

(Check against delivery)

“Securing Democracy through Education”

Conclusions on Behalf of the Chairmanship

23.3.17, 11:30-12:30

Context

Democratic values should not be taken for granted. We were reminded of this on the first day of our conference through the attack on Parliament in London. We stand with our British colleagues and friends.

Our efforts to secure democracy in our societies are taking place in a dynamic socio-political context. Many of us feel that the Europe of tolerance is transforming into a Europe of intolerance. Are we losing our ability to cope with and live with diversity?

The importance of democracy as a matter of values and not as a set of plain procedures to be learned comes to the forefront. This calls for a critical understanding of our European identities and a reaffirmation of the humanist dimension of education. Democracy cannot be learned unless it is practised and lived. Democracy as a practice should engage students, teachers, parents and the wider society. Education cannot provide the answer by itself, but no answer can be given without education. We also need to develop a common European vision for our own and future generations - we need to find a common cause again. Furthermore, we need coherent public discourses and policies to avoid the danger of bureaucratisation of democracy. Today's education is tomorrow's society.

Suggestions

During these two days of discussions and useful deliberations I have taken note of many interesting ideas and I would like to draw the following conclusions:

We need to educate our children to step out of their comfort zone. This applies both to the citizens of the receiving countries as well as to the newcomers. Failure to do so might make it easy for xenophobic and populist political voices to gain ground. Immigration can be an enriching factor and it can have positive effects to society if appropriate measures are taken.

We need to be ready to address the concerns of all and help students to live in an ever changing and complex world. Education must prepare students for complexity because that is the reality of our societies.

We need to preserve the autonomy of education and its fundamental purposes, of which the Council of Europe has defined four: preparation for the labour market, preparation for democratic citizenship, personal development, and the development of a broad and advanced knowledge base. While undertaking measures to counter radicalisation, we should maintain the feeling of trust among students, between students and teachers and between the institutions and the local communities. Our schools and universities should be safe spaces where dialogue on sensitive and controversial issues can take place. I invite the Council of Europe to work further on these issues through its Steering Committee for Education. Three main elements should underpin our work: democratic teaching practices, democratic learning environments and the democratic functioning of schools.

Teachers are asked to play a very demanding role. Are we asking too much of them? Increasing demands on them should go hand in hand with a constant care for their empowerment and the enhancement of their confidence. The development of specific tools which will support them in their daily practice is critical. The model of Competences for Democratic Culture is a very good example that could be used in this respect and it has already received very positive feedback. Teachers' professional development, both initial and in-service training, should be a main focus.

A whole school approach and a multi-stakeholder approach have proven to be productive. The engagement of parents, NGOs, and the community at large can bring more sustainable results.

We should put the emphasis on young learners. Pre-primary education should be organised according to the needs of the children and move beyond simple caring to providing quality education adapted to their age.

The current situation of greatly increased migratory and refugee flows should not be perceived as a problem that can be faced with emergency measures. Rather it should be considered as a structural issue which calls for long-term responses. Some countries, such as, Lebanon have already managed to provide responses which maintain both the quality of and access to education, which is considered as a public good and a public responsibility.

Refugees need to be given a safe haven in new countries and help in adjusting to a new culture and environment. Our conference in particular examined the role of language in helping integration, as shown by Italy, as well as in developing the will to adapt. It is also of great importance that refugees are able to make good use of their qualifications. This is essential to individual refugees but it is also important to their host societies, and it will be equally important to their home countries if and when they can return. We took good note of the pilot project on a European Qualifications Passport for Refugees currently being carried out by Greece and the Council of Europe with the participation of recognition specialists from four countries. Providing refugees with a possibility of having their qualifications assessed, even when these cannot be fully documented, is entirely in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and our marking of its 20th anniversary.

We need to work together to tackle common challenges. The establishment of synergies on a regional and international level is more than necessary. The Council of Europe can play a pivotal role in this endeavour, for example by setting up a platform to share good practice. The Cyprus chairmanship is becoming a starting point for the establishment of such synergies and partnerships. We wish to see the Council of Europe take this issue further in its future work. Cyprus is prepared to play a leading role in this direction.