



Education for Sustainable Democratic Societies: the Role of Teachers

23rd session of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education
Ljubljana, Slovenia, 4 June 2010

Opening address by Mrs Andreja Rihter ¹

Ministers, Excellencies,

Dear colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I address you at the opening of this 23rd session of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education in Ljubljana, both on behalf of the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and as a Member of Parliament and former culture minister of Slovenia.

The Assembly has dealt with education policies since its creation and in fact called in its Recommendation 28 of 1949 for a meeting of education ministers to produce a “comparative study of the teaching programmes in the different countries in order that the best features of each may be available to all”.² European integration has progressed enormously over the last 60 years, but it remained the sovereign power of national legislators in Europe to determine educational policies and laws, as it has been confirmed also by the Lisbon Treaty on the European Union of last year.

National parliaments reflect the political and cultural diversity of their societies and can best voice the political priorities and measures for their countries in the education sector. Nevertheless, it is indispensable for national education ministers in Europe to identify common frameworks and positions on education policies, such as on the role of teachers. Europe in this sense must mean the whole continent, because we cannot afford geographic barriers in this field. The Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education has been and is, therefore, the appropriate forum for European co-operation which respects cultural diversity, national differences as well as the framework of common values throughout Europe.

Europe is experiencing a demographic shift with fewer pupils and students. At the same time, the average age of teachers is rather high in many countries in Europe. Students want to be competitive globally, as national borders have become less important for students and their education. The Internet is increasingly changing the knowledge society into an information society. How can teachers adapt to these challenges?

Since the last session of the Standing Conference in Istanbul in May 2007, the Assembly adopted a number of Recommendations and Resolutions on education.³ I should like to refer briefly to those which are directly relevant to our session today and tomorrow:

¹ Mag. Andreja Rihter, Member of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education and Chairperson of the Sub-Committee on the Cultural Heritage of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, Member of Parliament of the Republic of Slovenia, former Minister for Culture (2000 – 2004).

² Recommendation 28 (1949) on a meeting of the ministers of education and university authorities. See also Recommendation 30 (1949) on employment of teachers displaced by war.

³ Recommendation 1892 (2009) on the contribution of the Council of Europe in the development of the European Higher Education Area; Recommendation 1884 (2009) on cultural education: the promotion of cultural knowledge, creativity and intercultural understanding through education; Recommendation 1880 (2009) on history teaching in conflict and post-conflict areas; Recommendation 1849 (2008) for the promotion of a culture of democracy and human rights

Recommendation 1849 (2008) for the promotion of a culture of democracy and human rights through teacher education called for a recognition of the role of teachers and other educational staff as important actors in promoting the culture of human rights and democracy, for renewed support of the Council of Europe's Pestalozzi programme for education professionals, and for the development of an appropriate Council of Europe framework policy document on education for democratic citizenship and human rights. With regard to the latter, the adoption of the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education by the Committee of Ministers this year is a remarkable success.

Recommendation 1880 (2009) on history teaching in conflict and post-conflict areas emphasised that teacher-training programmes should balance two distinct elements: the development of expertise within the subject area ("what" to teach) and the skill-building for motivating students to engage with the subject ("how" to teach). It also called for the full implementation of the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "Living together as equals in dignity", in order to assist the development of guidelines for teachers on issues concerning tolerance and intercultural dialogue.

In addition, the Assembly directly addressed the Standing Conference in three Recommendations since Istanbul 2007:

Recommendation 1884 (2009) on cultural education: the promotion of cultural knowledge, creativity and intercultural understanding through education asked ministers to establish national strategies for cultural education at school and as part of informal education and lifelong learning, and make cultural education through qualified arts teachers and artists mandatory at school and provide related training for all teachers. It furthermore asked ministers to recognise the right to cultural education, set up assistance programmes for member states on ensuring proper implementation of the right to education under the European Convention on Human Rights and monitor such implementation, in particular as regards people from disadvantaged, minority or migrant backgrounds, in order to combat cultural illiteracy and a growing educational and cultural divide in society.

Recommendation 1836 (2008) on realising the full potential of e-learning for education and training invited the Standing Conference to propose relevant national or regional legislation and to set up national action plans for realising the full potential of e-learning and identifying examples of best practice in e-learning. It seems necessary to develop further the 2003 Resolution of the Standing Conference on ICT in education.

In its Resolution 1651 (2009) on the consequences of the global financial crisis, the Assembly emphasised that member states must also invest in people in order to face the economic and social challenges resulting from the financial crisis. In a globalised and interdependent world, human resources are a key factor for economic, social and democratic stability. Therefore, the Assembly called on the Standing Conference to develop educational policies in view of these challenges and invited the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to strengthen education in the Council of Europe's work programme.

National parliamentarians in Europe represented in the Parliamentary Assembly consider education as a high priority for the Council of Europe. We therefore fully support the Standing Conference with the same emphasis the Assembly had in 1949 when it proposed for the first time a meeting of education ministers.

Education is a fundamental human right under the European Convention on Human Rights.⁴ Education is a necessary requirement for the development of every individual and the backbone of any civilised human society. But the quality of education depends on the quality of the teachers.

In this respect, I wish us all success for this 23rd session of the Standing Conference of European Ministers for Education in Slovenia.

through teacher education; Recommendation 1836 (2008) on realising the full potential of e-learning for education and training; Recommendation 1833 (2008) on promoting the teaching of European literature; Resolution 1671 (2009), paragraph 21.11, on the situation in Belarus; Resolution 1580 (2007) on the dangers of creationism in education.

⁴ Article 2 of the first Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 9 of 1952)