

## **Citizenship education according to the Dutch Education Council**

*Richard Toes, EUNEC conference, 1 – 2 march 2018 Lisbon*

Education prepares pupils and students for a demanding society. The labor market asks for a high quality of (professional) knowledge. Also, the 21<sup>st</sup> century makes a strong appeal to ICT-literacy, problem solving skills, critical thinking, creativity and social competences, as well as the ability to shape and control one's own learning. Contemporary education should lay a solid foundation for the personal, social and professional functioning of young people.

Education in the Netherlands generally achieves above-average performance with average financial resources. However, the Dutch Education Council holds the opinion that Dutch education is not sufficiently prepared for the future. Basic overall quality is good, but some barriers hold back further improvement and innovation. The Council sees three risks: Firstly, there is too little vision regarding what pupils and students should be taught. Recently, the primary focus was on measurable goals, in particular aimed at raising performance in language and mathematics. In policy much less attention was paid to the broader palette of subjects and 'Bildung'. Citizenship education is one of those subjects that received relatively little attention for a long time. Secondly, performance-enhancing measures have left schools with insufficient room for putting their own emphasis in their curriculum. Citizenship education is one of the subjects that is likely to perish. Finally, the self-esteem of pupils who do not perform well in academic skills is low. The early selection for either prevocational secondary education (vmbo), or different levels of general secondary education (havo/vwo) already accentuated cognitive differences between pupils of different social backgrounds. The growth of homogenous classes may yet increase social differences as well. More segregation makes it difficult to work on citizenship education within classes and schools.

One of the solutions that the Dutch Education Council proposes to counter these problems, is that education policy should foster a greater appreciation of non-cognitive capacities. Society also needs creativity, problem-solving abilities, collaboration, cultural and moral sensitivity, and consideration. One of the important tasks of education is therefore to encourage the social development of children and young people. By Dutch law, it is one of the missions schools have to fulfill. Young people need to get acquainted with and build knowledge of a wide range of cultural aspects, such as moral values and traditions. This will contribute to young people's qualification, socialization and subjectification. It will form their personality and prepare them for a place in both the labour market and society at large. Education that is aimed at 'forming' children culturally, will present young people with knowledge and competencies, and will equip them to develop and discuss their own point of view regarding all kinds of developments in society. The Dutch Education Council holds the opinion that day to day educational practice offers many opportunities for this kind of 'bildung'. Many of these opportunities are not seized, these days. Educational practice is still too often aimed at the transfer of knowledge. Socialization and subjectification need more attention.

There are several advisory reports in which the Dutch Education Council has touched upon the issue of citizenship education as an educational goal. To summarize, the council proposes that schools:

- Give children a broad orientation, and invite them to reflect upon meaning, significance and purpose
- Encourage citizenship
- strengthen the cooperation between parents, children or youngsters and school
- work towards a school culture that is inclusive and avoids segregation.

What citizenship education should exactly entail or incorporate, is up to schools themselves. Schools should formulate their own vision on citizenship education. The Dutch Education Council does, however, mention the following:

- Citizenship education should bring children into contact with concepts such as democracy, human rights, sustainability, conflict management, social responsibility, equal rights and diversity. This will be important for their qualification (for instance, in the workplace it is of vital importance to be able to work with a diversity of people), their socialisation (we want pupils and students to become democratic citizens), and their subjectification (meaning that on the basis of their knowledge and experiences children are able to take their own stand, to formulate their own opinion and find their own place).
- Citizenship education is up to schools, so the Dutch Council does not propose a national citizenship education curriculum. However, according to the Council, there should be clarity about the minimum goals that ought to be reached. Also, schools should make the progress children make towards these goals visible.
- Citizenship education also means that the school is an area of practice. Citizenship and democracy are practiced in day to day school life. The Council therefore considers it important that schools and classrooms are heterogeneous where possible, and that possibilities are offered to all pupils and youngsters in the Netherlands to meet and work together with people from different ethnic, religious or social backgrounds.

Citizenship in practice.

In our Education Council three main functions of education are mentioned: qualification, socialisation and personal development (also called 'subjectification'). Socialisation in particular gives legitimacy to the phenomenon of citizenship.

In my personal practice as a school leader of a Christian school I have made several interventions to better embed the responsibility of pupils in our curriculum. 'School as a place for practice' has become a well-heard phrase in the discussion about citizenship. Pupils develop their active citizenship by 'learning by doing'. By only increasing their knowledge (for example about democracy and identity) the pupils do not become responsible citizens. Active citizenship is not dependent on

what we know; pupils mainly develop active citizenship if it is put into practice. This means that a school must strive to make sure that the pupils have as many occasions as possible to 'learn by doing'. This can happen in classrooms, in school and beyond.

I would like to mention a few examples which I'd like to divide into four geographical circles, namely: the school, the vicinity, the country and the world.

At the school where I am chairman of the board, work is being done on acquiring democratic competences. These competences are shaped for example by debate competitions, by organising school events in which political leaders present themselves and debate with pupils.

Also in school older pupils are linked to younger ones to make sure they make a good start within our school, which is called peer-support. Pupils are made responsible for their school and the vicinity of the school by keeping it clean. Pupils make contact with (in most cases) seniors citizens in the neighbourhood and invite them to musical performances, fitness and a Christmas dinner.

All subjects taught in schools are obliged to imbed citizenship in a meaningful way and it is addressed in everyday teaching practice.

When it comes to the city (R'dam) our school has the so-called "multicultural" project in which four pupils accompanied by a parent or teacher visit a family of one of the migrant groups in Rotterdam. They have dinner with that family and in return they are invited to visit our school during the same week (in which the students tell their experiences while the class and families listen). In this manner xenophobia is tackled and made possible to be talked about. Another example is that our school is jointly responsible for placing a Jewish children's monument in the centre of Rotterdam. Every year all Jewish children that were murdered during the Second World War are commemorated here. So Jews, Christians and Muslims are involved in these commemorations.

To complete the circle our school also takes responsibility worldwide by visiting countries in Africa and Asia. Pupils themselves make sure that they have all the financial means to make this journey possible through aid organisations. They also become young ambassadors for this respective country and the aid organisation by organising fundraisers in school for a year. In doing so the attention for aid to those countries becomes a phenomenon within the school.

Of utmost importance is the role of enthusiastic teachers. Governments have to invest in teachers and school leaders who see the value of citizenship and their task to form pupils in this respect. It regularly appears that teachers have to grow in this role. If that happens it is beneficial to the atmosphere and involvement in the school. It would also be a nice external motivation to citizenship education if research could show that it is possible to make pupils' progress on citizenship visible.