

Peter Schreiner

## **What is needed for Europe: Common values or Education for pluralism?**

### **Introduction**

This article deals with the debate about values in education from a European perspective. It discusses the term and the aim of a European identity and tries to work out the inherent challenge for education in this area. This is seen in the context of an existing debate about values in education.

### **Values in education – a controversial debate**

Whether we like it or not, the debate about values in education is a red-hot issue in Europe. Reasons for that can be found in the situation of pluralistic societies where it is more difficult to find guidance in life and ways of understanding others. Some academics don't like to use the term 'values' in educational discourse for good reasons. They claim that the debate is mostly superficial and it neglects the complexity of every educational process. Furthermore it needs too much time to explain what is meant by values, if the term is used. And indeed there is a danger of the misuse of 'values' by economic or political interests to encourage an utilitarian model of education which should help to stabilise the 'values' in society and which ignore the worth of education. Recipes from outside the educational area are not always helpful although education is not a secret garden far from the problems of society. The discussion about values in education is in many cases not an educational debate but a debate about politics.

Others take part in the discussion with the view that education should be more 'educational' and that the demand of values is obvious and necessary for the pupils and also for society. If school has the aim to foster guidance and orientation in life, the capability of understanding each other and the abilities to take part in democratic processes in society, then the question about values is vital. It is asked: which values can hold our society together when pluralism and individualism are signatures of our time? If we take the current discussion about values in education in a positive way we can understand it as a reflection about the aims and purpose of education. It is helpful to take account of some arguments from other academic views such as social sciences. Sociology teaches us the difference between norms and values. Norms are defined as an accepted common good of a group of people or of a society. With values we should distinguish between personal values of life-style and values which influence the whole community. We can also differentiate between real, legal and legitimate values. In sociological and philosophical discussion it is debatable, whether a democratic, pluralistic society can represent a wide and differentiated range of public "values" or not. In any case it seems that in pluralistic societies only very general values are accepted which do not influence or dominate personal life style. Maybe human dignity is one of these.

Another argument which nurtures a critical view on the public debate about 'values' is that a set of values in education gives reason for the creation of limits and barriers. 'In the end 'values' in an educational sense describe nothing more than educational truth claims, for whom the expressions of will of children and young adults are ignored in some cases, if not even changed or broken.' (Brumlik 1995, 59f) It can be said that the creation of barriers stems from a

pessimistic anthropology of children and the attitude that child will fail. When is education becoming paternalism? How much intervention is possible and necessary by educators?

We should be aware of the controversial debate about values in education from a European perspective.

### **Values in Europe – which values?**

Which values characterise Europe? The Council of Europe emphasises in its analysis of the situation in Europe a crisis of values (or rather a lack of them).<sup>1</sup> 'The pure market society is revealed as inadequate as was communism for individual well-being and social responsibility.' This analysis is part of a 'recommendation on religious tolerance in a democratic society'. It is encouraging that a European institution is not ignoring religion as a decisive fact at the European level because the process of European integration is not taking place in a part of the world where culture and religion do not exist. Although we find a separation of politics and religion in most of the states in Europe, which is based on the neutrality of the state, religion is enmeshed in the history and culture of all European societies. However a careful reading of the recommendation of the Council of Europe reveals, that the role of religion is seen as rather negative. 'Religion often reinforces, or is used to reinforce, international, social and national minority conflicts'. Consequently the Council stated that 'The recourse to religion as an alternative (to the crisis of values P.S.) has, however, to be reconciled with the principles of democracy and human rights.' It should not be a problem that any RE approach should respect and foster the secular principles of democracy and human rights, especially tolerance. This seems to be obvious and anyway religion has a public meaning. Religion is not limited to the private sphere. It is of importance for our societies to see, what religion means and what the effect of religion is, if religion promote understanding or frictions.

But the problem starts if there is not a comprehensive view on religion. Religion is also a source of life and grounding for the believer. Religion gives a sense of meaning to life, responses to suffering, and transitoriness. The religions are resources with a wealth of memories and wisdom. They tell us where to find encouragement and power for authentic acting in solidarity with those who suffer and those who are oppressed. Stories of release and healing are part of religion and give reasons why religious communities should participate in the communality of Europe. This is also a background why on the European level and in many countries religious communities are asked by politicians to contribute to a constructive common life in Europe on the basis of democracy and human rights.

Karl Ernst Nipkow discusses the question about the shape of RE in the coming Europe (Nipkow 1995). He mentions two dimensions. First, European schools need RE in order to promote religious tolerance and mutual understanding on the basis of democracy and human rights. Second, he argues for a RE which becomes a place of a dialogical self-representation of the historical religions, giving pupils the opportunity to learn about them authentically, and he demands RE as a place of critical religious education with critical respect to a Europe which is dominated by economic interests and eurocentrism.

RE in Europe should be a critical partner in the process of European unity in two ways:

It should not accept eurocentrism as a limitation on Europe. Religions always have an universal dimension, caring for the poor and victims all over the world. Religions also see justice and well-being as criteria for human life.

Also it should challenge any understanding of a harmonious European identity. This "value" needs more critical reflection.

The presence of different religions in the societies and schools of Europe – in various forms – makes religious pluralism an inescapable reality. It is a central challenge for society and religious education.

In the classroom the aims are to create understanding of other religions and world views as well as a constructive dealing with existing differences. This should be achieved through dialogue. A consequent change of perspective is needed for that: to consider the individual (religious) experiences and the existing capacity of interpretation of children and young adults. There is a move in different European countries among RE scholars what the change of perspectives means for the "Education of the whole child" (C.Erricker et al. 1997). In the German discussion we can find a debate which deals with the change from a hermeneutics of transmission to a hermeneutics of appropriation especially when it comes to religious education (Becker/Scheilke 1995). The main idea of this approach is to take the role of the child as an "active explorer" of its world more seriously than it is done in most of the existing teaching approaches. The mentioned attempts drew the necessary hermeneutical consequences out of a change of perspectives. They foster a new approach which focuses the child's and the adolescent's individual way in constructing patterns of religious interpretation of their world along the links of their life-history and their life-world. If we take that shift in a serious way it also has consequences for the debate about values in education. It shows respect of the task of the individual to create self-esteem and identity. In a time, when standards and guidance are no longer given by overall accepted institutions the individual has no other choice than to become self-creative. Educators should be more like companions than traditional teachers in a common process to find out about values of life.

At least both aspects can be seen as different parts of an indispensable complementary perspective because appropriation cannot substitute transmission completely but it changes the perspective and also the role of the educator.

The European Council declared in a statement in October 1995: 'The education system can make a valuable contribution in promoting respect, tolerance and solidarity in the relationship between people or groups with different ethnic or cultural backgrounds or different religions'. Many representatives of different religions in Europe share these aims and choose to make a contribution through their education activities.

### **European identity as a challenge for education**

If we discuss the aim of creating a European identity, then we start with the view that the search for identity is not rooted mainly in historical or political reasons, but in specific interests. Of course orientation and guidance are much more difficult in a confusing time where institutions and world views have lost their overall relevance and where plurality is a dominant mark. In a time when ambivalence is a central signature there are interests which like to create specific identities, which should give an outlook and security. Also if politicians

speak about a European identity they have specific interests. "The European dimension includes, taking into account its variety, a common historical inheritance, a common cultural tradition and increasing also a common life reality" (recommendation of the Ministers of Culture in Germany in 1990).

If one recognizes the current crisis of European integration, the non-simultaneousness of developments, tendencies to separation, re-nationalism, tensions, violence and helplessness, this definition might appear surprising. In a situation of rapid changes we need a new understanding of what a European identity can mean. It seems to me not sufficient to refer to a common heritage or a common cultural tradition. This suggests a status of harmony, which no longer exists, if the historical context is taken seriously. We should remember that the founding and development of the European institutions were not the result of a harmonious process but the reasons were laid down through the experience of two World Wars, with their near-complete destruction, pain and hatred. These common 'experiences' led to the European co-operation for which, up to now, no alternative exists.

In a recent article P.Hansen argued, that "European" very often takes on an ethno-cultural meaning, "which leaves out of view the presence of particularly those (non-white) pupils who, per definition, do not impersonate the required historical 'roots', the 'cultural tradition', the (Christian) 'civilisation', and who cannot become part of a tradition which made Europe the first to bring about a technical and industrial revolution and thus change the world" (CEC, 1995, pp 12,50) (Hansen 1998, p 17).

What seems to be necessary in these times is an understanding of European identity which takes into account the existing diversity in Europe in a more constructive way and not as a problem. A statement about a multi-cultural Europe is a two-sided declaration: To maintain the cultural diversity of the old Europe and to respect other cultures which come to the Europe of today by immigration.

The question about identity and values is put in a new way if it includes contact with the unknown mark signature of political culture today in Europe. At the same time it is an essential element of a European identity.

From the very beginning of cooperation in western Europe the demand for a European identity was a point of discussion and a challenge for education. From the 'fifties onwards schools were asked to promote a European dimension or identity which should create a feeling of being European beside local or national identities. The approach did not work because identity cannot be ordered from above. If Europe fails to become not an important part of the day-to-day-life of young people, they will not be affected by a vision of Europe.

### **Criteria instead of values**

Education should not be exclusively based on the interests and demands of the economy and a pure purpose-oriented behaviour. People should also learn to reflect on the impact and limits of their own knowledge and abilities. Education (Bildung) enhances the humanity of every human being. It leads to the development of an autonomous and self-aware individual. Criteria, which are used to assess 'Bildung' go beyond economical justification: 'Abhorrence and resistance of inhumanity; a willingness to grasp opportunities; the capacity and the will for understanding; a consciousness of the historical dimension of the self;

sensitivity to ultimate questions; and - a double criteria - the readiness to be responsible for yourself and to be responsible for the *res publica*.' (H.v.Hentig 1995, p. 75). These might be also a criteria for a critical view on the debate about values.

1. Recommendation 1202 (1993) on 'religious tolerance in a democratic society', printed eg. in Education and Europe (see note 1).

### **Literature**

BECKER, Ulrich, SCHEILKE, Christoph Th. (Hrsg.): Aneignung und Vermittlung, (Appropriation and Transmission) Gütersloh 1995

COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES: White paper on Education and Training: Teaching and Learning Towards the Learning Society. COM(95) 590 final, Brussels, 29 November 1995

ERRICKER, Clive, ERRICKER, Jane, SULLIVAN, Danny, OTA, Cathy, FLETCHER, Mandy: The Education of the Whole Child, London 1997

HANSEN, Peo: Schooling a European Identity: ethno-cultural exclusion and nationalist resonance within the EU policy of "The European dimension of education". In: European Journal of Intercultural Studies, Vol 9. No 1, April 1998, pp 5-23

HENTIG, Hartmut v.: Bildung (Education Philosophy), München 1996

BRUMLIK, Micha: Gerechtigkeit zwischen den Generationen (Justice between the Generations), Berlin 1995

COUNCIL OF EUROPE: recommendation 1202 (1993) printed in: P. Schreiner et al: Education an Europe, Münster, Utrecht 1995, p 36-38

NIPKOW, Karl Ernst: Religionsunterricht im künftigen Europa (RE in the Coming Europe). In: Informationes Theologiae Europae, Berlin u.a. 1995, pp 357-374.