Societies Without Borders

Volume 13
Issue 1 *Qualitative Methods in Human Rights Research*

Article 12

February 2021

Revisiting the Role of Education in Global Society: Relevance of the Concept of "Value Generalization" in an Educational Context

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1. Introduction – Learning to live together in global society

Learning to live together, as outlined in Delors Report on education for the twenty-first century (Delors, 1996), becomes an even more crucial and challenging educational vision in today's globalized and pluralistic societies. Contemporary world's dynamics, including globalization processes, are deeply impacting on our notions of identity, society and culture.

> *"Our cultural environment is changing quickly and becoming more and more diversified. More and more individuals are living in a 'multi-cultural' normality, i.e. facing influences of different cultures in daily life, and having to manage their own multiple cultural affiliations. (…) The increasing cultural diversity also brings about new social and political challenges. Cultural diversity often triggers fear and rejection. Negative reactions – from stereotyping, racism, xenophobia and intolerance to discrimination and violence – can threaten peace and the very fabric of local and national communities."* (Bekemans, 2015).

It is therefore crucial to reflect upon rapidly changing and paradoxical realities produced by contemporary multi-faceted and multi-dimensional societies, as well as to explore how this transformation is shaping education in its content, levels and format. Does Delors' vision of learning to live together still make sense in global society? From a sociological point of view we might still debate on whether human beings can in fact live together, and on whether a global society can emerge from the increasingly sectarian nature of our social identities as members of different and divided ethnic, religious, political or national groups (Touraine, 1997/2000). However, educators must grapple with the issue of learning to live together on a daily basis. Not only educators but also governments persist, quite rightly I believe, in identifying schools as instruments of policy to address major social and political issues. *"Whilst leaders may assert the failure of multiculturalism, they nonetheless expect schools to function as places for learning to live together."* (Starkey, 2012). Building on this feature of schools as public hotspot for pluralism and social integration, the paper aims to develop an educational consideration within the framework of global society. A particular form to interpret global society will be taken into account, namely the *morphogenetic approach* (Archer, 1995). In a Morphogenic Society that has no pre-set form or preferred state ("morpho" element) and that takes its shape from, and is formed by, agents, originating from the intended and unintended consequences of their activities ("genetic" part), the article will reflect upon some of the social changes brought about by the process of globalization. In particular, the role and vision of education in globalising societies will be questioned to finally suggest that human rights should be at the centre of the educational practice. In order to sustain this argument, the concept of "value generalization" (Joas, 2013) will be framed within the formal education sector and, more specifically, within the context of school class considered as a social system. My final objective is to conclude that putting human rights at the core of the learning process, and translate them into educational practice, has the potential to enable people whose value systems are diverse and apparently incompatible to establish creative

relationships and, ultimately, recognise and accept common standards and principles that make living together in society possible. In the words of Hans Joas:

> *"values such as universal human dignity and rights such as human rights are not confined to a particular tradition. They are also approachable in light of other traditions and under new conditions, to the extent that these traditions manage to creatively reinterpret themselves (…). Such religious or cultural traditions may therefore discover new areas of common ground without abandoning their unique perspectives. This is the idea behind the concept of value generalization"* (Joas, 2013).

My attempt through this paper is to stress the considerable relevance of the concept of "value generalization" in an educational context in order to cope with the challenge of learning to live together and make the school system an inclusive public sphere able to manage contemporary global issues. Of course there are many other variables to ensure a successful learning process for all stakeholders involved, including, among others, an open school climate in which students feel able to explore and discuss controversial issues with their teachers and peers (Flanagan et al., 2007), as well as teachers who are trained and equipped with essential human rights knowledge, skills and experience, and a general educational system supported by effective government policies (Struthers, 2017). Clearly, the aim of this work was not to investigate the entire educational debate within globalized and pluralistic societies, as this would have been a huge and probably unrealistic research endeavour. It is, however, hoped that this article has been carried far enough to shed some light on the process of "value generalization" and its relevance for setting a common ground on shared public values in education and further developing constructive discussions on human rights in the school classroom.

2. Globalization, Morphogenic Society (MS) and a revisited role of education

Economic, political, social and cultural challenges in the age of globalization have a multiple and diversified impact on identities, societies and cultures across the globe. Considering globalization processes only under a mere economic perspective would be a gross mistake. There are two lines of thought in this respect. One regards globalization as essentially an economic process, which involves a crisis of governance and normativity. Following a suggestion of systems theory, Gunther Teubner allows us to take a more accurate view of the scene. What is really happening is that processes of autonomization are taking place in various spheres of society. Globalization is therefore a plural process that generates a "polycontextural" world made of functional global systems, each with its own inner rationality (Maccarini, 2015). The transition accomplished through the passage from a nationally to a globally organized society involves a correspondent differentiation of law, that is developing along sectorial instead of territorial lines. Transnational legal regimes are emerging which define the scope of their own validity along

thematic rather than territorial lines, because trans-national communities – functional systems differentiated on a global level – express normative needs that cannot be satisfied either by national or by international law. Global legal pluralism is not simply a result of political pluralism, but is instead the expression of deep contradictions between colliding sectors of a global society. At core, the fragmentation of global law is not simply about legal norm collisions or policy conflicts, but rather has its origin in contradictions between society-wide institutionalized rationalities, which law cannot solve, but which demand a new legal approach to colliding norms. *"The immediate consequence is that high expectations of our ability to deal adequately with legal fragmentation must be curbed since its origins lie not in law, but within its social contexts."* (Teubner & Fischer-Lescano, 2004). In a nutshell, there is a combination of socially organized and spontaneous norm production, decentred in a plurality of political and private actors without one decision making centre (Teubner, 2012).

There are various ways in which social theory has been tackling the complexity of contemporary global society and its ongoing change. Among these, a particular form to interpret global society is through Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach (see as general reference Archer 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016) which has recently prompted a substantive thesis about macro-social change, namely that of an emerging morphogenic society (hereafter MS). The word "morphogenetic" refers to the intrinsic tendency of all human societies to continually and simultaneously produce and destroy social constructions (institutions, organisations, cultures, etc.). *"The morphogenetic approach provides the conceptual tools to study the logics of such processes, as the outcome of complex interactions between structure, culture, and agency, and the resulting emergent effects."* (Maccarini, 2016). The MS is a high speed society characterised by social acceleration and multiplication of actions and experiences, thus leading to profound and – in principle – boundless change. A sort of Durkheimian *anomie* is only one branch of the morphogenic tree, as in the MS new normative processes do also emerge from increased possibilities of actions and experiences. The MS can be defined as a form of society in which mechanisms generating social transformation overwhelm those maintaining social stability and this characteristic is endogenous, meaning that change comes from within the society itself and results from people (Archer, 2013). However, as argued by Al-Amoudi (2014), the MS differs from Liquid Modernity (Bauman, 2012) because no all social institutions incur intensified morphogenesis, and actually those that resist morphogenesis have exceptional normative influence. Due to unequally distributed social morphogenesis, the MS is characterised by heterogeneous social and institutional landscapes, from relative institutional stability to intense and turbulent social change – also known in the literature as "enclaves" and "vortixes" (Maccarini, 2015a). The MS does not only create novel social forms but, in many circumstances, it is also conducive to the obsolescence or death of social forms. As a result, people have to rely on their

personal powers of reflexivity to respond to continuous novel opportunities and threats generated by social morphogenesis. In a broader sense, reflexivity can be defined as *"the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa"* (Archer, 2007). A number of organisations including families, schools, societies, work organisations and even social media may help fostering reflexivity and tackling its uneven distribution in the context of intensified morphogenesis. Schools, for example, play a particular important role with regard to political reflexivity, which can be conceived as people's ability to reflect and act on the question: "how can we steer society together?" Indeed, school constitutes a crucial institution for the development of political reflexivity and associated skills as it is a place where the child, through discussion with peers and teachers, can learn to understand and confront different values, mindsets and worldviews.

> *"In this light, the school is (or at least can be) a site where children are prepared for democratic political life. Note, however, how this conception of the school is different from those aspirations, held for instance by extreme right group Collectif Racine, which purports to restrict the school's activities to 'instruction' while claiming that 'education' is the exclusive prerogative of the family. It is not surprising that movements such as Collectif Racine and others also propose to ban the League of Human Rights from performing activities in and with members of (high) schools."* (Al-Amoudi, 2017).

This consideration allows me to argue that the emergence of the MS obviously entails massive social change along many different dimensions, and that the educational dimension is no exception.

> *"Education systems transmit and shape the value systems of the societies in which they are embedded. Education, at all levels from primary schools to institutions of lifelong learning, now faces the critical challenge of reflecting and guiding the manifest plurality of cultures and identities in globalising societies: both to embody a commitment to the equal dignity of all, and to offer a sufficiently rich vision of human flourishing. (…) The unifying perspective of intercultural education lies in the reconciliation between unity and diversity in various situations of a multi-cultural and plural world."* (Bekemans, 2016).

Within the dramatic acceleration in the speed of social change brought about by the process of globalization, the danger exists for a commodification of education in its contents and outputs, neglecting the added human enhancement of the learning process. Leading education towards the commodification of a market-led provision exacerbates the risk of exploitation, social exclusion and inequalities (Torres, 2012). Therefore, it becomes necessary to reflect rigorously on the relationship whereby the dominant educational model appears to be connecting educational objectives to the demands for the market and, as a consequence, we are experiencing an increasing technocratic, fragmented and dehumanised conception of education. Inevitably, this leads to the creation of persons who come to mirror this practice (Galiero et al., 2009). New, innovative, participatory and human-

centred approaches are needed to respond to the challenges of fragmented societies. Since the human person is at the centre of global society, human rights should be at the centre of the educational practice. A substantial and urgent need exists for a revisited role and increased responsibility of education in culturally diverse and complex societies. This diagnosis of the educational challenges in a globalising world implies a learning to cope with changes, uncertainties and risks. This is the right starting point if we consider that globalization emerged at the end of the twentieth century as a new representation on the fragile public stage of world life (Alexander, 2012) in which nothing can be taken for granted, including human rights as they arose as a contingent historical achievement that we could now lose at any time. Once we acknowledge that contemporary societies entail a multiplicity of identities living together within a global space and we accept that this does not contradict necessarily a community of shared values, which educational trajectory has to be developed so that people become prepared to live such an experience positively? My suggestion is to take the paradigm of human rights as the universal point of departure, implying the crucial importance of human rights education (United Nations General Assembly, 2011). According to Hans Joas' genealogy of human rights (Joas, 2013), it is possible to reach agreement on new areas of common ground among different traditions and cultures through a process of "value generalization". The most successful result of this dynamic, which the author deeply investigates in his book, is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). In the next section I will go through some of the major steps of Hans Joas' affirmative genealogy in order to focus on the process of "value generalization" and its relevance for education. In particular, "value generalization" becomes instrumental in identifying an agreement on the plurality of competing values in complex global societies. As a result, "value generalization" in the educational context has the potential to set a common ground among different traditions and cultures, and to make the school system an inclusive public sphere able to manage contemporary global issues.

3. The concept of "value generalization" and schools as places for learning to live together

The concept of "value generalization" stems from the theory of social change developed by the most influential American sociologist in the decades following the Second World War, Talcott Parsons (Parsons, 1977 and 1978). In reaction to the many criticisms of his work for being unable to deal with social change, he applied his theory of the four basic functions each system has to fulfil to the area of social dynamics. The four functions had been called adaptation to the environment, goal-attainment, integration and maintenance of the value patterns characteristic for a social pattern. In a dynamic perspective this means that all social change has to have four dimensions as well, namely adaptive upgrading, social differentiation, inclusion of more and more members of society in the status of full citizenship, and, lastly, value

generalization. For the purpose of this article, I will proceed with the analysis of the concept of "value generalization" as it has been developed by Hans Joas for his *New Genealogy of Human Rights* (Joas, 2013). His aim through this book is to provide an affirmative genealogy of the universalism of values and the key term he refers to is "sacrality" or "sacredness". Hans Joas suggests that human rights and universal human dignity are the result of a specific process of sacralization – a process in which every single human being has increasingly been viewed as sacred (the sacralization of the person), and this has been institutionalized in law. Therefore, the history of human rights is a history of sacralisation – the history of the sacralization of the person. The term "sacralisation" should not be understood as having an exclusively religious meaning but it may also apply to secular content. According to Hans Joas, values and value systems are often treated as entities that exclude one another and can even get into conflict with one another but, from a strictly action-oriented perspective, it is only human beings, their organizations and institutions that can act, not values or value systems. We all constantly interact and cooperate with others in multicultural and diversified realities, and for dealing with our value-related differences we can take elements from other cultural traditions and fit them into our original framework in creative ways. Indeed, traditions are not hermetically closed or self-referential frameworks (Joas, 2008). Building on Talcott Parsons' theory, Hans Joas argues that different value traditions can produce a more general, mostly also more abstract understanding of their common features without losing their roots in the specific traditions and experiences to which actors feel committed. In its current articulation a value may be the result of a particular cultural tradition – human rights, for example, are claimed to be a result of the Judeo-Christian tradition or of the Enlightenment – but this does not mean that other cultural and religious traditions cannot be reinterpreted, or rather, cannot reinterpret themselves in view of this articulation of a value so that their own potential to articulate this same value comes to light. In other words and going beyond Talcott Parsons' analysis, Hans Joas states that if

> *"human rights do in fact draw on cultural traditions such as Christianity, but also demand that these traditions be articulated in novel ways, then values such as universal human dignity and rights such as human rights are not confined to a particular tradition. They are also approachable in light of other traditions and under new conditions, to the extent that these traditions manage to creatively reinterpret themselves in the same kind of way that the Christian tradition has undoubtedly done. Such religious or cultural traditions may therefore discover new areas of common ground without abandoning their unique perspectives."* (Joas, 2013).

This is the idea behind the concept of "value generalization" through which Hans Joas affirms that amid the plurality of competing value systems it is possible to reach agreement on new areas of common ground. He finally concludes by portraying the emergence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 as an example of such agreement among a wide range

of intellectual and cultural traditions, and as a composite synthesis of a dynamic process in which many minds, interests, backgrounds, legal systems and ideological persuasions played their respective determining roles. Indeed, he refers to some of the many actors involved in the development of the UDHR, including former American first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and French jurist René Cassin; Charles Malik and Peng-chun Chan, representatives of Lebanon and China respectively; Indian delegate Hansa Mehta and Chilean judge Hernan Santa Cruz. This already gives us an idea of the diverse range of intellectual and cultural traditions involved but he also stresses different examples of the role these actors played, such as that it is thanks to the Indian delegate that the language of the declaration is gender neutral (not "all men" but "all human beings") and that the Chilean judge was especially engaged in efforts to ensure the mention of socioeconomic rights. According to Hans Joas, all these elements confirm that the UDHR is the result of a successful process of "value generalization". He warns that we should, however, resist any temptation to idealize this process as there were of course many disagreements, misunderstandings and tensions. But the period following the adoption of the UDHR showed that values and a declaration, even with its legally nonbinding nature, of rights based on a process of "value generalization" can have a substantial influence on intellectual debates, lived practices, and both legal and political institutions. As explained by Hans Joas:

> "*Value generalization does not intellectualize value traditions. Stripped of their affective dimension, they would be quite sterile. But through this process of generalization, people who feel bound to a tradition find new ways to articulate it by engaging with social change or the representatives of other traditions. If this occurs on both sides of a process of engagement involving different value traditions it may lead to a new and authentic sense of commonality. So value generalization is neither a consensus achieved through rational-argumentative discourse nor merely a decision to embrace peaceful coexistence despite insurmountable value differences. Again, it is evident that the result of successful communication about values is both more and less than the result of rational discourse: though we do not reach total consensus, we can achieve the dynamic, mutual modification of our own traditions as well as finding stimuli for their renewal."* (Joas, 2013).

The concept of "value generalization" obviously has its pitfalls in the study of social change but what I would like to outline through this paper is its relevance from an educational perspective. It is, indeed, an interesting sociological concept for setting a common ground on shared public values in education and further developing constructive discussions on human rights in the school classroom. Talcott Parsons laid the basis for school class to be seen as a social system in an analysis of elementary and secondary schools in American society (Parsons, 1959). His thesis is that school class can be treated as an agency of socialization whose function may be summed up as the development in individuals of the commitments and capacities which are essential prerequisites of their future role-performance. Commitments may be broken down into two components: commitment to the implementation of the broad values of society, and commitment to the performance of a specific type

of role within the structure of society. Capacities can also be broken down into two parts, the first being competence or the skill to perform the tasks involved in individual's roles, and the second being the role-responsibility or the capacity to live up to other people's expectations of the interpersonal behaviour appropriate to these roles. Surely, many things have changed globally since Talcott Parsons' publication but, still nowadays, the educational system plays an increasingly vital role as a consequence of an increasingly differentiated society. Of course we should not idealize the educational task and we need to have a clear idea of its limits. However, while acknowledging that our work and activities as educators will not be enough to change the world, *"it is necessary to recognize that by doing something inside the space of the school we can make some good contributions."* (Freire & Shor, 1987). Furthermore, and as I stated in my introduction to this paper, today more than ever schools are expected to function as places for learning to live together. In a recent article on the role of schools in educating tomorrow's citizens (Keating, 2016), Avril Keating argues quite strongly that citizenship-formation is a whole school process, and not something that can be ascribed to one specific curriculum intervention or educational activity. Indeed, all education contributes to the construction of citizenship and schools play a vital role in promoting citizenship simply by providing quality education to their students. The role of education in culturally diverse and complex global societies must therefore be rethought in light of holistic approaches. The actions of schools clearly have implications not just for individual students but also for the wider society. Without careful attention to the school curriculum and the school culture, the impact can be negative rather than positive. Of course schools are not the only site in which citizenship- (and I would add also character-) formation happens, as families, the media, and government institutions do also play a role. However, this article aims to focus on the relevance of the sociological concept of "value generalization" in an educational context in order to cope with the challenge of learning to live together and further develop constructive discussions on human rights in the school classroom. In the next section I will wrap up the main features of the educational consideration developed so far within the framework of global society and I will try to sketch a direction that could take this research forward.

4. Conclusion – how education can be revisited in global society?

Globalization is a plural process which entails social change along many different dimensions, and has a multiple and diversified impact on identities, societies and cultures. Among the various ways in which social theory has been tackling the complexity of contemporary global society I chose Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach to develop my argument. For the purpose of the paper, I focused on how the ongoing transformation of contemporary multi-faceted and multi-dimensional societies is shaping education in its content, levels and format. The challenge of commodification of education has been pointed out as a result of the dramatic acceleration in the speed of social

change. Therefore, a substantial and urgent need exists for a revisited role and increased responsibility of education in culturally diverse and complex societies, starting with a shift from a market- to a human-centred approach to education. In line with this human-centred approach and drawing from the concept of "value generalization" as it has been developed by Hans Joas for his *New Genealogy of Human Rights*, I argued that putting human rights at the core of the learning process, and translate them into educational practice, has the potential to enable people whose value systems are diverse and apparently incompatible to establish creative relationships and, ultimately, recognise and accept common standards and principles that make living together in society possible. Indeed, according to Hans Joas, it is possible to reach agreement on new areas of common ground among different traditions and cultures through a process of "value generalization" and he describes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the most successful result of this dynamic. Thus, taking the paradigm of human rights as the universal point of departure seems the most suitable and appropriate educational trajectory to be developed in this context, leading to the crucial importance of human rights education (United Nations General Assembly, 2011). Indeed, human rights education (HRE) entails both content and process related to human right, and keeps together both legal and normative dimensions. The legal dimension deals with content about international human rights standards, treaties and covenants to which countries subscribe; the normative dimension looks at HRE as a cultural enterprise and a process intended to provide skills, knowledge and motivation to individuals to transform their own lives and realities so that they are more consistent with human rights norms and values (Tibbitts & Fernekes 2011). The reduction of HRE to one side or the other, being legal or normative, would undermine its ultimate goal, which is to reduce human rights violations and empower persons to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights (Tracchi, 2017). Furthermore, while it is not exempt from challenges and criticisms which I won't discuss in this article (see as general reference Keet 2012 and 2015; Tibbitts & Katz, 2017; Spreen & Monaghan, 2017; Vlaardingerbroek, 2015), HRE relies on more than twenty years of theory, research and praxis (Bajaj, 2017). Since the process of "value generalization" has the potential to lead to an agreement on the plurality of competing values in complex global societies, in section 3 of the paper I looked at school class as a social system recalling Talcott Parsons' analysis. In order for schools to function as places for learning to live together, the role of education in culturally diverse and complex global societies must be rethought in light of holistic approaches. All education contributes to citizenship- and character formation and this is not something that can be ascribed to one specific curriculum intervention or educational activity. Surely there are many variables to ensure a successful learning process and that schools live up to their goal. However, the approach taken in this article limited itself to shed some light on the sociological concept of "value generalization" and its relevance for making the school system an inclusive

public sphere and further developing constructive discussions on human rights in the school classroom. More empirical research is needed to investigate if and how schools are reflecting and guiding the manifest plurality of cultures and identities in globalising societies, and if and how they are shaping citizenship- and character-formation. An interesting path for taking this research forward and qualitatively assessing the relevance of the concept of "value generalization" in an educational context would be to develop a targeted and participatory activity for students to be observed in the school classroom. For example, the activity could focus on a specific issue/event from the perspective of different cultures and traditions, and the challenge would be to reach agreement among students following the process of "value generalization". The development of the UDHR, for instance, can be turned into a role play in which students embody different actors and the wide range of intellectual and cultural traditions involved. The purpose would be, as described by Hans Joas in his *New Genealogy of Human Rights* (Joas, 2013), to recreate the composite synthesis of a dynamic process and achieve the dynamic, mutual modification of our own traditions as well as finding stimuli for their renewal.

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