

Revue québécoise de droit international
Quebec Journal of International Law
Revista quebequense de derecho internacional



**MULTICULTURAL AND INTERCULTURAL
EDUCATION: CONDITIONS FOR CONSTRUCTIVE GROUP
ACCOMMODATION**

Asbjörn Eide

Volume 12, Number 1, 1999

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1100399ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1100399ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Société québécoise de droit international

ISSN

0828-9999 (print)

2561-6994 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Eide, A. (1999). MULTICULTURAL AND INTERCULTURAL
EDUCATION: CONDITIONS FOR CONSTRUCTIVE GROUP ACCOMMODATION.
Revue québécoise de droit international / Quebec Journal of International Law /
Revista quebequense de derecho internacional, 12(1), 19–24.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1100399ar>

Tous droits réservés © Société québécoise de droit international, 1999

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

MULTICULTURAL AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION: CONDITIONS FOR CONSTRUCTIVE GROUP ACCOMMODATION

*By Asbjörn Eide**

Dear Professor François Crépeau and seminar staff, dear colleagues and other participants: Let me first thank you warmly for inviting us to and hosting this seminar, which allows us to learn from the rich debate on, and the experiences of, Canadian and Quebecois multicultural education. The United Nations Working Group has been deeply concerned with the ways in which education can improve or worsen group accommodation in plural societies, and we are therefore very pleased with the opportunity to discuss these matters at the present seminar.

I. On the impact of education

Education can be factor in aggravating or reducing conflicts. Depending on its methods and content, it can serve confrontation, neutral coexistence or co-operation, promotion of reciprocal tolerance and equal dignity. It can also be an important tool for integration in or even homogenisation of society.

These considerations focus primarily on formal education, which is mainly public. However formal education is only one among several factors influencing the child and the adolescent. Others are informal education at home and in the neighbourhood, the impact of radio and television or printed media, and the propagation of systematically pursued political agendas. These have all their own important impacts, which do not necessarily follow the same direction as formal, public education.

Formal education imparts, not only pedagogic instruction, but also attitudes, values and behaviour. Education contributes to the transmission of language, culture, moral values and social organisation. It is therefore of great importance to the state as an agent of the national society, for the minority organisations as agents for their communities as well as for the individual pupil or student.

II. Social processes of integration and disintegration

While most governments seek to maintain the unity of the inherited state, minor groups often have different concerns: Some seek equality and not discrimination, while others seek some form of separate identity. Policies resulting

* Chair, United Nations Working Group on Minorities; Universitet I Oslo; Norwegian Institute for Human Rights.

from such interaction may take many forms: (a) assimilation or fusion, i.e. absorbing minorities by a hegemonic majority or the construction of an altogether new identity through the combination of several immigrant groups; (b) social integration, which means integration into a common domain where there is equality with regard to jobs, freedom of movement and residence and a common legal system, while retaining pluralism with regard to language, culture and religion or beliefs; or (c) some form of regulated coexistence, which can take the form either of territorial or cultural autonomy or of a combination of both.

The increasing emphasis on ethnic identity manifests itself mainly in an articulation of separate cultural activities, implying a process of gradual separation. Vast differences can be observed, from modest manifestations of cultural traditions on particular days of ethnic festivity, to demands for almost complete cultural autonomy including control over educational institutions from kindergarten to university.

III. The right to education – a common concern

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* broke new ground by declaring that everyone has a right to free education which is to be compulsory at least in the elementary stages. This was subsequently reinforced by the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, article 13. The right to education must be accorded “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

Members of minorities have the same basic right to education as everyone else in society and must not be disadvantaged in this respect. Non-discrimination provisions are found in most human rights instruments. The *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* includes “the right to education and training” among the rights to be protected from discrimination. The *UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education, 1960*, defines as discrimination any “distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which, being based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth, has the purpose or effect of impairing equality of treatment in education [...] including depriving person or group of persons access to education or limiting them to education of an inferior standard.”

IV. Educational rights of minorities

International instruments which have confirmed and further elaborated the right to education with reference to minorities include article 27 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and article 30 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which guarantee the right of minorities to use their language in community with other members of their group. Other provisions provide guarantees

relating to the possibility for national minorities of learning their mother tongue or learning in their mother tongue, such as article 5 of the *UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education*, Paragraph 34 of the *Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE*, article 4 of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*, and article 14 of the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*.

These instruments contain provisions on the right of minorities to maintain their collective identity through the medium of their mother tongue, particularly through education. At the same time they make it clear that the maintenance of collective identity through the minority language must be combined with the responsibility to integrate and to participate in the wider national society, through the learning of the official or State language(s).

The sum total of these instruments has made it possible for a group of experts, under the auspices of the Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations, in the Hague, Netherlands, to develop a set of guidelines regarding the educational rights of national minorities. The *Recommendations* deal with measures to be taken and the use of resources, decentralisation and participation, particularly in the preparation and choice of curriculum, public and private institutions, minority education at primary and secondary levels, minority education in vocational schools, minority education at tertiary level, and curriculum development.

V. The contents of education

The *Universal Declaration* at article 26 established the main principles: A right to free education, compulsory in the elementary stages, an intercultural content to the education and a degree of parental choice. Of particular relevance here is the question of the content of the education which also has consequences for the curriculum, the methods and the institutions of education. Article 26 provides that education "shall be" directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

However, it also states that parents "have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." The same concerns are reiterated in the *Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* at article 13 which adds, among the purposes, that "education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society [...]." Article 13 refers to the liberty of parents, etc., to choose schools other than those established by the public authorities, which ensure the religious and moral education of their children in accordance with their own convictions. Article 13.4. respects the liberty of "individuals and bodies" to establish and direct educational institutions subject to the rule that such institutions conform to minimum

standards laid down by the state and anti-discrimination measures "including affirmative action." The Committee requires information on "linguistic facilities, such as the availability of teaching in the mother tongue of the students," in spite of the fact that there is no reference to mother tongue education in the *Covenant*.

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* requires, in article 29, that education should be directed to:

- (a) the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- (b) the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the *Charter of the United Nations*;
- (c) the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own.
- (d) the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.

VI. On the relationship between multicultural and intercultural education

Article 29, just quoted, brings together all the relevant educational concerns:

- The need of the individual pupil or student to become fully capable of managing in her or his subsequent professional life;
- The importance of developing respect for the basic principles of contemporary world order, including respect for human rights and the principles of the *Charter*. These include, for example, the maintenance of peace and respect for the territorial integrity of states;
- Multicultural education;
- Intercultural education, including the inculcation of the values of peace, tolerance and friendship among all peoples and ethnic or religious groups.

Tolerance and intercultural dialogue are essential in multicultural societies in order to avoid discrimination and conflict. Measures intended to achieve this goal should be taken especially in the field of education, culture and the media. Education is of particular importance.

Article 29 gives us the basis for the distinction between multicultural and intercultural education, both of which are required. Multicultural education involves the educational policies and practices which meet the separate educational needs of

groups in society which belong to different cultural traditions, while intercultural education involves educational policies and practices by which the members of different cultures, whether in a majority or minority position, learn to interact constructively with each other. As a minimum, intercultural education requires majorities to learn about the minorities and their cultures and traditions while minorities must similarly learn about other minorities in the same society as well as about the majorities. Intercultural education requires even more, however: It requires the development of respect, mutual tolerance and co-operation. Respect and tolerance must be based on a common recognition of general human rights as the basic framework which is applicable to all and which must be respected by all, whether in a majority or minority position. The obligation to promote intercultural education, understanding and co-operation is found also in the *International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination*, at article 7.

* * *

The range of international instruments addressing multicultural and intercultural education is growing and will increasingly affect state behaviour. The aim is to ensure that the state functions as the common home for all parts of its resident population under conditions of equality, with preservation of separate group identities for those who want it under conditions making it possible to develop those identities. Neither majorities nor minorities should be entitled to assert their identity in ways which deny the possibility for others to do the same or which lead to discrimination against others in the common domain.

A primary role for any state is to facilitate the equitable sharing of the economic wealth and social benefits of the nation as a whole. Priority in minority protection should be given to members of groups which are truly vulnerable, subject to discrimination and marginalisation by the majority. There is a necessity, in all states, to have a common domain of equality and non-discrimination. This necessity arises from obligations undertaken by states under the international human rights conventions, which requires state parties to be able to ensure equality and non-discrimination in the enjoyment of human rights. Integration should be developed on a basis of equality, where all groups contribute with their own values and cultures to shape the common domain where their members all interact.

For the long-range prevention of ethnic or religious hatred and intolerance, human rights education should be made a core curriculum subject in primary and secondary education. Additionally, measures should be taken to ensure that the substantive content of childhood and adult education is fully in line with the requirements of article 26.2 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, article 29 (1) (b) (c) and (d) of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and article 7 of the *Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*.

Civil society requires pluralism and the preservation of different identities combined with equality within the state as the common home for all residents. Properly managed education can be an important tool in these respects. International standards containing guiding principles now exist; the challenge is to make use of them in ways which combine multiculturalism with interculturalism within an overall concern for human rights, which also ensures the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to its fullest potential.