

International conference addresses the need for more comparable data

Culture and school: learning to build bridges in diverse Europe

How to build bridges between the worlds of culture and education? How to make a common European culture of diversity broader than the continent itself? How to appeal to children more attuned to Nike, Coca-Cola and McDonald's than to their own heritage? How to assess arts and heritage achievements at school? The conference "Culture and School, Policies for Arts and Heritage Education across the European Union" (The Hague, 8 – 10 September 2004) offered rich food for thought.

"We Europeans have only just embarked on the long road towards a more systematic exchange of knowledge in the field of cultural education," said Dutch State Secretary of Education, Culture and Science Medy van der Laan on the conference's opening night. The three-day congress was a step on that road: arts and heritage education experts exchanged insights into the objectives and policies EU countries use when creating arts and heritage curricula in primary and secondary education, and discussed the development of comparable European indicators.

Arts and heritage education is essential to Europe's efforts to become a highly competitive knowledge economy, said Dutch Education, Culture and Science Minister Maria van der Hoeven. But its value goes far beyond economic importance. Personal development and identity, self-confidence, European citizenship, social cohesion, creativity – not to mention the pure joy that comes from a love and understanding of the arts – all are fostered by culture teaching, delegates affirmed. Diversity is inherent in the 25-member European Union and was a frequent discussion topic. EU extension, plus the arrival of immigrants from outside Europe, makes the questions of European identity, culture and citizenship yet more complex. But the conference showed the challenge of Europe's diversity is also its promise: an ever richer tapestry of art and heritage.

One of the main difficulties, said keynote speaker Otto von der Gablentz, is that Europe's citizens do not feel European; they more often define themselves by nationality and local community. Or, as Jean-Marc Lauret of France's culture ministry noted, the younger generation's icons are often global – Coke, Nike or hamburgers. "How do we get them to recognise symbols of European culture?" Lauret

asked during a seminar, of which three were held on differing themes during the conference.

Assessing added value

In the elegant surroundings of The Hague's Royal Theatre, participants heard how their country's experiences, methods and problems compared with those of their counterparts. "Modernising cultural education is the central issue. It's the same all over Europe," said Jan Helmer-Petersen of the Danish culture ministry. And as Laurent Bazin of France's education ministry put it: "Everyone is trying to cope with tough budgets. Governments want to go back to basics and have to make hard choices. In such a situation we have to prove that the arts can make a difference. We have to show the added value."

But how to evaluate this added value? Much debate centred on assessing arts and heritage education. Rod Fisher, director of International Intelligence on Culture, said cultural education could only reach a European level if more intense research was done to measure the impact of culture. "We all assume arts and heritage are building blocks for shaping our identity, insight and inspiration," he said. "But we need more research to prove this."

Rolf Witte of the German Federation of Associations for Cultural Youth Education described the 'cultural diploma', a certificate recently developed in Germany to evaluate what young people engaged in out-of-school activities have learned from cultural education programmes. And one seminar leader, Tim Copeland of the University of Gloucestershire, discussed the UK's 'Young Roots' project that encouraged children to define their own heritage and required a special system of evaluation to assess youngsters on the skills acquired.

Building bridges between the worlds of school and culture was the core of a seminar led by Ilona Kish of the European Forum for the Arts and Heritage. It found that though there are some successful partnerships between schools and cultural institutions in Europe, cooperation is generally ad hoc, diverse and patchy. Participants felt national governments could help facilitate closer cooperation, while the EU could take significant steps to document best practices and help develop a much-needed glossary for art and heritage education.

Culture is crucial

At Dutch Professor Max van der Kamp's seminar on European citizenship and arts and heritage education, delegates agreed that without a cultural component, the whole European project would fail. Citizens must realise that European culture predates national cultures,

and links us together, said Sneska Quaadvlieg-Mihailovic of Europa Nostra.

But conference chairman Professor Anton C. Zijderveld warned that culture could divide as well as unite; many conflicts were in the name of culture. "Europe is the continent of fantastic creations in the arts, politics and economics, and fantastic destruction in the same sectors," he said.

Closing the conference, Minister Van der Hoeven said better and more comparable data were needed in all member states, with more clarity in definitions. The next step was to formulate an agenda and translate it into concrete steps. "Let's use this conference as the continuation of the network, through which we can meet whenever we need to exchange experiences and share knowledge," she urged, "a process through which we can learn from one another!"