

LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

By Daisaku Ikeda

TOKYO, Jan 20 2010 (IPS) - The smiling faces and laughing voices of children are the true measure of a peaceful and healthy society, much more so than any statistical indices.

In 1996, I visited Costa Rica to attend the opening ceremony for the SGI's 'Nuclear Arms: Threat to Humanity' exhibition, which was being held in the capital, San Jose. With both President Figueres Olsen and former President Arias Sanchez in attendance, a solemn performance of Costa Rica's national anthem began.

Adjacent to the venue was a Children's Museum, and throughout the ceremony we could hear the lively voices of children playing and laughing, calling out to their friends and running around excitedly. The partition between the two venues didn't reach the ceiling, so the noise made by the children resounded through the room unhindered.

Soon my turn came to take the stage. The organisers of the ceremony appeared increasingly concerned as children's heads peered through gaps in the partition, but my heart filled with joy. 'The lively voices and playful exuberance of these children,' I commented, 'is surely a true embodiment of peace. This is the key to overcoming the threat of nuclear arms. This is where hope lies!'

I heard later that the building where the exhibition was being held used to be a prison, but it had been repainted in a bright yellow and converted into a science and culture centre. This reminded me of Victor Hugo's assertion that he who opens the doors to schools closes the doors of prisons.

There is no such thing as a person who is bad from birth; we all have the seeds of goodness within. The work of nurturing these seeds and bringing them to fruition is the purpose of learning and education. Education is not simply the transfer of knowledge, nor simply the development of specific talents. Authentic education is aimed at nurturing the complete personality, including both character and intellect; it is the great enterprise of passing on the fullness of humanity from the past into the future, ensuring its development.

The pioneering American educator John Dewey once stated: 'To the growth of the child all studies are subservient. Not knowledge or information, but self-realisation, is the goal.' Children need to believe in their own potential and soar into the limitless skies as they embrace their mission in life.

It is not just schools and the home that support this; this is a task of the local community and of society as a whole. Based on this belief, I have often called for a reorientation of values: from the idea that education should serve the needs of society to the idea that society itself should be dedicated to the cause of learning.

I am a member of the generation that directly experienced the horrors that result when education is subverted to false aims. When I was young, the militarists who controlled Japan sought to inculcate, not just in schools but through every available means, the idea that offering up one's life in service to the state was the highest path in life. Aged thirteen, I even tried to enrol in the Naval Aviation Corps like many of my friends. But my father, who had already seen my four elder brothers drafted and sent to the front, opposed this so vehemently that I gave up on my idea. Countless precious young lives were sacrificed to an educational system which placed utmost priority on serving the machinery of the state.

My own efforts to create educational opportunities that are solidly focused on the happiness of children grow out of this experience. Regrettably, the postwar Japanese education system was focused on producing foot soldiers useful to Japan's economic growth. This process of forcing children through an education system designed to serve the interests of the state, a system that turns them into means and not ends, is entirely unacceptable and cannot be allowed to continue. Instead, we must base education on respect for life and a humane philosophy: the commitment never to build one's happiness on the suffering of others.

A loss of awareness of the interrelatedness and inseparability of our own lives and those of others -human or otherwise- inevitably gives rise to the kind of egoism that underlies the increasing inequalities in society and propels the processes of environmental destruction. There are numerous examples of educational projects that seek to sensitise people to our interrelatedness. For example, as part of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (2005-14), efforts are being made to encourage young people to get out of the classroom and interact with the world. These initiatives, which include community art projects and the revitalisation of local public spaces, enable children to experience their interconnections with the world around them and develop a rich capacity for empathy.

As a civil society organisation and a proponent of ESD, the SGI is engaged in grassroots activities to raise awareness and support the decade. Creating an educational environment that instills a spirit of empathy with other people and with nature would be the greatest treasure today's adults can bequeath to the future.

A firm spiritual foundation is the key to constructing an enduring culture of peace. If education flourishes, society, too, will prosper and humankind will advance.

Education is not something distant from us; our schools, our homes and our communities provide myriad opportunities for strengthening our shared capacity for learning and teaching. The inherent creativity of life is brought to flower by working for other people and contributing to society, striving to learn and take

meaningful action. We all have the potential to become wiser and stronger, to bring forth the brilliance that exists in the depths of life. It is up to each of us to demonstrate this truth. (END/COPYRIGHT IPS)