

2002: SEMINAR CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Citizenship education, social cohesion and equal opportunities

The Flemish Education Council (Vlor) invited the members and observers of the European Network of Education Councils to the seminar on Citizenship education, social cohesion and equal opportunities. This seminar was a step in the execution of EUNEC's Action Program.

General outline and approach of the theme

Education and training systems play an important role in the preservation of European democratic societies. For the European Union education and training systems should promote solidarity, democratic values, tolerance and interest in other cultures in an efficient way, and should prepare youngsters for active citizenship.

Europe connects the need for citizenship education to its intention to provide equal opportunities for socially vulnerable groups (disabled people, pupils with learning problems, people in rural areas ...). Social exclusion is an important restraint on social cohesion in our society. Socially vulnerable people should also have the opportunity to acquire competences by which they can actively participate in the society.

The General Assembly of EUNEC decided on November the 23rd to put this theme on its agenda. In this seminar we want to reflect on the responsibility of education to work on the involvement of citizens in politics and society and on equal opportunities.

1 Changes in society affect the legitimacy of politics

In the first part of the seminar we will analyse the social changes that reveal why the need for citizenship education is increasing. Politics are faced with a problem of legitimacy due to a number of fundamental social evolutions. A part of the population does no longer feel involved and represented by politics. This part of the population turns its back towards politics or chooses (and votes) for very radical or simplified solutions. At the same time there's an evolution that threatens the social cohesion. A lot of people seem to retreat from social life and engage themselves only on a very limited basis. Both evolutions are related to a certain extend. They are not necessarily present in exactly the same parts of the population and of course in different variations and gradations, but there is undoubtedly a serious overlap.

2 Dimensions of citizenship education

Citizenship education wants to stimulate young people to behave themselves as responsible citizens. This objective lies beyond knowledge and insight of political institutions, and of political costumes and traditions. It is about the development of values; about learning young people to act democratically, incorporate democratic attitudes and take up responsibility in society. It is essential that the school is seen as a micro-cosmos for political and responsible action.

Citizenship education can accordingly be seen as an attempt to stem the tide. To counter the attitude of distrust of politics, citizenship education uses a broader approach than political or

democratic education. It uses active learning and experience-based learning to give pupils the chance to have success experiences

In the seminar we want to connect this vision on citizenship education to another insight. This implies that we should situate these concepts in a wider perspective than limited to the level of curriculum development for citizenship education.

3 Unequal opportunities as a breeding ground for political distrust

The legitimacy crisis that politics are facing, has, at least for a considerable part, its origin in the dual society that is coming into being. In our knowledge society part of the population does not feel fully respected nor given its due. Socially vulnerable people for instance tend to turn away from politics. They create an attitude that appreciates distrust of politics as 'cool'. In class for instance, this attitude is picked-up by others. In vocational and technical training this phenomenon is stronger than in more general types of education.

Despite all the efforts, citizenship education will not succeed by itself if nothing is done against the structural cause behind the attitude of political distrust. This means that a policy of equal opportunities is necessary too. Moreover, a meritocratic education system contributes to the dual society. It rewards the pupils that are good at school and in the end helps unintentional to create the division in modern society between higher and lower educated people.

Although there are hardly any alternatives for a meritocratic education system, we would like to reflect on the contribution education can make to prevent a dual society. How is education capable of lowering its selective influence? And how education and training systems could stimulate the effect of citizenship education by providing more equal opportunities in education?

Results

The seminar gave the councils the opportunity to exchange their ideas and opinions. This resulted in a number of statements.

The General Assembly of 1 March in Den Haag approved these statements as official viewpoint of EUNEC. You can download these statements on the website.