EDUCATING FOR PLURALISM

Key Principles

The education sector is critical to achieving the long-term, transformative results in behaviour and attitudes needed to advance and sustain pluralism in the world. Every society is diverse in some way – educating for pluralism goes further than simply tolerating, or even appreciating, diversity. Educating for pluralism responds to the challenges and opportunities of a changing, diverse and connected world by answering the question:

How do we foster a positive understanding of and engagement with diversity?

The intention of the Global Centre for Pluralism is not to replicate international initiatives that fall under global citizenship education, human rights education, multicultural and civic education, peace education and anti-bias education. Rather, the Centre's goal is to complement, assist or collaborate with other educational initiatives to produce actionable knowledge for educating for pluralism.

> Pluralism is an ethic of respect for diversity.
>
> In a pluralistic society, the dignity of each person is recognized, and everyone feels like they belong.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF EDUCATING FOR PLURALISM

The Centre's work in education takes as its starting point a holistic understanding of where and how pluralism is advanced in societies. This approach encompasses political, economic, social and cultural domains, while emphasizing the importance of both institutional efforts (hardware) and cultural attitudes (software). This key insight—that multiple and concurrent levels of effort are needed to shape a society's institutions and to reorient exclusionary norms towards diversity—is fundamental to the development of the Centre's work.

When educators and learners commit to an ethic of respect for diversity, they recognize the following:

- **Pluralism is a commitment that requires ongoing effort.** Pluralism moves beyond a simple tolerance of difference—where members of an excluded group might be free from overt harassment and intimidation but not actively accepted or made welcome as equal contributors and citizens to society. A commitment to pluralism requires a continual willingness to encounter and learn from diversity as well as to unlearn biases and assumptions. An ethic of respect for diversity and the skills needed to engage with divergent perspectives are learned over time, especially following more challenging encounters with difference. The Centre believes that when it comes to pluralism, we are all learners.

- **Pluralism can be uncomfortable.** An understanding of pluralism asks learners to reflect on their identity and acknowledge their position within embedded systems of power and privilege. This may require a certain level of discomfort, vulnerability and risk-taking on the part of a learner and the school community they are part of. Educators and learners need to engage in difficult conversations about controversial topics while continually asking themselves how they are implicated in the social issues they are facing.

- **Pluralism has limits.** Including divergent viewpoints is essential for pluralism to thrive. Unpacking the assumptions behind expressions of identity that do not respect difference (i.e. white nationalism or radical religious supremacy) or that use violence as a means of expression can help develop critical thinking skills and explore issues around inclusion, digital literacy and manipulation techniques.

> "Pluralism does not mean the elimination of difference, but the embrace of difference. Genuine pluralism understands that diversity does not weaken a society, it strengthens it."
>
> His Highness the Aga Khan
> May 16, 2017

- **Pluralism requires a holistic perspective.** Exclusion can happen in political, economic and social spheres as well as in physical/geographic ones, often simultaneously and in interconnected ways. What happens outside of an educational setting informs the attitudes and shifts within. Exclusion in education can limit opportunities in the political sphere (hampering effective participation or one's ability to claim rights), the economic sphere (employment, entrepreneurship) or for social mobility in general. Exclusion can also occur when societies limit what qualifies as knowledge and who is considered an expert. Parental support and the involvement of the broader community within educational settings can be critical for increasing feelings of belonging. Educating for pluralism therefore requires a holistic and complex understanding of how learners experience belonging within and outside of their educational institutions.

- **When fostering pluralism, context matters.** Since there is no single experience of global diversity, the challenges to inclusion are different depending on the context. Discussions about diversity and inclusion must be anchored within the historical narratives and lived experiences of learners, and must actively seek to incorporate multiple and typically marginalized viewpoints. The context in which many youth form ideas about identity is increasingly digital. In these instances, education programs that address pluralism should include tools to critically navigate online knowledge sources.

- **Pluralism is transformative.** Moving towards a more positive narrative about understanding and valuing diversity may require a paradigm shift. When learners gain the confidence and skills to engage with difference, they become well positioned to develop inclusive institutions and policies which will enable secure, peaceful and prosperous communities where diversity is a source of creativity and innovation.

To learn more about the Education Program, visit **www.pluralism.ca/education** or contact the Education team at **education@pluralism.ca**