



Statements Civic Education and Equal Opportunities

The European Network of Education Councils adopted the following statements on civic education and equal opportunities on its General Assembly of 1 March 2003 in Den Haag.

Statements on Civic Education

1. Schools and education systems have to assume a responsibility to prepare youngsters to behave as citizens, active and responsible. This goes beyond providing insights into the working of political institutions. It is about young people learning to assume responsibility in society, to adopt a citizenship attitude and to act democratically. Schools and education systems have to develop (civic) skills and values.
2. It is important that pupils take responsibility in the neighbourhood, the school, (youth) associations and are involved in voluntary community service. This means that youngsters engage themselves in democratic procedures and strategies.
3. The following transversal competences should belong to the “core curriculum” of education:
 - to deal critically with information;
 - to formulate an articulated opinion;
 - to deal with diversity and other opinions;
 - to find a solution accepted by as many people as possible;
 - respect of democratic outcomes.
4. The school is a place where citizens learn to act as democratic citizens.
 - a) A participative school culture is essential whereby active citizenship is cultivated. The creation of a participative class and school is crucial to the success of citizenship education. Schools have to take into serious account the articulated opinions and concerted actions of pupils.
 - b) Democratic competence must have the support of the whole school structure: pupils must be able to express their ideas and work out their ideas on how things work at school; they must be able to discuss them and help find compromises and solutions. This right to give one’s opinion and to be listened to must be real, because empty slogans reinforcing feelings of powerlessness lead to apathy.
 - c) Today schools have or at least may have many pupils from a wide variety of different backgrounds. As far as schools can successfully make the classroom a true reflection of modern society this microcosm can offer opportunities for young people to learn how to live with diversity.

- d) Social and communicative skills have a prominent place in this approach. Negotiation strategies, learning to listen, forming an opinion and dealing with power, constraints of all kinds and the interests and concerns of others, all belong to the essence of democratic citizenship.

Statements on Equal Opportunities

1. Information in Europe about the situation of the most disadvantaged groups in education is scarce and fragmented. If the European Union plans to make equal opportunities in education a core element of its policy, the European Commission as well as other authorities should facilitate the collection and harmonisation of quantitative and qualitative information.
2. Enhancing the concept of competence in education.

To the 20th century, one often bound the choice of an orientation to the concept of merit, which induces a devalorisation of certain forms of studies which seem second choice. It is currently necessary to prefer an orientation which takes into account competences and the personal development plan.

Curricula are largely determined by the acquisition of abstract knowledge. Some pupils have primarily instrumental skills, they learn while doing. Others have mainly social abilities.

The challenge consists in organising open curricula and educational situations better adapted to a diversified public. A variety of training situations should interest both young people gifted for the abstraction as those with more practical talents. Quality standards, curricula imposed by each government, should stimulate diversity.

At present, various developments are addressing this issue.

- The discussions in various countries and on the European Union level on the recognition of non-formal learning and skills attained elsewhere show that education systems are gradually starting to realise that they do not have a monopoly on learning.
- Experiments with cooperative learning highlight varying skills of the pupils in the classroom.
- Experience-based learning will appeal to the people who learn by doing .

A related question is whether the educational system should more focus on nurturing experiences of success. Modular education is one of the possible ways to emphasise progress in learning.

3. Early school programs for children deserve more attention. Important deciding factors for the success of this strategy include:
 - selective targeting of most underprivileged children;
 - close involvement of the parents;
 - an integrated approach;
 - a sustained effort in the primary and secondary school.
4. Learning rights must be reinforced. This includes
 - the right of admission to a school of one's choice,
 - a pedagogy of success instead of expulsion from school,

- the right to differentiated learning strategies,
 - the expansion of programmes for youngsters who failed.
5. An important conclusion drawn from the analysis of alternative curricula, transition systems seems to be that these pedagogical and didactical principles ought to be mainstreamed within the “normal” secondary education. Their carefully considered educational approach is highly suitable for all pupils at-risk.