

Research for CULT Committee - Teaching common values in Europe – Key conclusions

This briefing summarises the conclusions of a study on [‘Teaching common values in Europe’](#) prepared by an international team of researchers for the Committee on Culture and Education of the European Parliament. The study explores the teaching of common values in Europe, in particular democracy and tolerance—if and how they are addressed by EU Member States’ official curricula for students in secondary education. The role of civil society and non-governmental organisations is also considered. Country chapters set out the situation in 12 EU Member States and show that in many cases, there are considerable gaps between general policy aims and concrete implementing measures, and between policy and practice.

The European Union has always stressed the relevance of the values of democracy and tolerance for Europe as a community as well as for its Member States. This research focuses on the policy of teaching the common values of democracy and tolerance in secondary schools, and how this policy is implemented in practice. Further, it covers how teachers, local communities and NGOs influence the teaching of common values. Data on the formal education policies of all 28 European Union Member States has been collected by national academic experts, and in-depth curriculum studies have been performed in 12 Member States.

The study distinguishes three components of democracy: participation, democratic politics, and democratic society; and three components of tolerance: interpersonal relations, tolerance towards different social and cultural groups, and attitudes towards an inclusive society. Further, a distinction is made between a national and an international orientation.

A review of existing relevant studies shows some evidence that the value development of students is stimulated by a whole school approach that incorporates the teaching of values in five ways: a specific value-oriented subject; integration into related subjects; cross-curricular activities establishing links with the community; and a democratic school culture involving more dialogical methodologies of teaching and learning, and inclusive education bringing together different groups of students and teachers. In this research, we investigate if these elements are part of the education policies of the EU Member States, and if schools and teachers can realise them in practice.

Key Conclusions

Policy

- In the past decades, and in particular in recent years, most countries have taken new initiatives related to teaching values in secondary education. Greater attention to the teaching of values is evident in the education policies of all EU Member States. This is also the case for the values of democracy and tolerance. Teaching Common Values (henceforth TCV) is fairly important in half of the EU Member States; however, compared to other topics and subject areas, attention given to TCV is still lacking.
- Analysis of the practice of TCV in 12 EU Member States shows that there are only a few Member States where the different components of teaching for democracy and tolerance receive systematic attention across schools.



- TCV is often not very strongly implemented in education policy in terms of concrete curriculum instruments and in supporting measures. This results in practices that do not always give real attention to TCV. EU Member States differ in the extent to which they steer the curriculum in general, and teaching common values like democracy and tolerance in particular. They also differ in terms of the relative autonomy given to schools. Nevertheless, schools often have plenty of freedom in implementing TCV.
- In the education systems of several EU Member States, there is a strong tendency to separate students into different groups, based on different learning capacities. This reduces possibilities to learn about social and cultural differences. A second element that limits diversity amongst students is the existence of private or religious schools.

Curriculum

- In most EU Member States, there is a focus in practice on political participation. In TCV, attention should also be given to democracy as a process of deliberation and consensus-building, and to creating a democratic society that values freedom of speech, equality, and making society more just and inclusive. Strong education practices that relate to all these different components of democracy are scarce.
- Tolerance is addressed in education particularly at the interpersonal level, quite a lot at the level of cultural groups, but very little at the level of an inclusive society.
- While the national orientation gets abundant attention in education policy, attention given to the international dimension is not very strong, although it is growing. Teaching about the own nation is often susceptible to an uncritical approach.

Schools

- Each country makes its own choices in the way it incorporates TCV into the curriculum. Common values are imparted through special value-oriented subjects like citizenship education and moral education in half of the EU Member States. Values are involved in many other school subjects as well, but not always explicitly. Further, schools offer quite a lot of cross-curricular activities, both in and outside of school, that pay attention to values. However, schools do differ in the extent and manner of their cooperation with the community and NGOs.
- The foundation of school cultures on the values of democracy and tolerance is not very strong across the Member States. Currently, learning, also value-related, primarily involves a transfer of knowledge. The transition from traditional to dialogical methods is still very much a work in progress in most of the Member States.

The following table provides an overview of policy instruments for TCV employed by the different EU Member States (Table 4.2 of the study, page 42).

TCV importance and formal policy aspects (policy instruments, value-oriented TCV subjects and the degree of autonomy and monitoring)

		POLICY INSTRUMENTS						
		GENERAL LAWS		ELABORATE CURRICULA				
COUNTRY	TCV IMPORTANCE	BASIC EDUCATION LAWS	NATIONAL CORE CURRICULA	SUBJECT LEVEL	CROSS-CURRICULAR LEVEL	PRESENCE OF VALUE-ORIENTED SUBJECTS	AUTONOMY SCHOOLS	MONITORING BY GOVERNMENT
AT	Very	X		X	X		Moderate	No
BE	Not	X					High	Weak
BG	Very	X	X			X	Moderate	Yes
HR	Moderate				X		Moderate	No
CY	Very		X	X		X	Moderate	Weak
CZ	Moderate		X			X	Moderate	No
DK	Moderate			X		X	High	No
EE	Moderate		X			X	Moderate	Yes
FI	Very	X	X				Moderate	No
FR	Moderate			X		X	Low	Yes
DE	Moderate	X					Moderate	Yes
EL	Moderate		X			X	Low	No
HU	Moderate		X				Low	No
IE	Very			X		X	Moderate	Strong
IT	Moderate			X			Moderate	No
LV	Very		X				Moderate	Yes
LT	Moderate		X	X			High	No
LU	Moderate			X		X	Moderate	No
MT	Moderate		X				Moderate	Yes
NL	Moderate	X					High	Yes
PL	Very	X	X			X	Moderate	Yes
PT	Moderate	X					Moderate	Yes
RO	Moderate	X		X			Moderate	Yes
SK	Very		X	X		X	High	Weak
SI	Very	X	X	X		X	Moderate	Yes
ES	Not	X					Moderate	No
SE	Moderate		X				Moderate	Yes
UK	Very	X	X			X	Low	Yes

Key Recommendations

Policy

- The EU and the government of each EU Member State have to take responsibility in contributing to the sustainability of society and in supporting democracy and tolerance as common values. An intensive dialogue in society on what constitutes the common values and the role of education in promoting them, is an expression of a lively democracy and is a challenge for tolerance. Both EU Member States as well as the EU should support such dialogues.
- Steering in education policy should target the general aims, guidelines for content, and subjects and activities. Beyond that, education policy should challenge schools to use their relative autonomy to demonstrate their own vision for and their practice of teaching common values.

- The EU can challenge its Member States to develop their own educational vision on teaching common values like democracy and tolerance, stimulate the development of innovative practices, promote the exchange of teachers and students to help them experience different political and educational practices, and stimulate comparative research.

Curriculum

- Greater attention should be given in education policy and practice to all three components of democracy, namely political participation, democratic politics, and a democratic society. TCV also has to address all three elements of value development, namely knowledge, skills, as well as a democratic attitude.
- Besides tolerance, concepts with more positive attitudes such as appreciation, pluralism, and respectful engagement should be used. Tolerance can be addressed at the interpersonal level, at the level of social and cultural groups, and at the level of an inclusive society. All three levels need more attention in education policy and practice.
- Learning democracy and tolerance can be strengthened by promoting social and cultural diversity in schools and classrooms. Education policy should thus stimulate diversity in education (amongst both students and teachers).
- Each country has to find a good balance in education between a national and an international orientation, so as to strengthen democracy and tolerance both nationally and internationally, and address both in a critical way.

Schools

- Education policy on TCV should stimulate the integrated use of four ways of teaching values: special value-oriented subjects, integration of values into other subjects, cross-curricular activities, and a democratic school culture.
- Teaching common values needs more reflective and dialogical learning processes in which students reflect and enter into dialogue with others about their experiences and values. Teaching democracy and tolerance also needs more democratic learning in which students can learn to collaborate, deliberate, appreciate differences and find consensus.
- Teachers should be afforded possibilities, as part of their professional development, to learn these varied ways of teaching. This can be implemented, in particular, through co-teaching, promoting mutual support and networking.
- Schools should be at the centre of their community and serve as the pedagogical engine for community development. Parents, community groups and NGOs should surround the school and partner up in educating young people. Mutual support makes education more meaningful for students and can create a strong pedagogical community.

Feedback If you wish to give us your feedback please e-mail to Poldep-Cohesion Secretariat:
poldep-cohesion@ep.europa.eu

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