

Formative education

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Opportunities for formative education in schools

How can education be given an incentive to offer a modern take on formative education? This question was put to the Education Council by the Senate, and the present report is our response.

A focus on formative education means broadening the world of pupils or students through a broad-based cultural transfer that provides them with a compass. Formative education also means giving pupils and students ideas that will help give them direction or point out things of value. Attention for formative education is important and desirable, not only because schools in all sectors have a legal duty to provide it, but also because the current sociocultural context demands it. Society is complex, pluralistic and dynamic, and places high demands on young people in terms of their personality, but also in terms of the way they function socially and professionally. Formative education prepares them for this. It is important that the focus on formative education takes a contemporary approach. Children and young adults need a broad-based cultural transfer, including knowledge of traditions and morals. This is knowledge that they will not so readily acquire from other sources. It is important that young people are given the equipment they need to be able to enter into a dialogue, so they can discover for themselves the things that help give them direction and things of value. Today, authenticity and personal experience are important. This broad-based cultural transfer will therefore often take place through people and personal stories. For example, by teachers and tutors who themselves have a broad base of knowledge and have developed a compass, and who can convincingly show what these things mean to them. Today's youth often have a strong focus on immediate gratification. This will demand examples of people to show how you can enrich yourself by rejecting this and by committing yourself to something greater.

This report puts the role of the teacher centre-stage. To benefit from formative education, children and young people need others, including teachers, who convey knowledge, demonstrate expertise and whose actions bear testimony to certain values or ideals. Teachers and tutors therefore have an important role to play in setting an example for pupils and students. But this is not their only role: given their position and the way they behave, teachers are always working formatively, whether they intend to or not. It is important that teachers and tutors are aware of their formative roles so that they can use their role in a targeted way.

The Education Council makes five recommendations that will better enable teachers and tutors to systematically devote attention to their formative role. The recommendations are not only directed at teachers and tutors, but also towards the broader educational environment: teacher training colleges, schools, the education minister and the Senate. The recommendations are intended as a prelude to a debate on the formative role of education.

Recommendation 1 for teachers: acknowledge your formative role and develop a feeling for formative opportunities in teaching situations

The Education Council believes it is important that teachers and tutors are aware of their role in the formation of students. Awareness of this role presents opportunities. A good time for formation is during subjects such as religion and beliefs, science, literature, history and philosophy. Teachers can act formatively by teaching their subject with passion, by bringing the outside world into their classes to show the relevance of their subject, by engaging their pupils in a discussion of more underlying questions, or by showing what a subject means for teachers in their professional capacities. To a large extent, formation also takes place through the behaviour of teachers or tutors towards pupils or students, the way they make contact and the way they respond. Formative education will therefore also be visible in everyday educational practice.

Recommendation 2 for teacher training colleges: pay attention to four competencies

The central role of teachers in formative education places high demands on the profession. Teachers must be able to present themselves as people who have been formed, in terms of knowledge and expertise, but also on a personal level. The Education Council advises teacher training colleges to devote more attention to four competencies: 1) subject-matter knowledge and teaching skills; 2) social and educational engagement with the pupils or students; 3) be formation-oriented; and 4) be inspired and committed to continuing development.

Recommendation 3 for schools and educational institutions: make sure there is a vision, commitment, time and space

At present, a lot of attention is devoted to the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in economic terms. While knowledge and skills are important, schools and educational institutions should also enable teachers and tutors to fulfil their formative role well. The starting point is to think about what the school or institution wants its educational offering to achieve, and what values the school or institution holds important. What do we want to offer pupils or students in the way of a compass and purpose; what traditions and knowledge are important in achieving this? It is important to have a clear educational vision which all stakeholders are committed to, and which is also part of the school's profile. This will also demand that attention is given to coherence between the various activities within the school or institution. Furthermore, a healthy educational or social environment is a prerequisite for formative education. Additionally, education should be organised in such a way that there is ample opportunity for longer-term and more personal contact between teachers or tutors and pupils or students. This generally requires small-scale forms of education and support. Finally, it would be useful to ensure that external partners, such as parents, other professionals and volunteers, are involved in formative education activities at school.

Recommendation 4 for the education minister: emphasise the fact that modern formative education and knowledge transfer belong together

The minister could regularly emphasise the importance of a modern take on formative education. Formation is one of the statutory duties of schools that teachers and tutors find important. Policy for all education sectors should be assessed in terms of the extent to which it allows formative education. The Education Council notes that formative education is not separate from or opposed to good educational achievement. In fact, formation will actually occur in practice when subject-matter knowledge is transferred. A teacher or tutor who teaches his subject with passion, who broadens the world for his pupils or students, and who has high expectations can help pupils or students attain high academic standards, while fulfilling an important formative role. It is also recommended that the attention paid by schools and educational institutions to formative education is reported on by schools when they render an account of their educational quality.

Recommendation 5 for the Senate: organise the debate on formative education

A number of recommendations alone will not be enough to adequately highlight the topic of formative education. The Education Council wishes to put formative education firmly on the agenda of policymakers, schools and educational institutions, as well as society as a whole. The Education Council therefore encourages the Senate – who commissioned this report – to organise a number of debates.