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Attitudes and identity: a comparative study of the perspectives of European children

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Introduction

In the present social, economic and political situation, where inter-state unions are being formed, a key question is the correlation between national and supranational identity, and its place in the development of such ties. Identity is a fundamental concept for the functioning of every human being, as it is connected with our feeling of uniqueness, integrity and individuality. National identity is a special case of social identity, as

- it is built upon a stable criterion of a non-transferable nature, mutually exclusive with other criteria (Jarymowicz, 1994);
- it concerns joint participation within the confines of a larger social community,
- it is 'shared' by many persons, and
- it refers to a common code, accepted *a priori* (Greenberg et al. 1992).

Understanding identity is complex as the national, political, economic and social diversity of each country underpins its identity.

With the expansion of the European Community there is current interest in the development of European identity: the promotion of an attitude of tolerance and acceptance is seen to be of primary significance if we are to prevent conflicts rooted in cultural differences. If schools are to play a role in the development of identity (both national and European) we need to have some understanding of how children perceive themselves, how they perceive others and what they currently understand about both their own nation and Europe.

This research into attitudes and identity took two ages groups as its focus: seven year olds who may still be at a pre-operational stage of thinking (Piaget, 1926) and eleven year olds whose understanding may be more diversified and detailed, so that initial responses are gradually replaced by descriptive categories (Livesley and Bromley, 1973). We wished to examine social processes in the national context, and at the same time to compare social phenomena connected with identity across countries.

Our findings have relevance for all countries which are concerned about how we should best educate young people for participation in an increasingly interdependent and global economy, whilst at the same time respecting cultural identity. Cogan and Derricott (2000) indicate that we need to educate young people who can work co-operatively, accept cultural differences, think critically, defend human rights, solve conflicts non-violently and participate in politics.

Researchers from eight countries collaborated in this study, which aimed to determine and describe four key areas:

- Children's understanding and perception of national identity;
- Children's perception of tolerance and differences;
- Children's understanding and perception of European identity
- Children's understanding of European citizenship.

After presenting a summary of the findings from each country, we discuss the implications for all concerned in preparing children as future European citizens.

Methodology

The eight European countries participating in the project were Belgium, Greece, Hungary, United Kingdom, Finland, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia. They can be divided into the following groups:

- EU member states and those which are to become member states in the future;
- countries located in Central Europe and those at its periphery;
- mono-cultural and multicultural countries.

The research methodology has been both qualitative and quantitative. 192 children, divided into small groups of three, were interviewed. Half of the pupils were aged 7-8 and half were aged 10-11, with the exception of Hungary where all the children were aged 8-9. Schools were chosen to reflect both urban and rural settings, with children from different socio-economic backgrounds. The researchers followed an interview schedule including both open and closed questions, and a number of focussed tasks. These tasks included giving the children a photograph of children from many different ethnic groups where they were asked to identify those most like themselves, and to talk about the life styles they thought the other children might have. They were asked to say which of these children they would have sitting near them in class, which they would choose to spend the weekend with and what they could learn from these children. With regard to European understanding, they were asked whether they considered themselves European and were given a list of countries (including all of those in this project and three others: Japan, USA, India) and asked which of these countries were in Europe and what they knew about them. Further questions focussed on how they would describe themselves to a child from the USA, and to whom their families would donate money. They were asked about their country's leaders and political processes in order to assess their knowledge of their own state's democratic processes. A final question focussed on children's values and the kind of future they would like. Interviews were tape recorded with the children's permission and have been analysed using constant comparative technique (Miles and Huberman 1984.)

Summary of findings

Portugal

Children's understanding and perception of national identity

All the children considered themselves to be Portuguese, with the exception of one child born in Switzerland. Living in Portugal and speaking Portuguese were the two most referred to characteristics of Portuguese identity. Several children also mentioned:

physical characteristics such as hair and eyes colour, clothing, food, and life style, which they related to physical environmental features, such as high mountains and snow. Many of the older children also indicated an awareness of a common history, heritage and special monuments.

With reference to social action, the majority said they took part in class discussions and let others join in their games at playtime. Half watched the news on TV ‘sometimes’: the other half always did. Only one 11 year old boy, who was the student representative of his classroom, said that he always helped to clean the playground: others sometimes helped while a few never did. Only one 8 year old boy from a small village said that he never recycled glass or paper, while nearly half said that they always did it. Apart from stopping other children being teased or bullied (which the older children were more likely to do than the younger ones), there was little difference by age in the responses.

Children’s perceptions of tolerance and difference

Only older children used the term culture. Monique even pointed out “each country has its own culture but at the same time now there is a melting of cultures”. Two children considered that the Portuguese were poorer than other people, were not polite and did not have time and money for leisure, but other children appreciated being Portuguese, stressing several aspects such as being non-racist, leaving in peace, having good things (landscapes, monuments, wine, food), and being more sensitive.

All the children knew someone from other countries and most of them had visited at least one country for holidays, shopping or to visit relatives. All of them would appreciate having children from other cultures in their schools, and most of them would like to sit close to them so that they could learn about their language, food, and heritage. The children were evenly divided about who they would spend the weekend with (children from their own or other countries) but only two thought their parents would approve of their going to the house of a child from another culture.

Children’s understanding of European Identity

The children agreed that they were European mainly due to the Euro, and because they lived in Europe, but only the older children showed some understanding of what it meant to be European. Indicators of being European were the Roman influence, a common past and a cultural heritage. They would identify themselves as European when they met a child from America, whereas the group of young children would say that they were Portuguese. The older children were more able to identify the countries of Europe, but they did not know much about the individual countries in this study and did not include Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia as being in Europe. They knew most about the USA and Afghanistan and a few included the USA in Europe.

Children understanding of European citizenship

Most children did not show an understanding of the concept of interdependence, but did show an awareness of the advantages of the Euro. They preferred a democratic process of governance, but did not agree that this kind of subject should be taught in school. One older boy was in favour of government based on consensus, instead of based on a majority; he thought that this should be possible at least in schools.

United Kingdom

Children's understanding and perception of national identity

The white children considered themselves to be British, but some children of ethnic minority background were less sure. One said she was "three-quarters Jamaican and one quarter British" whereas a Sikh boy of Asian origin said he was definitely English. When asked what made them typically British, language was identified first, followed by having the same clothes, games, music and sports.

All the children indicated a high level of social activity: they took part in class discussions (with a higher degree of participation from the older children), sometimes helped clean up the playground, and sometimes watched the news on TV. Some recycled paper and glass whilst most stopped children being teased or bullied and let others join in their games.

Children's perceptions of tolerance and difference

When asked how children from other countries might be different (or similar), again it was language that was the defining feature, with some also mentioning skin colour and "different hair and some different religions and symbols". Many thought that children in other countries were poorer, not owning computers or televisions, and that they might have wars in their country. Few children had been to any other countries.

Despite this negative view, all of the children said they would welcome such children into their school, so they could learn their language and games. They would like such children to sit by them and would wish to visit them in their homes. Even in the inner city school where there were already refugee children from Somalia, Bosnia and Afghanistan, an 11 year old boy explained that they "would definitely want more children from different countries cause its like learning different stuff and different languages". Only one boy in an all-white school felt such children could be a problem as they might "have bad habits" and "get into trouble more".

Children's understanding of European identity

Very few of the British children saw themselves as European and their knowledge of Europe was poor. The younger children were confused about which countries might be in Europe: some thought the USA was "cos they speak our language". Older children had more knowledge but this was often stereotypical- e.g. Belgian chocolates. Very few had heard of Hungary, Slovenia or Poland. Their knowledge appeared to be influenced by recent school projects or news (September 11th). Nearly all the children said they would tell someone from the USA that they were from England, rather than Europe, whereas they would give money to children in Afghanistan rather than those in need in the UK.

Children's understanding of European citizenship

The children had little idea of what the EU represented but most had heard of the Euro. They were not at all sure if it would benefit the UK to join the Euro. Their knowledge of the UK parliamentary system was limited to knowing that "there are elections when you vote". Many children thought the UK was run by the queen and Tony Blair, with two seven year olds explaining that "the prime minister lives with the queen" so he can "help her". A few children thought George W. Bush was the prime minister of the UK. When asked about the future they would like to see, many wanted a world where "there is no bullying or racism", where there would be "things for teenagers to do" and where

environmental problems had been solved. Most were optimistic that the future would be better for them and that they would have a part to play.

Finland

Children's understanding and perceptions of national identity

All of the children felt that they were Finnish but found it hard to define. Most said that language and outlook were the defining characteristics of the Finnish. Only a few older pupils thought that Finnish people had a different culture and ate different food. Some mentioned the characteristics stereotypically associated with Finns: "sauna, sisu and Sibelius". ("sisu" means that Finnish people persevere).

Children's perceptions of tolerance and difference

The younger children found it difficult to explain cultural differences; only a few mentioned language and different customs. When examining the photograph of children from around the world, they were able to identify where most of the children were from and felt positively about having these children in their school. Only one child in the younger group didn't like children who were different, saying "I don't want to be with them and I hope that they are not in my school."

Children's understanding of European identity

The children had difficulty identifying the countries on the list. The youngest knew only a few: Greece, Spain and Japan. Some had heard of Slovenia but did not know anything about it. Older pupils had learnt about some of the countries at school; they knew for instance that the next Olympic Games would be in Greece and they recalled information about Ancient Greece. They knew that people spoke English in England, and that there had been a war in Slovenia.

At a general level, all the children felt positively about people from other countries. While only a few had talked with somebody from another country, many had seen foreign people in Rauma as it is a popular tourist destination. The children made no negative comments about children of other races. Some of the younger children said that children can feel sad or glad and that this is the same for all children. They would like children from other countries to teach them games and to play with them and a few said that they would like to learn a different language from them. For older pupils, most said that they would like the foreign child to teach them their language.

Despite this openness to children from other countries, most children (both younger and older) preferred to sit by a Finnish child although some said "It is the same, who is near me". The over-riding factor in deciding whom to spend the weekend with was the gender of the child: each wanted to stay with a child of the same sex.

Children's understanding of European citizenship

All of the older children and many of the younger ones knew that they were also European. They knew about Euros and indeed had used them in everyday life. The knowledge of democratic institutions among younger children was limited; they knew the name of the president and most of them said that "there is no king in Finland". Older pupils were able to give more details of the Finnish Parliament and local government officials. Older pupils were aware of some differences between democracy and monarchy.

These they had studied at school. Children's knowledge was rather narrow; they had difficulty explaining the meaning of these institutions.

Poland

Children's understanding and perception of national identity

All of the children examined considered themselves to be Poles. Regardless of age, they mentioned the same national characteristics: language, appearances, customs and national symbols. Older children were also able to identify the concept of nationality with government and president. Most of them declared a high level of social activity and engagement in social relations.

Children's perceptions of tolerance and difference

Irrespective of their age, the pupils recognised members of other nationalities by two categories: language and place of birth. Younger children emphasised outward appearances. Older pupils noted customs, and architecture. Most of the children had had some contact with representatives of different cultures. Half of the children had never been abroad. Whilst most Polish children appeared tolerant, their attitudes towards other nationalities and cultures seemed to depend on their social background. Children from rural areas were less open to having other cultures in their school because "it wouldn't be possible to talk to them, they could beat us", whereas urban children felt "they could show us their customs".

The children found it difficult to differentiate between distant, rarely met cultures and those well-known in Poland. In their opinion all children belonging to other cultures were similar: "they play strange games, can teach us new letters". They tended to attribute their own values to children from other cultures, believing that only their behaviour was different. Half of the pupils would be willing to spend a weekend with children representing other cultures. However, many thought their parents would be wary of such contacts, for fear of cultural differences.

Children's understanding of European identity

All of the children perceived themselves as Europeans (somebody who lives in Europe.) Younger children emphasised "having European parents" and "eating European food" (vegetables, spaghetti, hot dogs). They also mentioned certain kinds of clothes typical of Europe (sweatshirts, trousers). Older pupils stressed the existence of the EU, "the same money" and "European customs".

The children's knowledge about other countries was based on stereotypes (the Greeks wear togas). They knew very little about such 'peripheral' countries as Portugal or Finland but a lot about exotic and English-speaking countries (Japan, USA, UK). This is probably connected with the fact that English is a compulsory subject in Polish schools and recent news - it appeared that the events of 11th September had affected their perception of both the USA and Afghanistan. Urban pupils were better able than rural children to identify the geographical location of countries in Europe.

The majority of the children would like to belong to the EU for economic reasons ("it would be easier to find a job and earn more money") and safety ("it would be easier to defend our country"). However, four children did not want Poland to join the Union as "we would have to give them money" and "we wouldn't be able to speak Polish".

Children understanding of European citizenship

The knowledge of state organisation among younger children was limited to the figures of president and prime minister. Older pupils mentioned members of the Parliament and local government officials and some from urban areas knew about other political systems such as the differences between democracy and monarchy. Children do not learn about all these issues at school, although they declare their willingness to do so. Teachers only discuss questions related to nationality, culture and citizenship sporadically, as they are not included in the basic curriculum.

Hungary*Children's understanding and perception of national identity*

All the children said they were Hungarians and were aware of their place of residence. They identified a typical Hungarian child as one who speaks Hungarian, and many of them gave descriptions of appearance (white skin, brown hair, brown or blue eyes). All but two of them were able to identify Hungarian specialities (food, scientists, national holidays, traditions). In discussing similarities and differences between Hungarians, they mostly mentioned appearance, friendship, language and holidays as things in common: appearance, standards of life, skills, taste, and clothes were then mentioned as differences.

Children's perceptions of tolerance and difference

Language and traditions were the distinguishing features of other cultures: only a few mentioned different outward appearances. People from another culture were associated with clothes, religion and, in some cases a more friendly relationship between people. These answers reflect uncertainty and show little specific knowledge. Most of the children had already met people from other cultures and most had travelled to other neighbouring countries.

Most children said they would be happy to have children from other cultures in their school. Similar results were found when the children were asked if they would sit by a child from another culture. Only one child said that "I am not sure if I would like him". Generally children liked to sit by those of the same sex.

When examining the photographs, most of the children identified particular children as being most similar to them based on skin colour and the shape of the face. All the children felt they could learn from foreign children. Typically, they mentioned language, games, culture, sports and eating traditions. Almost all of them also felt that their parents would be happy if they were to spend a week-end with one of the children in the photo as the children seem nice. One said "I would choose the Japanese boy. The others also seem nice but I do not want to sleep in a girl's family."

Children's understanding of European identity

Most children said that to be European meant to live in Europe with some adding "to have European traditions" or "to behave in a European way". Most, however, made some mistakes in identifying which countries were European. While two did the task perfectly others excluded Greece, Belgium or Britain, while including the USA. When asked what they knew about the countries, a wide spectrum of answers was found. In addition to some stereotypes, they mentioned myths (Greece), people wearing suits and the attack on World Trade Centre (USA), and different eyes and wearing no socks (Japan).

With regard to a hypothetical meeting with an American boy, half of the children would say they were from Hungary, whilst a quarter would say Europe; the rest named their town. Almost all of them were able to mention different kinds of food (pizza, macaroni, tropical fruits etc.) when asked about what we have from other countries.

Children's understanding of European citizenship

About the administration of the country, they usually said "we have a parliament", "we have elections this year". They had a good understanding of how the country operates, although they had little particular knowledge. They had a number of ideas about the future of Hungary: most expressed a belief in positive development ("the country will be more developed"), but some of them highlighted possible dangers ("nature is being destroyed").

Slovenia

Children's understanding and perceptions of national identity

All the children considered themselves to be typical Slovenian children because they were born in Slovenia or spoke the Slovenian language. Some were less sure because their parents spoke Croatian, Serbian or Macedonian languages with them. They also identified clothes and colour of skin. Children mentioned the natural beauties of the country as being special, with some older children mentioning the national flag and hymn. Most children thought that the Slovenian people behaved in the same way as others, as "we are all human beings".

With regard to social action, all of the children said they participated in class discussions (half of them always and the other half sometimes). Only some of them sometimes cleaned up the playground while all "sometimes watched the news on TV". Regardless of age or gender all of the children from two schools always recycle paper, but most of the other children say they never do. This indicated the influence of school in developing awareness about environmental questions. Most of the children stopped other children being teased or bullied and let others join in their games.

Children's perceptions of tolerance and difference

The majority of the children see others in terms of the different languages they speak, colour of skin and food. People from different cultures are seen as guests, who should be helped and from whom they can learn other language. Most children had come into contact with other cultures through contact with tourists. A very few children would not like children from different cultures in their class, because they would not understand each other. The majority of children would like to sit next to them, to help them, and to learn from them.

When the children examined the photograph of children from different part of the world, they commented on hair length, colour or hairstyle. They commented that the African girls and Japanese boy might not be happy due to hunger and overly rigorous schools. They felt they could learn a new language from other children, as well as their songs, games and how to do such things as survive in the natural world. But when asked with which children they would like to spend the weekend, most of the children (in particular the younger group) chose the child whose appearance was Slovene. It seems as that staying overnight somewhere was associated with a fear of the unknown. Declared tolerance does not always reflect the real situation.

Children's understanding of European identity

All the older children except one declared themselves to be Europeans because Slovenia was in the European continent. The exception was a girl who said that Slovenians are not Europeans because Slovenia is not in the EU. Some of the younger children could not remember if they had ever heard of Europe. Many of the children knew that the USA (skyscrapers, big shopping centres), Japan (special letters for writing) and Afghanistan (desert, war) were not in Europe. Many also knew that UK was in Europe, but were not so sure about the other European countries. The majority of the children from the older group would explain to friend from America that they were from Slovenia; some of them would add Europe. The younger children would name their town or village. Children would give money to children in need in Afghanistan, some would give money also to homeless children in Slovenia.

Children's understanding of European citizenship

The children had a good grasp of economic interdependence, understanding that we get some exotic food (bananas, crabs) from other countries by air, land or sea. The majority of the children thought that we have most connections with the USA. Most of the children who had heard of the European Community didn't know what it meant, but they had heard of the Euro. Some of them also mentioned the advantages of Europe as having no borders between countries.

Slovenian children were able to talk about elections in their country but did not have specific knowledge about democratic processes and did not think it necessary to discuss more about such subjects at school. As for the future, their concerns indicated that they were not very aware of environmental and social problems. Some of them for example mentioned the disappearance of tropical forests, but with little idea of the implications for the ecosystem.

Greece*Children's understanding and perception of national identity*

Half of the children considered themselves Greek, whilst two who were born in Albania either did not know or felt they were Greek "sometimes". The majority linked their identity with their language, history, culture, customs, holidays, and religion. Language was also what makes us different. Social activity and engagement was very pronounced in all categories. TV news was something only two watched.

Children's perception of tolerance and difference

Regardless of age, nationalities/differences were recognised by language, appearance, behaviour/culture/customs and place of origin. Again irrespective of age, all the children were very open to having dealings with other nationalities. They showed a high degree of tolerance and willingness to incorporate children of different cultures in their school/social life; many saw it as an opportunity to learn different things (games/language/what they eat/customs) as well as a different language. Only one thought these children needed to go to a special school. Many tended to choose the African or Asian child as someone they wanted to know better/sit near and felt their parents would agree to them spending the weekend with someone from a foreign country.

In many respects the Greek children's responses about difference and tolerance accentuated their own values while identifying superficial differences such as appearance.

Many things they wanted to learn about were linked to their own behaviours. A few had a rather skewed understanding of other children's realities ("Scandinavians can't go to school because everything's frozen"). However for the majority they felt the children were happy and enjoyed a similar lifestyle.

Children's understanding of European Identity

All but two of the children felt they were European; one because she was Albanian and the other because he said he hadn't been to Europe. As to what makes them European, responses were mixed but included EU membership, living in European country, sharing a unique history, and participating in certain functions. Something rather troubling in terms of 'identity' and 'pedagogy' was the lack of expressed knowledge about the countries that make up Europe. A large number knew nothing about most of the countries. There were some generalised characterisations but few direct or even stereotypical responses about the countries. About a third identified countries such as Portugal, the UK, Finland, and Belgium as part of Europe; very few were aware of the status of the countries preparing for membership. This may be partly due to confusion in understanding and separating out EU membership from geographical facts. Finally, regardless of age a majority would identify themselves by nationality when talking to an American child, with a few identifying themselves by region or as European.

Children's understanding of European citizenship

Their knowledge about state organisation was linked to age and curriculum. Few young children knew anything about how the state was organised while older children were well versed on the topic (civics is taught in the upper elementary curriculum). The older children knew about the Parliament, MPs and role of the government. The majority of the children indicated that these were things to be discussed and taught in school. The older children were also able to give generalised responses as to what rights, responsibilities and benefits came from membership while the younger ones could not. As to the future, responses were divided, many mentioned technological advancements and cleaner environments. However, a fair number talked about pollution, overpopulation, war, destruction and poverty.

Belgium

Children's understanding and perception of national identity

Most of the children said that they were Belgian; only two said that they were Flemish, lived in Flanders and spoke Flemish. According to them being typically Belgian meant "beef with French fries" cycling and football. The older children (from a rural school) also mentioned problems specific to Belgium: over-manuring and 'swine plague'.

Most of the children participated in class discussion and two (in a Freinet School) talked positively about their "forum and school council". Some mentioned a project on recycling and talked about the system in school for selecting rubbish. The older children watched the news every day as they had to do this for school (in a 'world orientation' course) while some mentioned the '*Kidjournal*' and liking "short" presentations of the news. With regard to letting others join in their games, some said they didn't like it when other children disturbed their games - especially children from other countries (refugees from Kosovo and Chaldea) because they did not understand the rules.

Children's perception of tolerance and difference

The main differences seen between Belgians and others were: food (Chinese was mentioned), skin colour, music, sport and language. Some children said that they were afraid of "some strangers" and that they had heard from their parents and the local newspaper that there had been a lot of trouble because of these "foreigners".

Children's understanding of European identity

None of the children identified themselves as European. The older children had some knowledge about Europe (the countries and the history of the European Community) because they had taken part in an educational project organised by the regional authorities. When asked to identify certain European countries, they knew of Greece (due to a musical they had created in the school), and Portugal (holidays). Some had learned about Santa Claus and knew that he came from somewhere in Finland. Most of the older children could say which of the countries were members of the European Community, but they did not know about Hungary, Poland and Slovenia.

Some children had met children from other countries on holiday (France, Switzerland, the Netherlands). One told us that he had been on holiday in Wallonia (the French part of Belgium): to him this was another country. All of them could relate stories about Afghanistan but could not say if this country was in Europe or not. The younger children knew about America (Walt Disney) but didn't have any idea whether it was far from Belgian or not. The older children knew that a lot of Belgian people (two said Flemish) had emigrated to the USA. They heard this from their grandparents.

Children's understanding of European citizenship

Some of them collected Euros and stamps from different European countries. The younger children understood citizenship and state institutions to be about the names of the kings and queens and their children, especially the members of the Belgian and British royal families. These children were aware of the function of a mayor (probably due to a famous television programme, in which a mayor plays a humorous role). The older ones also mentioned the titles of the prime minister of the (federal) government and the name of the minister – president of the Flemish community. They could not, however, explain the difference between a king and a president.

Conclusion

The following comments are inevitably generalisations. There was diversity within each nation, and the older children were generally more sophisticated and knowledgeable in their responses than the younger ones. In some countries children from rural areas were less knowledgeable and less tolerant than those in urban areas (e.g. Poland), and children from ethnic minority backgrounds sometimes held different perspectives to children from the majority culture. Yet some statements hold true for all children across European borders.

First, all of the children had a strong sense of national identity, with the exception of some children from ethnic minority groups (e.g. UK, Greece) who felt they might belong to two countries. Language was seen as the most important signifier, followed by clothes, customs and skin colour. There are implications here for those countries with children from different ethnic groups: it appears to be important to help children to establish a

sense of their own identity (be it mixed or mono-cultural) and to help all children understand that a nation may be composed of people from many cultures.

Second, many of the children had not travelled outside their own country (with the exception of those from Portugal and Hungary) and seemed to base their knowledge of children from other countries on tourists (Slovenia, Finland), what they had seen on TV or what they had learnt in school. In many cases their knowledge of people from other countries was based on negative or narrow stereotypes. In spite of little first-hand knowledge, nearly all were very receptive to meeting and working alongside children from other countries. However, in some countries a few children indicated the beginnings of xenophobic attitudes (not welcoming others/racism) with a negative image of others' lifestyles (UK, Belgium).

This lack of knowledge of how others lived was reflected in the children's geographical understanding. Some countries appear to be teaching more on the geography of Europe than others (Hungary) but for the most part the children had a very poor knowledge of European geography. Many thought the USA was part of Europe and knew more about the USA and Japan than about their own neighbours. Those countries within the Euro or where there is a debate about imminent membership of the EU (Poland) appeared to have better informed children. The impact of the school curriculum was also evident: children in Greece were by far the most knowledgeable about democratic processes because of what they had been taught in schools and children in Belgium watched the news because it was part of the curriculum. Parents also appeared to be influential: many children were keen to spend the weekend with a child from another country but were not sure if their parents would approve.

There are lessons here on the importance of fostering more communication between children in Europe: whether by email, school visits or specific European projects (COMENIUS). Even if child-to-child communication is not possible, there is clearly a case for more teaching in schools about how others live and work, thus harnessing the enthusiasm of primary school children for learning about other children and other languages and at the same time combating stereotypes. It would seem important to do this before the cynicism and prejudices of adolescence set in.

Finally, it appears that children across Europe exhibit a high level of social activity, taking part in class discussions and helping others. Many are aware of environmental issues and want to learn more about democratic processes. They are keen to have a better world in the future and to play an active part towards achieving this. Taking these aspects together with the children's tolerance and openness to others, we appear to have a group of civic minded young people who are showing the characteristics identified by Cogan and Derricott (op cit). What they lack is knowledge: specific geographical knowledge about other countries, specific political knowledge about how decisions are made in their own countries and in Europe, and specific human knowledge about other people, their lifestyles and cultures. If we are to prepare young people for an active role as European citizens, it would seem imperative to provide them with this information and the chance to discuss such issues as a matter of urgency.

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