Cultural Identity, Education and Geocentric Spatial Orientation in India

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The multicultural society of India has allowed a peaceful coexistence of people of diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds since ages. In spite of several changes taking place within the country with the new economic order coming into force, the basic structure of the Indian society has so far remained largely unchallenged. People still enjoy enormous freedom in terms of the choice of education and occupational specializations. While a fairly large number of schools established in rural and urban settings organize education along the Western pattern of schooling, they have not been able to completely displace the traditional institutions of education. Traditional Sanskrit and Urdu schools (for Hindu and Muslim societies respectively) are two classical examples. They attract a large number of pupils even in modern years. They are known not only to reinforce pupils' traditional cultural identity, but also a geocentric orientation to space. What happens to the cultural identity of children who attend Western type of schools relative to those who go to traditional schools? How do children in modern schools build up their spatial knowledge in terms of language and cognition against those who attend traditional Sanskrit or Urdu schools? This presentation attempts to answer these questions by reporting studies in which adolescent pupils from Western-type schools are compared with those of the traditional Sanskrit and Urdu schools in terms of several levels of identity (e.g., national, regional, religious) and the use of spatial orientation systems. With respect to cultural identity, the findings reveal the national identity to be strongly placed in all groups, whereas other levels of identity show variations according to cultural group as well as the school background of the participants. With respect to the use of geocentric space, the findings reveal that this is more commonly used by traditional than modern school children. The implications of these findings for education of children in India are discussed. The future of traditional schools and educational processes in the rapidly changing socio-economic and cultural contexts are examined.