

# International socialization of young people: Obstacles and opportunities

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## Abstract

The international or intercultural socialization of young people depends upon an appropriate skill-set and experiential background of a competent core of teachers. This paper presents an analysis of psychosocial development of young people, arguing that the middle childhood years represents the critical period to begin addressing international and intercultural socialization. Analysis of cohorts of educators utilizing the intercultural development inventory (IDI) and other surveys suggest that most teachers, however, lack the knowledge and experience required to adequately address these issues in schools. Finally, research that supports the role that international student teaching experience can play in enhancing teacher's intercultural sensitivity is presented.

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How educators can facilitate the development of an intercultural perspective, both in the domestic context as well as in the international sphere, remains more on the margins rather than considered central in the field of teacher preparation. There is scant attention to the topic of international or intercultural socialization in the professional literature, with reviews of a number of online databases yielding few, if any, relevant citations. Given our increased mobility, globalization, interdependence and vulnerability, attention to the intercultural or international dimension of learning should become the essential fourth 'R' in education—"Reading, 'Riting, 'Rithmetic, and I would propose, Relations". This paper looks at psychosocial development as it relates to intercultural socialization; provides an overview of demographics of the teaching profession, paying particular attention to the development of intercultural sensitivity of US teachers and students; and, considers some ways in which the education of teachers can be enhanced to more effectively address this dimension.

## 1. Psychosocial development in relation to international socialization

The process of international socialization lies at the intersection of cognitive, affective and behavioral processes. It does not, however, come automatically with cognitive development or physical maturity. Rather, like all developmental processes, both maturation and learning are requisite. Some characteristics of intellectual development, however, may prohibit an international perspective from emerging until an individual has reached a certain age or stage of development. Thus, critical periods may exist in the international socialization of young people that can serve as important benchmarks for educators.

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Educators make frequent reference to Piaget's stage theory of development to ground their understanding and explanation of developmental opportunities of young learners (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Piaget proposed four stages of cognitive development: the sensorimotor period from birth to 2 years of age; the preoperational period from 2 to 7 years of age; concrete operations from age eight to twelve; and formal operations beginning around age twelve. These stages describe a progression that is brought on by a combination of maturation and the child's actions. The preoperational and concrete operations periods are of most interest with regard to the international socialization of young people.

Characteristic of the preoperational period is that children begin to internalize mental representations of the world around them. Until this ability is perfected, children do not seem capable of taking the perspective of another. They are said to be egocentric, with the world being viewed as if the child was the center of the reality.

There is a gradual shift away from cognitive egocentrism as children progress to concrete operations during the middle childhood years. For instance, children at the age of seven or eight are able to correctly identify the right and left hand of a person standing opposite themselves. This partial relativism becomes a more true relativism around age 10 or 11, when children can correctly identify that an object in the middle can be both on the right and left of something. Related to this is a process Piaget termed perceptual or cognitive centration, referring to the tendency that preoperational children have of being so overwhelmed by one aspect of a visual experience that they are unable to attend to other dimensions. This helps to explain why young children may be unable to acknowledge conflicting or contradictory points of view on social issues, often seeing things as either black or white; right or wrong. As children progress from the preoperational stage to concrete operations they begin the process of decentering, especially if provided with guidance and practice, beginning to accommodate shades of gray and alternative points of view.

Research on perceptual role-taking has demonstrated that children acquire the skill of third-person perspective taking between the ages of 9–15, thus beginning to understand that others may have a viewpoint that is different from their own (Flavell, Botkin, & Fry, 1968; Selman & Schultz, 1990). With this comes an increased ability to communicate with others since the individual can now comprehend the perspective of the listener. At this stage, children also demonstrate the ability to deal with two elements, properties or relations of a concept at the same time (e.g. length and width).

Children's thought processes, too, shift from being static to dynamic during this period of time. That is, the preoperational child is generally unable to conceive of change upon an object—what is perceived is assumed to have always been; thought to be unlikely to change. As the child progresses to the next stage, the world is seen as more dynamic and changeable.

In support of using developmental theory to explain international socialization, studies indicate that political understanding and learning are initiated at a relatively early age as children begin to interact with authority roles, make decisions, and deal with interpersonal and intergroup cooperation and conflict. The types of experiences encountered affect subsequent attitudes regarding national and international identity and perception. Remy, Nathan, Becker, and Torney (1975) concluded that children in the intermediate grades (grades 4–8; ages 9–14) have a sense of their national identity and are beginning to develop attitudes, values and beliefs of their own nation and others as international beings and actors, as well as gaining knowledge about such issues as war and peace. And, the shift from a present, concrete orientation to a more future, abstract and general orientation noted above, supports the growth of political ideas in early adolescents (Adelson & O'Neill, 1966), as well as an increasingly capability to demonstrate concern for the needs of others in the community-at-large.

Related to this line of research is the early work done on prejudice formation, an area which has always contributed significantly to educators. It has long been established that recognition of ethnic difference, as well as attitudes related to people of different groups, appear very early in a child's development (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1948; Radke & Sutherland, 1949). And, Allport's (1954) three-stage theory of prejudice formation demonstrated the interrelationship between the cognitive and affective domains. In the first stage, pregeneralization, children are generally aware of differences but do not categorize others or have strong feelings toward other groups. Early puberty marks a period where total rejection of outgroups peaks. Stage three is characterized by the adolescent whose thinking becomes more differentiated and less generalized. Allport suggested that middle childhood and late adolescence are periods dominated by more positive attitudes and low rejection of other groups, while early adolescence is characterized by the most negative attitudes.

Aboud and Doyle (1993) support these findings, suggesting that children are highly ethnocentric between the ages of 4–7 and become less so between the ages of 7 and 10 as they acquire more differentiated views of both ingroups and

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