

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

NECE Workshop: The Impacts of National Identities for European Integration as a Focus of Citizenship Education

Project Example

“Some notes on the relevance of (European) history”

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This presentation is based upon results from a research project undertaken by prof. dr. Maria Grever (Erasmus University Rotterdam) and me. The main issue is how youngsters perceive not only the past but also their own social identity. The research was asked for by the WRR, the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy. This can be explained by the uneasy feelings in Dutch society concerning immigration, multiculturalism, and globalization as well as the European unification. As a result of all this, the attention for Dutch national identity increased in recent years. A dominant position was to present it as a fixed and unchanging phenomenon, at the same time excluding different kinds of ‘others’ from the concept. We, however, regard national identity as a construction, subject to temporal change.

The study – to be published in Dutch as ‘National Identity and Multiple Past’ (Amsterdam 2007) – is based upon a survey in early 2006 among app. 670 pupils in the Netherlands, UK and France, age 14-18, both natives and non-western immigrants. One of the questions we asked was ‘Can you name an historical event that influenced your life?’ More than half of the respondents in all three countries could not give an example. From the answers that were nevertheless given, two events were named most often: the first one was World War II, the second one was 9/11. All other events, some of them related to national history, were never mentioned by more than five percent of the pupils.

Formulating some what provocatively, one might say that the answers to this question show:

- that the relevance of large-scale history seems to be limited for a majority of young people
- there is no unanimous support for one historical event. That brings up the question to what extent there still is a collective memory?

The group of pupils who consider WWII the most influential event for their lives is only sixteen percent and hardly larger than the group that considers 9/11 the most influential from this point of view. It seems that in these three Western-European countries, national history is not by definition the most important narrative. According to these findings, the most influential history nowadays is global history – leaving us with the question what the perceived (historical) relevance of Europe is.

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But all this, as I warned, may be stated too provocatively. Looking further into the data, shows that pupils were also asked what kinds of history are important to them. They could choose among family history, local and regional history, national history, European history and world history, as well as history of religion. Pupils with a native Dutch, British and French background find national history usually more important than migrant pupils. European history is not considered very important by 95% of the respondents; pupils with a migrant background hardly mention it at all.

Most important for most pupils was family history. However, among migrant respondents an almost equally large group considered the history of (their) religion to be the most important to them.

This last result resembles the outcome of another question: we asked pupils to describe their own identity (local, national, international and religious). For a majority of the migrants in this survey, religion was the most important 'framework' to identify with, while the native youngsters considered the country (Netherlands, UK and France) and the local level as the frame for their most important identity. International frames (Europe, the world) followed somewhere after that.

The differences in ideas and preferences concerning history and identity - on the one hand the Dutchmen, Frenchmen and Brits, on the other hand the migrants - are interesting. There also differences (...) between for instance Brits and Dutchmen, but these are usually somewhat smaller.

Though half of the pupils who participated in this survey could not mention an example of relevant history, about 90% of the respondents considered history to be interesting. That may be hopeful, but there remains a difference between relevant and interesting. It is important to realize that more and more often, to a large group of people in the Western world, history remains interesting but distant, something that's not related to young people's individual and social identity.

At this point in time, European history is not as important as family history, national history and religious history. That may not look very promising if you consider European history (or the - possible - collective memory based upon it) an important building stone for European citizenship. But we should not forget that history of religion (especially of the Islam) probably became so important for many immigrants only after 9/11. Religion became more important once it came 'under attack' in public debates and xenophobic outcries in several European countries. So what to expect now that the European Union is increasingly questioned?