



## **The role of education in shaping European citizens<sup>\*</sup>**

Jean Monnet Conference / ECSA World Conference 2012

Brussels, 13-14 November 2012

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The comments we have heard so far have addressed the higher levels of education. However, I would like to bring you back down to earth. We need to start right at the beginning and think about the education of our children. A number of psychologists have pointed out that some of our basic ideas and the way we think later on is influenced by what we learn between the ages of 3 and 5. We can further develop these ideas but we have to start learning at that age, and I believe that if we want to achieve the excellence that we aspire to in a knowledge-based society then it is essential that we educate the largest number of citizens possible to understand what science is, and what culture is. As was said earlier by President Barroso, we need to develop this reflex and spirit.

My presentation addresses two different types of education at the primary school level: an introduction to science and an education in European citizenship. The former is extremely important since, as we are often reminded, there is a serious lack of scientists and engineers. The latter is equally important, to my mind, since the current crisis has shown that there is no real sense of solidarity in Europe. There is a feeling amongst the citizens of Europe that the

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<sup>\*</sup> See my intervention *European Cultural Heritage and the Role of Science and Mathematics*, Bayreuth University, Germany, 21st September 2010 and *Hommage à Georges Charpak : L'Europe et au-delà*, l'Académie des Sciences, Paris, 1st March 2011.

European Union is an obstacle to rather than a motor for positive change, imposing austerity and creating impoverishment.

### ***Introduction to science***

From an early age, children need to be educated in logical reasoning rather than the technical details of science itself. They should learn through experiments, which stimulates their interest. They start thinking about the subject; they develop hypotheses which brings their imagination into play; and then they must be able to verify and prove their findings, to explain and argue their results. This leads to discussion, to cooperation between them, and it also leads to mutual esteem, which I think is absolutely essential. This recognition of others and respect for another person's ideas are indeed fundamental principles of citizenship in our democracies and in the European Union.

This extremely open and dynamic method of learning also imposes a new role on teachers who are no longer the patriarchal chiefs but, as mentioned earlier by Jeremy Rifkin, are becoming facilitators. They are involved in the discussion, trying to answer the children's questions, but if they cannot reply immediately, they propose consulting other sources. They can get in contact with a group of specialists via the internet and in this way a different learning environment is created. Teachers are no longer seen as the source of all knowledge; instead of imposing their wisdom, they awaken the curiosity of children and encourage them to think logically. So we see a network is being created, which allows teachers to consult with scientists and convey their answers to the pupils. It is something that already exists in some countries but we are trying to introduce a similar network at a European level. Ultimately, this new method will lead to better social integration by fostering respect through dialogue.

### ***Educating European citizens***

Another educational priority is to develop the imagination and sense of identity of European citizens by ensuring that they are aware of some of the fundamental European values. At the moment, we are creating national rather than European citizens as demonstrated during the crisis, where citizens have not really been behind Europe. It is the manner in which we teach science, history, geography and environmental studies which will play a major role in

overcoming this nationalistic mentality by creating a sense of solidarity amongst European citizens from an early age.

In *Le Monde* there was an article about the invention of France, explaining how the French nation was created by the State and through history textbooks. In France the State came before the nation, whereas in Germany the nation came before the State. So, there are a number of very complex movements at play here. We have observed that in France centralization played and is still playing a key role, notwithstanding movement towards regionalization. The single currency imposed by Kings of France was an assertion of national sovereignty. All this is very important for children, who need to grasp the social and political environment of where they live and will later work. It is essential that they have a sense of national consciousness, but a sense of European consciousness and identity as well.

Clearly there is no "European people", but there is *European culture* which is common to all Europeans and characterised by two key phenomena: on the one hand we have a common culture which defines us as Europeans, but on the other hand there is the diversity and the differences which we respect. We talk a lot about cultural diversity, but I think that it is important to stress what unites us, our common values and principles. We need to introduce a sort of federal approach and spirit which would allow us to bring these two forces together. It is also important to accept the fact that everyone has a number of different identities. In my own case, I feel European but I also feel Swiss, Genevan and very much akin to the French. The main objective is to make sure that these identities are compatible and can co-exist together to form our personality.

As mentioned, the current crisis has highlighted the nationalistic mentality of some people and Member States. For example, we have seen a "media war" being waged between Greece and Germany, which was in no way an encouraging sign for European identity. We have had many wars in Europe but now we have won the Nobel Peace Prize and this should be an incentive for us to act for the future and influence the consciousness of our children as European citizens.

I would like to make one last point which I address to all my colleagues here today. We have to ensure that the European dimension is incorporated into the teaching of all subjects and that children are made aware of this from the earliest possible age. In Europe today, we have grown used to the fact that we live in peace. Moreover, we are increasingly aware that soft power, dialogue and cooperation are much more effective than the use of force. This is

Europe's strength – the capacity to become a global actor without using hard power and by nurturing the sense of our common cultural heritage and its rich diversity and developing dialogue among cultures.