

# A Cross-Cultural Evaluation of Human Values in Mainstream Education

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**Abstract:** Human values are the essence of social wellbeing of all societies. However, at present, they are considered rather as means to promote human rights, while their function in creating a sense of humanity plays a secondary role. The aim of this study is to review and evaluate the influence of human values on mainstream education in a cross-cultural context. The study is based on qualitative research that uses focus group and individual interviews on mainstream education systems and models in order to understand the differences and the similarities with respect to universal human values in cross cultural settings. Results show that human values should play a significant part in shaping mainstream education and also there are considerable cross-country differences with regard to human values in mainstream education. The study concludes that improving of human values in mainstream education would enhance opportunities for better personal development and perfection of human relations at every level of human interaction.

**Key words:** mainstream education, values education, human values, contemporary education

## 1. Introduction

Human values define human relations and communication, which are essential for the survival of any human society. One may want to ask in this context what human values are and what their meaning or importance may be. Although, there is no clear and precise definition of human values, the theory of basic human values proposed by Schwartz (2006; 2012) describes them as necessary, motivational objectives, diverse in importance, that function as guiding principles for every individual to live a full life. These basic human values are formed based on religious priorities or ideological preferences prevailing in a certain ethnic group, society, or nation, and it is transferred from generation to generation through family, school education, literature, art, and mass media (Kostina et al., 2015). Therefore, these values are the primary basis for forming societies and they can be assessed in all aspects of society or social life as well as in terms of interaction among ethnic groups, states, and nations.

Since the importance of human values cannot be emphasized enough, it is essential to convey the awareness of human values into modern global society. Our modern global society is currently facing human value crises and also the issue of changing values. Meanwhile, the old values of mutual cooperation are disappearing. Üner Kirdar (1992) states that it is almost forgotten to set goals and objectives to provide people with the opportunity to develop their own potential and creativity and pursue their happiness. There is also a marked trend in many countries towards the disintegration of

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the traditional family structure. The impact and the terminal products of this are millions of disturbed, poorly or non-educated citizens and children committing crime; there is a permanent and growing problem of erosion of human values in most societies (Kirdar, 1992). This problem is to be solved by a deep change in the way of thinking and by mutual cooperation. Malet De Carteret (1992) states that in order to initiate changes that will steer the global community towards a better future, we need information and new methodologies of approach. Nevertheless, the world is in serious danger of information overload. Even so, information available to us on how to change human attitudes and values is limited. Any approach that has been used to introduce change has been prompted from the top down. This statement implies on the responsibility of the leadership in societies of any level in providing proper quality and quantity of information to the public sphere in order to have moral development. Those values required for cooperative human progress are, among others, respect, tolerance, understanding, responsibility, honesty, integrity, and generosity (Malet De Carteret, 1992). Just as Kirdar and Malet De Carteret, Willows-Machera (1992) also shares the view of the necessity for transforming human values and to become better and more responsible and compassionate human beings. She also implies on the importance of each human being to become so called global citizens, who share the same human values (Willows-Machera, 1992).

The above trend is also synonymous with the mainstream education in our modern societies today. In modern societies, most mainstream education systems lack humanity partly due to secularism. Even some officially religious countries have to face the same problems about human values, sometimes because religion is separated from everyday life of the society or because its values and norms are not flexible enough to keep pace with the rapid change in most modern societies. Most of these challenges rise due to the ever faster globalization process. There are numerous arguments about what values should be taught, as such, values education becomes relevant. It is arguable whether values education is a task of the school or other institutions. One approach of values-education is represented by religion. Teaching human values is closely attached to religious studies. But religious studies are applicable only in religious schools. The other approach is the so called character building education, which mostly represents a part of certain countries' nation building programs. In these programs it is an important concept that the visibility of citizenship must be ethical, and even spiritual, if it is to cope with the complex moral matter of helping children to live in a liberal democracy (Pike, 2007). Therefore, one's choice of terminology in this topic depends on presuppositions (Vreken, 2008). For getting started, it is recommended to consider certain overlaps between character building programs and religious teachings in concentrating on such basic values as honesty and respect, among others (Vreken, 2008).

Most of the studies concentrate on human rights using human values as only means, not considering the aspect of humanity. Other studies concentrate on certain states when analyzing values education, mainly with the mere purpose of character building for the sake of the given state to create faithful and useful citizens (Duman, 2014; Fernández et al., 2014; Kostina et al., 2015; Thornberg & Oguz, 2016). This study aims at filling in the gaps other contemporary researchers have left with respect to creating a sense of humanity, approaching from a cross-cultural point of view. With this as backdrop, this study is an attempt to address these gaps by providing answer to this research question: "Does the influence of human values on mainstream education differ in a cross-cultural context, and can these differences be explained?" To answer the question, this study explores and highlights the importance of human values in mainstream education in a cross-cultural context. Moreover, it makes the significance of evaluating human values in mainstream education even clearer considering the insights it conveys with regard to cross-cultural differences.

## 2. Research Methodology

The research design of this study is based on an investigative and descriptive analysis which relies on qualitative methodological approach in collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data with the intention that the desired information can be achieved with sufficient accuracy (Mitchell & Jolley, 2010). The qualitative data collection techniques used include focus group interviews, individual interviews, semi-structured interviews, and observations. The primary data collected about the state of values education in mainstream education provide a base for comparison with secondary data from literature, journals, and documents. As qualitative research concentrates on words and observations to express reality, the key element is the involvement of people, where disclosures are encouraged, supported by a nurturing environment (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

### 2.1 Participants

Purposive and convenience sampling were used in this study to select the participants, 23 students (57% female and 43% male) in total from Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (an international university with students from eighty-one countries) ranging from 20 to 35 years old. The sample of the respondents was made considering the involvement of students who represent all continents, from countries of different cultural, political, economic, and religious backgrounds. 78% (18) of the participants took part in the focus group interview while the remaining 22% (5) participated in individual interviews. 74%(17) of the participants were graduate (15 Master's and 2 Doctoral) students, and 26% (6) were undergraduate students. The countries represented were Japan, Korea, China, Mongolia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, India, Pakistan, Iran, Oman, Kenya, Nigeria, Uzbekistan, Russia, Bulgaria, Germany, Denmark, the USA, Canada, Mexico, and Peru. 52% (12) of the participants came from Christian background, 22% (5) from Buddhist or Confucian background, 22% (5) from Islamic background, and 4% (1) from Hinduism.

### 2.2 Procedure and Analysis

The participants were given two handouts. One of them contained definitions of morality and human values providing insight on the subject matter and was also used as a reference throughout the interview process. The other one was a questionnaire containing open ended questions about the experience of the respondents from school years related to value education and human values. These provided a general orientation point in conducting the interviews and working out the analysis. The flow of the interviews followed the interview guide which consisted of six basic interview questions and in most cases some additional questions were also raised. A voice recorder was used in the process and the recorded material was transcribed in order to facilitate the analysis. The individual responses were analyzed, compared, and categorized based on the results of the transcribed interviews, and subsequently triangulated and interpreted to draw conclusions. The qualitative analysis was inspired by techniques developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Human Values and Morality

By the time the collection of definitions on morality and human values was distributed among the respondents the researcher had already explained the difference between the two categories, the questionnaire and the interview questions (Appendix A) made some respondents raise further questions in order to clarify which category the research topic refers to. It was important to clarify that morality refers to a narrower category that is related to a certain community, institution, or other

authority, that determines the set of norms according to which people can decide what is right and wrong. A significant majority of the respondents agreed on the importance of acquiring morals in order to be able to communicate with fellow human beings in a proper way.

Although morality is an essential guide that leads to global values, it can be exclusive, therefore it is still not satisfactory in terms of this research. As Sidney Simon (1972) claimed, there are no final moral authorities. Global human values are not restricted to a certain country, religion, or any kind of institution, but involve all human societies (Shankar, 2007).

### **3.2 Character Building in Schools and Society**

A significant majority of the respondents gave high importance to the statement that character building plays an essential role in gaining a sense of morality. Education is only one factor, although a very important factor, according to De Roche and Williams (2001), the most important factor in terms of developing and forming human values. However, the respondents mentioned that family, religious background, and the influence of the media and the society all have significant influence on shaping the individual's character. Most of the respondents expressed that they found character building highly relevant in education.

### **3.3 Education Systems**

The responses showed that the education systems in different countries mostly represent the basic concept of the society or the given state ideology. Especially the East Asian countries show collectivistic mentality in the school systems. In Japan, Korea, China, and Singapore, mainly due to Confucian ideals that have been shaping the general way of thinking from generation to generation in these societies since antiquity, the collectivist way of thinking shows the path in acquiring human values. The focus is on nation building, while the importance of the individual plays a secondary role. Even taking responsibility has to be collective, which, according to the respondents' opinion, does not teach the person about individual responsibility. On the other hand, self sacrifice also appears in these education systems by teaching the individual to work hard for the purpose of the welfare of the society. These education systems also value and promote hierarchy and make the individual find their place in it, in all micro communities in the society. They emphasize respect, but this respect basically has to be practiced towards the ones who stand on higher steps of the hierarchy. Self discipline, in these education systems, appears to be an important value, as well.

In societies where the school system is based on Christian values (the Philippines, Kenya, Nigeria, Papua-New Guinea, Peru, the USA, Canada), almost the same set of values are on display, comparing to the ones of Confucian background. Respect towards fellow human beings is one of the most important values being transmitted in Christian education. It also values home and family; moreover, it requires the students to report on their home behavior at school. As De Roche and Williams (2001) claims, values, which are taught in schools, must have consensual allegiance in the community.

The case of India turned out to be complicated, as it consists of many states which all have their own education systems. Nevertheless, human values are on display even to the extent of respecting all living creatures and the whole Earth as one entirety. This approach brings in the idea of caring for the environment that appears to be an important issue in contemporary societies. Respect and some other basic values, such as care for each other, trust, and responsibility are the key words in many other countries' (such as Uzbekistan, Denmark, Germany, Iran, and certain states of the USA and Canada) education systems considering human values. Nevertheless, some respondents (e.g. the students from Denmark and Germany) mentioned that in their countries, values education is not explicit, although human values are on display in everyday life of the school, and students can absorb them by observation. In Mexico, the school focuses on morals only according to the school standard.

The USA is one of the best examples of nurturing patriotic values in the society through integrating those values into the education system, put together with Christian values, which serve only the nation state, but does not necessarily contribute to global societies. In Switzerland, there is much interaction between teachers and students that makes it easier to transmit human values. Several respondents mentioned that to their knowledge, the education systems in their countries have changed since their school years there. Some of them (e.g. the students from Singapore, Iran, Oman) said, both the system and the teachers were more flexible, more open minded than even ten years before, but some of them (e.g. the students from Bulgaria, Uzbekistan, Russia, Mongolia) talked about the negative effects of “westernization” on their education systems that causes the deterioration of human values in the society.

On the whole, most of the respondents (e.g. the students from Russia and Germany) who mentioned good memories about teachers who held and conveyed human values in school, emphasized that they believed those values came from individual teachers and they were not the “products” of the given education system.

### **3.4 Subjects Supporting Human Values in The Curriculum**

#### ***3.4.1 Moral studies or ethics as subjects***

Only seven of the twenty-three respondents mentioned about participation in so called moral studies class, ethics class, or any other class referring to similar issues from their school years. Only one of the seven respondents evaluated the subject he studied on Right Behavior effective and edifying, but even he mentioned that it depended on the person. Most students did not get deeply involved in the message that the subject was supposed to transmit. The others stated that the way those subjects were interpreted was unsatisfactory and inefficient. Either because of the teacher’s ignorance and arbitrary action of replacing the subject with other, “more useful” subjects, such as mathematics or language classes (at primary level), or because of the opposite approach: the extreme overemphasis of sticking to certain values without the sense of proper interpretation, transmission, and justification (at high school level). The interviewee from the USA recommended to introduce Eastern philosophy to the students of individualistic societies, so that they learn about collectivist thoughts which they can apply in their own life, as well. Among others, the Bulgarian and the Papua-New Guinean respondents added that ethics, certain religious and other courses related to conveying human values are to be introduced in the education systems.

#### ***3.4.2 Philosophy and religion***

Philosophy and religious studies appeared to be a sort of replacement of morality or ethics class, where students could acquire a sense of morality or human values. Some respondents who had experience in both public and religious education, even expressed that the difference is significant between the two systems, and most of them noted that the religious approach was always more efficient than the public one. Seven of the interviewees participated in religious education, and only two of them evaluated the religious school system unsatisfactory and hypocritical, the other five persons appraised it as beneficial in character building.

#### ***3.4.3 Literature class and reading books in order to acquire human values***

Five of the respondents emphasized the efficiency of literature classes in character building and learning human values. Literature, by bearing emotional motives, can help in the transmission of ethical messages (Black, 1996). As in the case of many countries’ education, literature classes and textbooks with edifying stories of some other subjects which served to convey human values were mentioned by many respondents, the encouragement of students for reading more books might be one of those aspects that should be considered in the case of improving values education.

### **3.4.4 Home economics**

Home economics, as a subject was mentioned by some of the respondents, who expressed their admiration and satisfaction with the contents and the teacher's way of conveying home values by this subject. They all agreed that home economics can be a useful means in transmitting human values. They mentioned learning responsibility for home and those who belong to home; care, love and how to communicate with different kinds of people, among other values.

### **3.4.5 Importance of sports in character building**

As it was articulated by respondents from China and Papua-New Guinea, sports or any kind of physical demand have a great impact on one's character (Rudd and Mondello, 2006). They teach us self-control and proper communication with other people. After experiencing mental and emotional challenges, physical strain teaches people to feel the entirety of existence ("A healthy mind in a healthy body." Curtis and Boulwood, 1977: 362). Moreover, sharing the same experience with fellow human beings let us understand and feel the eternal fact of interconnection within all living creatures on Earth, therefore the sense of values gains a new dimension that would be missed were such physical challenges absent.

### **3.5 Boarding Schools**

Two respondents cited boarding schools as useful means for building character and nurturing a sense of human values in students. This might be a counterpoint to the approach according to which parents and home values play the essential role in values education, or at least suggests that a boarding school may take over those responsibilities from families on occasion.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1 Basic Problems with The Systems**

In most education systems, the basic problem turned out to be the fact that the systems themselves do not support the idea of conveying human values. Especially in the last two decades, the emphasis has shifted to material welfare. In this new world, even if there are some remnants from the old systems where there were some moral guidelines related to a given society, such as morality or ethics as subjects, the stream of the new wave is washing out the essence of those subjects. Most teachers do not value them, or moreover, they ignore them even if they are part of an established curriculum (e.g. in case of the Japanese interviewee's experience). Another problem, recently revealed in Japan, is the corruption scandal in the examination system for future teachers (Kyodo, 2008). The question goes without saying: How can we expect the education systems to promote human values, if the teachers themselves do not hold the basic norms and values that should be required by the society, which seeks human development and contribution to the global community.

The Danish respondent explained his opinion about the problem of the "nation-state" approach, what he saw as a barrier in building global views, and what rather holds the danger of developing nationalist or racist views. He emphasized the necessity to expose children to people from different backgrounds and question their assumptions about their own identity, in order to develop and improve their characters and values. All the American, Canadian, and Bulgarian interviewees implied on the necessity of a stricter education system, as in training both teachers (which should be compulsory for all teachers, not only future, but practicing teachers, as well) and students. Teachers should represent a certain authority or reference; the norms of whom show the path to the students and make them feel responsible for following that path, as the indicator of belonging to a certain community, certain society.

#### **4.2 Lack of Creative Thinking and Imposed Values**

The respondents from the societies mentioned above expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of creative and critical thinking in acquiring certain skills; memorizing the materials is the only way of studying, while understanding plays a secondary role. This same problem was explicitly expressed by the respondents from Oman, Iran, and Mongolia. Joined by the student from the Philippines, they expressed that because of the conservative state ideology, values were imposed on the students, and as the interviewees from China, Pakistan, and the USA stated, values were not taught intentionally, especially when the ideology did not cover the practiced set of values in case of some teachers; as it caused strong opposition among students. This strong opposition was explicitly on display in the Iranian education system and society. The Iranian respondent even explained that the imposed values and rules taught the students the negative value of being insincere by pretending to keep those rules. This approach is the direct opposite of the basic principles of humanity, therefore it settles a barrier to the spread of such basic values as acceptance of differences, understanding, or generosity.

#### **4.3 Lack of Respect**

Many respondents (e.g. the ones from Indonesia and Uzbekistan) mentioned that a very important issue that should provide the initial step in nurturing students' values is that the teachers must show respect and care for the students, so that students learn how to be respectful, and how to practice this respect towards other people. A serious problem is, that in many educational systems the teachers are not trained to be respectful with the students.

#### **4.4 Need for Global Way of Thinking**

As it was expressed by the Mongolian interviewee, a shortcoming in the Mongolian education system was that even the teachers themselves did not represent a global set of values, only a narrow moral frame which referred to only the state norms, but not the global approach. This was the main problem in many country's education system, except for Denmark, where the fortunate and exceptional situation showed contrast to this wide-spread problem.

#### **4.5 Environment**

According to the Iranian and the Singaporean respondent, among others, the lack of conveyed information on environmental issues and the respect for the world around us was missing in most school systems. Students did not learn responsibility in taking care of common property, as if it were their own. That is what leads to ignorance and carelessness in terms of environmental issues.

#### **4.6 Economic and Political Situation**

Another important issue was first introduced by the interviewee from India, who explained the difference between well-off and poor regions of India. He stated, it is difficult to convey love and compassion for somebody who is struggling for physical survival. The economic or political difficulties of certain countries caused the problem that presented itself not only in the case of India, but was mentioned by respondents from e.g. Nigeria, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Peru, Mexico, or Russia. The economic problem manifests itself at different levels. One of these levels is the salary of the educators. It represents a significant problem, that teachers are underpaid, therefore even the basic requirement for conducting good-quality work is missing in many cases (Greene, 2007). This is one of the reasons that lead to the problem that teachers, as they do not feel valued, do not possess the necessary motivation, passion, and ambition to work thoughtfully and carefully, and they do not improve themselves as the German respondent voiced.

## 5. Conclusion

Due to the great opportunity an international and multicultural university could provide in the form of a rich fieldwork, this study gained its strength deriving from the genuine resources of primary data collection. However, it could not cover all societies. Another disadvantage of this research stemmed from the fact that the interviews themselves could provide information only covering the period when the already adult respondents attended school in their countries, since when the circumstances of many education and school systems had been changing, therefore this research could not provide up to date information about the current situation. Nevertheless, having revealed recent tendencies in the development of education systems provided proof on the necessity that most contemporary scholars have not realized or implicated in their studies concerning the relationship between human values and mainstream education.

The findings answered the research question of the study and verified the research assumption on the unsatisfactory state of contemporary education systems. They showed that human values appear in contemporary education mostly due to the personal features of a certain pool of educators. Most education systems do not even acknowledge the importance of values education. In some cases, certain subjects represent useful means in conveying humanity to the students; some other cases show that school related extracurricular activities play a bigger role in transmitting values than the actual school activities. Several elements and aspects were discussed in the 'Discussion', such as no emphasis on communication, creativity, independent thinking, or self expression, as well as, lack of respect, lack of global way of thinking, and financial scarcity. The respondents of the interviews furnished information on ways to improve values education and further recommendations on revising contemporary school systems related to humanities. Several respondents provided information on already existing solutions practiced in case of certain alternate education models. According to the respondents' opinion, there is a remarkable need for alternate educational ideas in order to improve the mediation of human values in contemporary mainstream education.

As it was discussed previously, there are several aspects to consider and several steps to be made by the stakeholders of education worldwide. First of all, the leadership of countries needs to realize the urgent necessity of changes in terms of the importance of global values education. After realizing this necessity in our modern world of violence, aggression, conflict, and dominance, the leadership needs to clarify what global values mean. For this step, the Universal Declaration of Human Values proposed by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in Washington (2007), can be an essential document serving as reference in order for clarification and cooperation among governments of different countries with different cultural and religious backgrounds. As Shankar (2007) discussed, all institutions of the society need to take part in nurturing and strengthening human values in everyday life. The education system can be one of the most powerful key sectors to contribute to this aim. He proposed the same idea what the secondary research data also revealed: Multicultural and multi religious education is needed to serve the purpose of international understanding and developing a global way of thinking, which is the first step in improving human relations at all levels of community, by means of nurturing a sense of global citizenship. Therefore, the leadership of each country needs to implement reforms, first of all, in the distribution of budget, by giving more preference to the education sector. The reputation of schools and teachers needs to be improved, their image needs to be amended. The next step is to improve the already existent training systems of future educators, and to establish new institutions which could contribute to the aim of training educators in an appropriate way to hold all necessary mental and spiritual skills and features that enable them to transmit human values for future generations. To achieve this, the selection process also needs to be improved, and the selected candidates need to be properly motivated to ensure that only ambitious and well prepared experts graduate from

those special training institutions. The curriculum needs to be updated as well, and the overemphasis on sciences and languages has to be eased by shifting more emphasis to social sciences, humanities, literature, arts, sports, and other activities, which hold the potential of values education in their nature. Subjects such as ethics, morality, religious studies, philosophy also can be good basis for developing a sense of human values. Nevertheless, the interpretation of these subjects needs to be adjusted according to universal values and it has to be avoided to be bound by certain restricting ideologies set either by the state or by a religious institution. Besides individual interest, common interest, a collective way of thinking needs to be introduced in contemporary “globalized” school systems. This latter aspect represents an urgent necessity even in terms of environmental issues that endanger the existence of future generations. Human values have to be used as great means in creating a sense of care for not only human beings but also the living and inanimate environment around us, in order to sustain our world, and make life harmonic on Earth.

The outcome of this study showed that due to the limitations, further research is necessary to widen the knowledge on the prospects of values education. Fieldwork conducted in schools in a wider range of countries is recommended to specify and refine the findings of this research by collecting data at first hand. Further recommendations could be developed in order to support and improve mainstream education more, and to empower it with the capability of contribution to the welfare and brighter prospects of present and future generations both on local and global scales.

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## [Appendix A]

### Question Guide for Focus Group Interviews

#### **Substantive Frame**

How do human values appear in contemporary mainstream education?

- What is the respondents' opinion about the importance of value education?
- What are the interviewees' experiences about values education from their school years?

#### **Respondents**

Selection considering continents, countries and religious background, representing the variegation of the world

#### **Questions**

- 1) What memories do you have from your school years with respect how your teachers approached human values?
- 2) Do you remember any of your teachers who you think had influence on your mentality related to human values?
- 3) What do you think about your country's education system considering human values?
- 4) What is your experience in your country's education system concerning human values? (Primary, Secondary, University level)
- 5) Do you think there is anything that should be changed in the education system in your country related to human values?
- 6) How do you think your perception of human values can be implemented in mainstream education?