

DESCRIBING DIFFERENCES (AND RECOGNISING SIMILARITIES)

Lenka Malchova, Zdenko Majer, Pieter Laban

Describing differences and recognising similarities is one of the four stages of the learning approach of the EVE-project. In this section, we will take a closer look at how questions concerning the EVE-project can be answered with the help of this stage. We will show which strategies can be used to describe differences and similarities in Europe. Furthermore, we will show how this principle was used in teaching practice during the exchange programme between the Netherlands and Slovakia. Finally, we will explain how the student teachers experienced working with this principle in real life.

A GENERAL LOOK AT DESCRIBING DIFFERENCES AND RECOGNISING SIMILARITIES

According to the EVE-project the part of principles called describing differences and recognizing similarities is understood as a procedure in which the maps of the Atlas of European Values are used in teaching practice to represent average figures for each country. But it is important to realize that such generalisations may hide or reveal complex differences. Teaching strategies encourage pupils to question the map data by appreciating that there is a range of viewpoints even within their own class. However, the principle can be understood otherwise. Therefore, we would like to present some distinctive opinions relating to the principle.

Some people claim that in most cases the principle is quite clear. Many consider it as very important because pupils can see different and common features within Europe and so they are able to compare these similarities or differences to their

own country. They also claim that the principle is helpful in the way that it gives the opportunity to create an image of each country.

Another group of people think that by using this principle pupils can question the many national stereotypes often expressed of countries because they can look at the maps of the Atlas of European Values. So, they may either realise that European countries have many things in common or that they are very different. For this group the principle wants to make pupils aware of other opinions within Europe. They should realise that even though we are part of one great union, we are all different from each other. Furthermore, it helps to encourage pupils to think about reasons why it is like that.

Some participants want to stress the importance of this stage, so they claim that this principle should be understood as something teachers have to use in each lesson. This can be observed very clearly in the EVE exchange project when pupils have to compare their own values to the average result for the values in their country and then to the values of different European countries.

To sum up, most people agree that with this principle that pupils can compare the similar and different viewpoints of European values shown in maps and can come to the conclusion that there are many similarities and differences in Europe.

TEACHING STRATEGIES USED DESCRIBING DIFFERENCES AND RECOGNISING SIMILARITIES

The most suitable way of showing differences and similarities within the European Union is to use the maps of the Atlas of European Values. So, the students are able to distinguish common and different points very quickly.

Each principle of the EVE-project offers help to teachers, as it makes it easier for them to decide how to use the strategies and the maps in the lessons. This is also true for the principle of describing differences and recognising similarities.

Teaching strategies represent a particular approach to learning. When talking about the EVE-project, the main approach is to encourage discussion and debate between pupils. This approach is fundamental to the learning of complex issues.

To handle the describing differences and recognizing similarities principle different strategies can be used.

One suitable strategy is intelligent guesswork because it makes it possible to compare countries. This strategy is useful for exploring issues around the concept of diversity. Another appropriate activity for achieving this principle is called living map. This strategy is suitable because pupils have to think about which statement belongs to which country by comparing it with the data shown in the map.

Differences and similarities can also be pointed out during discussions. So, pupils can find out who agrees or disagrees with their opinions. The whole discussion can be based on the fact that pupils agree or disagree with particular statements,

for example in a traffic light game. The use of this strategy allows students to express their opinions and at the same time they can see whether others hold similar or different ideas.

The principle can also be advanced with the help of the snowball strategy. The latter enables pupils to discuss in a safe environment, i.e. in smaller groups first and then they can participate in a whole class discussion and express their attitudes to different questions. The group work enables pupils to encounter views and perspectives, which they may not have considered.

The open fish bowl strategy gets pupils to think about similarities and differences too. It stimulates pupils to reflect on their own values, to compare them with their fellow pupils and afterwards to put them in a European perspective.

Role-play is another useful strategy which can be applied in this principle, due to the fact that it gets pupils to feel empathy with opinions that are different to their own. During the activity it is valuable to encourage pupils to consider what they know about different European countries and how that may help them to think of different viewpoints.

The last strategy, which has to be mentioned, is odd one out. During this activity pupils have to consider similarities and differences between different countries from the list, because their task is to pick the odd one out from this list of countries.

Many strategies can be used to reach the aim of describing differences and recognizing similarities, but it is also important to make pupils aware of the fact that results shown on maps are general and do not have to be valid for every citizen coming from a particular country.

TEACHING PRACTICE

In the next part we will show how we described differences and similarities within our teaching practice. We mainly used evaluations filled by all student teachers who were participating in the EVE-project exchange project. Other resources are evaluation sheets from the pupils.

At first, we showed the maps to the pupils who should try to explain what they see in the map and what it could mean. With the help of this activity they found out very quickly that there was a huge diversity of values throughout Europe. In the next step we asked the pupils to tell us some reasons why the differences or similarities in the maps existed. We can say that the success of this activity depended on the knowledge of the pupils of particular countries. Generally, all pupils were able to express at least one reason, but this was not really sufficient. So, we made them think more deeply, in order to come up with more different reasons. For a better understanding, we mostly tried to compare Slovakia as the home country of the Slovak pupils to the Netherlands. For example we used the map 'Marriage is an out-dated institution'. The pupils were able to recognise the

differences of values concerning this topic very easily, for example that in the western part of Europe the institution of marriage was not as important as in the middle or eastern part. According to the pupils, the main reason for that lies in different traditions and the religion in each country. The teachers tried to facilitate the discussion and so the pupils were able to come up with other reasons, for example difference in culture, economy and society.

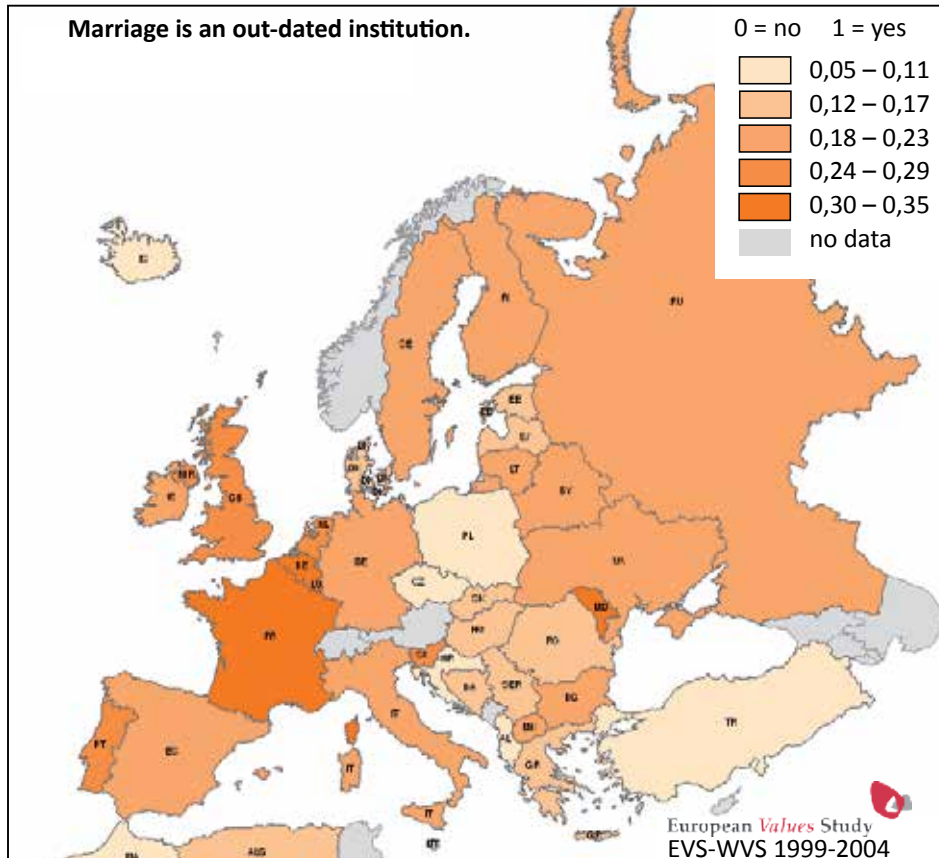


Figure 1: Map showing average opinions on the statement 'Marriage is an out-dated institution'

As for the strategies used one of our favourite ones was the traffic light game. The pupils had to express their opinions or agreement to different statements by showing a red card in case of disagreement or a green card in case of agreement. So, they could see who had the same or a totally different opinion on particular questions. In comparison to the map they could put their opinion in the broader European context. The aim of the following discussion was to motivate the pupils to discover other differences or similarities of European values and to find reasons.

The most preferred activity for describing differences and recognising similarities was the strategy called intelligent guesswork. First, pupils could express

their opinion, but then they had to think about the viewpoints of other European people. As we expected, most of the pupils made guesses according to stereotypes which provided a good basis for the next discussion. Within this discussion they should confirm or refute these stereotypes. The biggest problem was that pupils did not have enough background information about different countries, so they did not know how to decide about a particular country. The crucial part of this strategy was to compare pupils' conclusions to the maps and discuss about them.

The fish bowl strategy was also suitable for this principle. The pupils were divided into two groups where they could discuss the statements. In each group there were some pupils who did not participate in the debate. Their task was to listen to the discussion and remember main points which they were asked to present to another discussing group afterwards. The most visible differences could be seen when discussing about different roles of men and women in Slovak relationships. To support a more controversial discussion we divided the pupils into groups according to gender. So, the two groups could see different ideas, find similarities and understand the way how the other group was thinking.

Generally, the reactions of the pupils to describing differences and recognising similarities were very positive and it did not cause any problems. Very useful tools which we could use were the maps from the Atlas of European Values. These maps provided us with a comprehensible way of seeing differences and similarities of values within different European countries.

STUDENT TEACHERS' EVALUATIONS

In their evaluation forms, all groups of student teachers filled in how they felt about using the four stages to reach the aims of the EVE-project.

At first we think that it was important for both the student teachers and the pupils to know how the stages could lead to answering the main question and reaching the aims of the project. When we take a look at the four stages, describing differences and recognising similarities is the second stage. In the first stage, the aim is to give the pupils a voice of their own: 'How do you think about this subject?'. The second stage is about the question: 'How do other people think about this subject?'. For this, it is important to take a look at the class first because it is possible that there are different opinions on a subject within the classroom. When it comes to EVE, the different opinions of European citizens are rather more important than the ones of the class. The aim of this stage is to make clear that there are big differences in values in Europe, but that there are also countries that share the same opinions about some values. The third stage, deepening understanding and the fourth stage, developing critical perspectives, take a closer look at these differences and similarities and aim to let the pupils find out why they are like that.

The participating student teachers considered describing differences and similarities as really important for them and the pupils. Most of the students understood what the stage was about, and what strategies could be used to explain differences and similarities in European countries.

The student teachers maintained that there are two ways to handle this stage in the classroom. Some of the student teachers wrote down that they experienced differences between the pupils in the class. They also paid attention to this fact because it was important for developing the first stage. Because the pupils have different opinions, it is clear that there are differences.

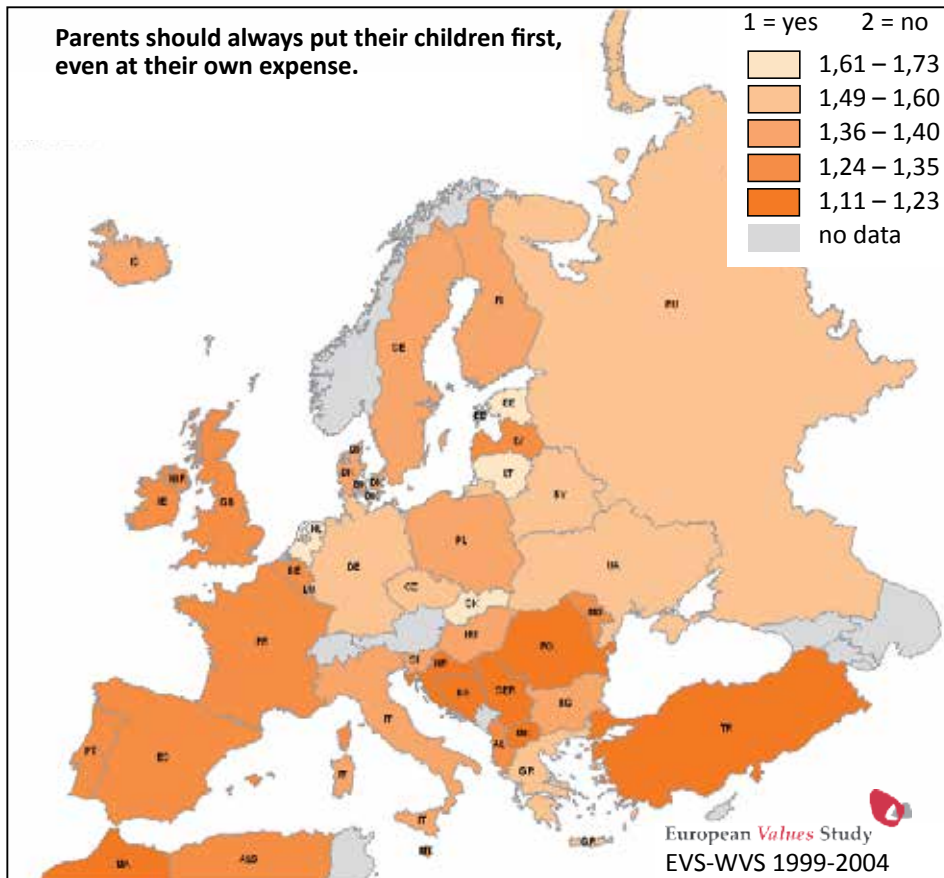


Figure 2: Map showing average opinions on the statement 'Parents should always put their children first, even at their own expense'

Another way of handling this stage in classroom was in combination with the maps of the Atlas of European Values. With the help of the maps it was easy for the student teachers to provide examples for differences, similarities and patterns in Europe. The critical point was that the pupils found out that the maps are not always representative for their own countries because of the fact that the value

questions were asked to only about 500 people per country. Therefore, it was important to make clear that the maps represent averages. For example, in the map above, you see that the Slovakian majority strongly disagreed on the statement ‘Parents should always put their children first, even at their own expense.’ In this map you see a big difference between, for example, Slovakia and Romania, but you also see a group of Balkan States that strongly agreed on this statement. But some pupils did not agree with the result of Slovakia in this statement. Therefore, it was important to remind the pupils of the fact that it is all about averages.

The strategies most often used for describing differences and recognising similarities were the traffic light game, intelligent guesswork, open fishbowl, role play and living maps.

Intelligent guesswork was one of the strategies that student teachers found harder to use as pupils have to have a lot of background knowledge to guess how other people might think. The strategy to us seems more suitable for the third stage, which is deepening understanding.

Finally it has to be said, that all strategies involve thinking about differences and similarities in Europe. When you check the different steps in the strategies, you will see that at least one step is dedicated to see if there are differences or similarities between regions. The student teachers experienced describing differences and recognizing similarities as a very important step in reaching the aims of EVE.

CONCLUSION

Describing differences and recognising similarities is one of the main principles or stages of the European Values Education project. Therefore, this principle should be included in almost every lesson.

With the help of the maps from the Atlas of European Values pupils were able to recognise similarities and compare differences in European values.

Almost all of the teaching strategies are suitable for this principle because they encourage discussion and debate between pupils, so pupils can compare similar or different viewpoints. However, the most preferable strategies are, for example, intelligent guesswork, living map, the traffic light game, snowball, open fishbowl, role-play and odd one out.

In general, the pupils liked discussing differences and similarities. The only problem was the silence in class that sometimes arose due to the pupils’ lack of background information on family life issues in different European countries. Therefore, we believe that some background information should be provided first. So, we can say that the success of these strategies depends on the pupils’ background knowledge on particular countries.