

Three Challenges

The first set of challenges, involving ‘instrumentalism and ethics’, concerns understandings of the aims of education as revealed in official sources. A central issue here is the extent to which students, teachers and the natural environment itself are intrinsically valued, or treated as ‘resources’ or ‘capital’ for the promotion of industrialisation, modernisation or national aggrandisement. Do conceptions of the purpose of education (as manifested in policy, curricula and textbooks) embrace a broad vision of human ‘flourishing’, care for the natural environment, etc. as *intrinsic* goods – i.e. worthwhile in and of themselves (Sen, 1999)? Or do they prioritise the *instrumental* utility of the ‘skills’ or competencies gained through schooling in terms of promoting economic growth and national competitiveness?

The second category of challenges, relating to ‘nationalism and identities’, focuses on how the ethical positions informing curriculum development (including notions of state-citizen relations) have been expressed in state-promoted narratives of identity – and the implications of this for sustaining diversity and promoting tolerance and understanding both *within* and *between* nation-states. The analysis here asks whether, or how far, ‘national’ priorities have tended to undermine the valuing of individual autonomy and dignity – seeking to subordinate individuals and diverse communities to the pursuit of a ‘greater good’.

Finally, we investigate challenges of ‘competitiveness and regimentation’. Whereas the first two challenges focus on the ideological underpinnings and content of policies and curricula, here we focus on how schooling socialises children at a mundane, day-to-day level, and the implications of this for peace, sustainable development and global citizenship. There is an increasing international recognition that schooling is not a positive experience for many children and adolescents (see, for example, UNESCO, 2016d, 2017a). In addition to describing the magnitude of competitive pressures and the often distressing nature of a learning environment which features extensive private tutoring, school violence and bullying, we also touch upon the implications of differentiated schooling experiences for the ‘elite’ and the ‘masses’ in the societies under review. Elitist approaches to education – persistent in some societies, emerging or re-emerging in others – lead to the blatantly unequal distribution of knowledge and sensibilities, undermining a sense of common or shared humanity and global citizenship.