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EUNEC statements

PROMOTING CITIZENSHIP AND COMMON VALUES THROUGH EDUCATION

These statements are based on the lessons learnt during the seminar in Lisbon, March 2018. They identify key issues for further debate within EUNEC and within each education council, member of the network.

EUNEC wants to disseminate these statements pro-actively to the European Commission, the European Parliament and relevant DG's. EUNEC also wants to promote action by its members at national/regional level. These statements can contribute to the national advisory opinions of education councils. They should lead to reflection and action by relevant stakeholders in the field of education and training, such as providers of education, teacher trade unions, social partners, students, parents and experts in the field of education and training.

Why is citizenship education at the centre of the policy debate?

In 2002 already, EUNEC approved statements on citizenship education. The education councils acknowledged the crucial role education must play in the preservation of European democratic societies.

Research, since the 1990s, underpins a growing political disinterest and disaffection both by young people and adults. As engagement of young people seems to be a good predictor of political engagement during adulthood, this is a worrying tendency.

This crisis seems more worrying today because new people want to participate, in relation to new issues, and in new ways. We certainly face a decrease of traditional participation, but at the same time we witness the rise of new forms of participation.

Participation and the core elements of the policy debate are changing because of the growing superdiversity of main European societies. The terrorist attacks in big European cities have been perceived as a strong signal to invest in shared convictions and democratic values. The Brexit was a wake-up call for the European Union to strengthen the belief in a common purpose and a continuing peaceful society. After a wave of democratization, there



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is a 'democratic recession', with the surge of populism and a return to authoritarian political systems. The development of social media offers unknown possibilities for influencing the society and the policy debate. But the information overload and the threat of false news create new challenges for any policy debate and the development of an evidence based political opinion.

Comparative research (such as ICCS)¹ on learning results in the domain of civic competences underlines the need for raising the civic competences of all citizens. Especially engagement with the fundamental principles of civics and citizenship and familiarity with concrete and basic features of democracy could be much stronger as it is now. In all countries, socio-economic background and gender are strong predictors of students' civic knowledge.

Core elements of a concept of citizenship

Citizenship in a superdiverse society is not an obvious fact. The concept balances between respecting diversity, identity and building common grounds for living together. Difference/diversity is seen in different ways of understanding the world, different ways of positioning yourself in society (identity) and social and cultural traditions. We cannot deny that our modern society is deeply divided by tensions between liberal and civic republican approaches, between emphasising civic rights or civic duties, between universality and difference, between local, national and global level, between criticality and conformity. Nevertheless, even the most diverse societies need an 'overlapping consensus' (John Rawls) to organise the co-existence in our societies. Living peacefully together in culturally diverse and democratic societies requires a mutual understanding and respect for shared values.

Part of the overlapping consensus can be found in the common values as described in the different declarations of human rights (UNO, European Declaration on Human Rights): respect for the human dignity, active and passive rights of freedom. The respect for the rights of persons belonging to minorities, equality between men and women. Non-discrimination and tolerance are at the heart of our European societies and they are fundamental to their functioning. These are values that are not negotiable. And we must ensure that they are embraced by future generations.

Citizenship refers certainly to democracy based on the rule of law, pluralism and justice, an open and tolerant society where all forms of diversity are cherished as an asset and not as a threat.

¹ <https://www.iea.nl/iccs>



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The democratic participation of citizens and their taking part in the development of a common understanding of co-existence requires also an active policy to tackle social inequalities and structural disadvantages. Fairness, inclusion and equal opportunities strengthen the sense of belonging to shared values. People should feel that their voice really counts in public life.

International and national policy frameworks underpin the efforts of schools in civics

For the European Union all these societal developments were reasons to reconsider the development and the understanding of the common European values and the concept of European citizenship². The leaders of government gathered in Göteborg in 2017 and set the policy agenda for a social Europe. Education and training are put forward as main assets for the further development of the whole society. Education and training are recognised in their preventive (against radicalisation), inclusive (creating opportunities and chances for further development) and pro-active (giving way to the future) roles.

The Council of Europe has a long tradition of stimulating school systems in the development of the civic competences of pupils³. The Council states that both the development of competences and democratic institutions are essential to sustain a culture of democracy. In addition, the democratic participation of all citizens within society requires measures to tackle social inequalities and structural disadvantages, that will allow for 'living together as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies'.

EUNEC welcomes these initiatives because education is put into the centre of the policy debate and is recognised as a main actor in the development of our societies. These initiatives call for a strong commitment of all parts of society to invest in education policies. Secondly, the European and international frameworks endorse the national policies with regard to citizenship.

Main levers for citizenship education

School is more and more becoming the 'common house' for young people. Therefore, it is a significant context for citizenship education, with high potential.

EUNEC identifies four main levers for citizenship education in schools:

- the learning content and didactic approaches;

² Keynote by Stefaan Hermans, 'The EU, common values and education'

³ Key note by Christopher Reynolds, 'Citizenship Education at the Council of Europe'



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- a school culture based on democratic values and respect for diversity;
- the competences of teachers and school teams;
- cooperation between schools and other societal actors.

Learning content and didactic approaches

Education should stimulate the sharing of common values and an ethic reflex from an early age, and at all levels of education. EUNEC considers key competences such as critical thinking, distinguish between fact and fiction (both in print as on-line) as fundamental for civics. Digital awareness, media literacy and a critical approach to digital information should be strengthened in all curricula. Human rights and the underlying concept and principles should be part of any curriculum at schools. This will be important for the pupils' 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).

The CDC model (competences for democratic citizenship) developed by the Council of Europe offers a comprehensive model for such curriculum design. It is valid for learners at all ages and at all levels of education.

There is need for a more action-oriented focus within schools and beyond (interaction with the community). Students show new forms of participation and societal involvement that should be recognised as a positive contribution (involvement in internet activism, new forms of collaboration and a sharing economy). Students should be more encouraged to bring their experiences into the learning process. As such, maybe the picture is not as dramatic as we might interpret. Maybe it is more inspiring and more positive to start looking at what young people are doing. To reach this, the education system should recognise the existing knowledge of the pupils and consider the informal and not-formal learning processes that are critical for any form of civic education. There is need for opportunities to discuss, to debate, to confront real life issues.

Democratic school culture

An even more challenging level of competence for youngsters is to be able to have an evidence based and articulated personal political opinion. This be a basis for active participation in the policy debate and for an active commitment in society.

The real challenge for education is to move from the intention to provide citizenship education, to doing it, putting it into practice. Democratic and civic competences can be learned at the school through promoting a democratic learning environment. Children and



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young people must have the agency and the right to have their say regarding what the future is going to be. Active participation of teachers, parents, students and the wider community in school governance gives pupils an idea of what democratic decision making is about and what it can change in concrete situations.

Schools are places where trust and mutual respect can be built. Playing together and speaking to each other is a strong starting point to realize how much we have in common. Intercultural dialogue is about real contacts between real people (and pupils).

Fairness and inclusion in education systems

The link between common values and inclusive education is crucial. If we want to create and sustain fair and inclusive societies, then the education systems need to develop the fundamentals for this approach by creating equal opportunities at school and in the classroom.

Education policies should reach out to all learners and strengthening inclusion in early childhood, for youngsters at risk and early school leavers, for disadvantaged groups with low literacy, numeracy or digital competences.

Competences of teachers and of school teams

Teachers play, as in many aspects of qualitative education, a crucial role. Introducing a complex concept of civic education with its different layers of competence, is impossible if teachers are not taken seriously as agents for change and for curriculum development. In too many innovation policies they are reduced to instruments. As shown in the research presented during the seminar⁴ the convictions and beliefs of teachers play a predominant role.

⁴ Key note by Reinhilde Pulinx, 'Dynamic relations between teachers' beliefs on language and citizenship on the one hand and teacher-student-interaction on the other hand'.