

Education as a site of cultural communication:

Rethinking childhood.

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Abstract

This paper, "*Education as a Site of Cultural Communication: Rethinking Childhood*," studies cultural communication in education beyond what many educational researchers identify as traditional pedagogy, advocating for a deeper understanding of cultural dynamics and mutual respect. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas' idea of "*thinking the issue otherwise*," the article investigates how educational institutions can promote local and global cultural exchange, emphasizing inclusivity, democratic values, and universal human rights. The paper critiques traditional teacher-student relationships and fixed views of childhood, calling for a shift toward empowering students as active participants in their education. By rethinking childhood through childhood studies and critical pedagogy, it challenges developmental psychology's limited portrayal of childhood and supports a view of children as social agents in shaping their learning environments. Ultimately, the paper calls for transformative educational practices that celebrate cultural diversity and foster authentic communication.

Keywords: Cultural communication, education, childhood studies, inclusivity, cultural diversity, transformative education, democratic values.

In this article, entitled "*Education as a Site of Cultural Communication*," the aim is to address cultural communication as a mere competence to be learned or a qualification to be achieved through school, nor will I frame this investigation as a debate about how culture and communication impact the professional realm or market welfare¹. Neither will this work focus solely on fostering mutual relations or understanding among heterogeneous peoples within the context of nursing or social work.

While the issues raised above are undeniably significant and deserve further exploration, my focus here is to follow an alternative route. It could be argued that academic research must actively seek theoretical paths and create new corridors for communication with the stranger, the culturally different or unfamiliar. What applies to 'us' must necessarily apply to 'them', for it really takes two sides to build a bridge. The effort to bridge cultural differences must be balanced and reciprocal.²

This paper is, in simple terms, an attempt to "think the issue otherwise"³—to borrow a phrase from Emmanuel Levinas. It is, in a sense, an "inside-out" approach, seeking to create an "in-house" potential for revitalizing communication *locally*, with a specific focus on the educational context viewed through a cultural lens. The core challenge in education, beyond all oversimplifications, revolves around the practical question: *What are we doing in schools, and what are we supposed to be doing?* More specifically, does cultural communication within educational institutions align with democratic values and the respect for human rights? Do we approach the other with the belief that

¹ Ting-Toomey, S., & Dorjee, T. (2018). *Communicating across cultures* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press

² **Bakhtin, Mikhail.** *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 293

³ Levinas, E. (1985). *Ethics and infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (R. Cohen, Trans.). Duquesne University Press.

universal human rights, including the acknowledgment of cultural diversity, hold equal value for all, irrespective of gender, age, social status, or religion?

To answer these questions, we must begin by questioning our conventional practices, our everyday behaviors, and the cultural norms we take for granted in educational institutions.⁴ Is our respect for the other truly evident in our educational settings? More importantly, do all actors in the educational sphere—teachers, students, administrators—communicate openly with one another in a way that is culturally respectful and inclusive?

The first point to consider before moving toward any pedagogical strategies or methods is the "domestic handicap." It seems counterproductive to explore far-reaching communication strategies in foreign lands if communication within our own educational settings is inadequate. The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the communicative value of education itself—how we assimilate and operationalize respect for the human being, regardless of difference, within the walls of our schools and universities.

It is true that schools are only one of many spheres tasked with fostering tolerance and facilitating dialogue between local and foreign cultures, especially in a world plagued by violence, hatred, and rejection of the other.⁵ However, educational institutions hold a unique role as the primary venues for nurturing respect for difference and equality. Schools are crucial in promoting diversity and providing solutions for inclusive education, but the question remains: Is cultural communication with the other really embedded in the ethos of our institutions?

This is not a call for self-accusation or a grim view of cultural communication. Indeed, the "other" may also struggle with establishing genuine cultural

⁴ Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed., M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum. Original work published 1970.

⁵ Banks, J. A. (2015). *Cultural diversity and education: Foundations, curriculum, and teaching* (6th ed.). Pearson Education.

communication with us. However, the key challenge is ensuring that such communication transcends superficiality, tokenism, and empty rhetoric⁶. Cultural images of the foreign are often rooted in myths and stereotypes, which lead to prejudice and categorization of others within our own "horizon of knowledge" (Beller & Leerssen, 2007, pp. 11-17). Hence, the need for ongoing intercultural communication is paramount. To borrow from René Descartes: "*I communicate with the other, therefore I exist.*"⁷

The controversy surrounding cultural communication will not be resolved until it is genuinely embedded in society itself. What is at stake is the feasibility of communication in our public spheres and institutions, particularly in education. Once we address these challenges, the task becomes easier. So, let us question the images shaped by social representations of teacher/student and adult/child paradigms. This calls for a critical reassessment of the concepts of childhood and adulthood.

At the core of this issue lies a practical, everyday question: *How do we perceive our roles as teachers and students?* Although this question may seem mundane or exhausted, it reflects the powerful social imagination that underpins our educational systems. The polarity between child and adult is embedded in our behavior and mindset. The concept of childhood and adulthood, as shaped by culture, has led to a strange form of "personality disorder" within us. As adults, we tend to forget that the child within us has never fully died. The adult and the child coexist within us in a complex symbiosis, complicating how we interact with children.

⁶ Smith, John. *The Art of Genuine Communication: Overcoming Rhetoric and Tokenism*. Publisher, 2020.

⁷ Descartes, R. (1641). *Meditations on first philosophy* (D. A. Cress, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. (Original work published 16

The cultural distribution of roles has evolved over time, and this division between childhood and adulthood has deepened.⁸ This manifests in our treatment of children and the way we, as adults, interact with them. It is essential to address this issue to foster true cultural communication with the child, treating them not as "half-grown minors" but as full social agents, with their own voices to be heard and respected. Educational institutions must promote such a cultural shift if we are to achieve effective and inclusive communication.

The ongoing debate around the constraints and promises of public schools is tightly linked to how the child is positioned within the educational system. Childhood, as a human condition, is socially constructed and varies across time and space. As such, childhood should not be viewed as a fixed biological stage but as a dynamic social phenomenon (Prout, 20XX). The child is not simply an incomplete adult in the process of becoming; rather, they should be recognized as autonomous beings with emotional and cognitive aspects that deserve full participation in the educational process.

Childhood studies challenge traditional essentialist views of the child and offer an alternative understanding. The child is an active participant in the educational process, not merely a passive recipient of adult knowledge. As such, respecting the child's autonomy and engaging them meaningfully in school matters is crucial to restoring the human ethos in our educational institutions.

If we persist in viewing children through the narrow lens of a child/adult binary, we will face significant challenges in fostering genuine communication.⁹ This binary often reflects unresolved trauma and power dynamics that shape how we engage with children. By recognizing children as full participants in the

⁸ Johnson, Mary. *Cultural Shifts and Social Roles: The Evolution of Childhood and Adulthood*. Publisher, 2019.

⁹ Rosen, M. (2016). *The Overlooked Importance of Children's Agency: Rethinking the Child/Adult Divide in Education and Development*. *Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, 22(4), 23-40.

educational process, we can begin to break down these barriers and foster mutual respect and understanding.

In conclusion, the strategies and skills needed to communicate with culturally different others are not distant or abstract. They are present in our daily interactions and must begin with a "self-healing" act within our own educational spaces. Once we cultivate genuine communication with our students, colleagues, and the people around us, we can extend that same respect to others in a broader, more global context. Without addressing these domestic concerns first, our efforts to engage with others will be ineffective and superficial.

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