

2016 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – Honorable Mention]

Sowing the Seeds of Change

(Original)

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“The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life,” Plato recognized two and a half millennia ago. The only lasting way to change the course of history is through education – by instilling a sense of environmental awareness, democratic participation, and peace in the hearts and minds of future leaders and voters. Going to school in China, I was surrounded by amazingly attentive and studious pupils who could recite long passages by heart. Yet they were never asked about their own opinions; independent and critical thinking was discouraged. In the United States, on the other hand, I met young people who knew little to nothing about foreign countries and cultures. To understand our fellow human beings we must learn to speak their language; to respect our planet we must learn to appreciate nature.

All nations have to educate their future agents of change about our planet’s problems and our responsibility to stop global warming. Already in elementary school, environmental education should be an integral part of the curriculum. However, learning about nature does not have to be confined to class rooms. If students are to develop a relationship with the environment, they need recurrent interactions with the outdoors. How better to learn about biodiversity than by growing plants in a school garden? How better to study energy independence and waste management than by installing solar panels and implementing recycling in schools? Bhutan has shown the world that environmental awareness is an utter necessity for poor and rich countries alike. We should follow its example and root environmental education in our schools to preserve our planet for generations to come.

Moreover, nothing can sow the seeds of lasting peace as well as education. To eradicate prejudice towards different cultures, schools could emphasize the study of foreign languages and cultures. At present, only few Americans speak more than one language, while many Europeans speak several. Starting with a foreign language as early as in primary school is crucial for a child’s development as it encourages memory and creativity. But even more

importantly, speaking a foreign tongue opens new doors and points the way to mutual understanding and peace. For example, Israeli children who had started studying Arabic in elementary school were found to view the Palestinian culture more positively. Once they speak the language fluently, students should be encouraged to go abroad and discover a different culture for themselves. This way, they can befriend people they might before have been taught to view as enemies. That is the beauty of language – the power to understand and to be understood, both literally and figuratively – and to thus remove every obstacle in the way of world peace.

Yet all studying is futile unless students acquire the most important skill of all – to think. “I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only teach them how to think.” In these two sentences the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates captured the essence of education, the pillar of democracy. Schools ought to promote rather than preempt questions and encourage critical thinking and debates in all subjects. In addition, secondary education should feature a mandatory subject devoted to the discussion of ethics. In this class, students could learn how to reveal logical fallacies and how to debate a political issue. Speaking, the public expression of one’s very own beliefs, deserves an equally prominent place in education as reading and writing. Discussion and debate is the soul of democracy; it is necessary for the existence of a thriving civil society.

In the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges ranging from pollution to poverty and war, we must not forget that these problems are caused by humans and can be amended by humans. There is nothing that stops us from changing the world if we decide to change our ways of educating. If our schools teach children about protecting the environment, then the next generation will be the first to fully embrace a sustainable way of living. Once people start speaking the language of their rivals and understanding the culture of their enemies, war will be a thing of the past. When young people are allowed to start thinking, they can build a better world for all.