

CONCLUSION FOR FUTURE TEACHING

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Religion is one of the most controversial issues in today's world and for that reason raising awareness of this issue amongst people living in different European countries is very important for future governmental policies. The European Values Education Project held in the Netherlands from 10–17 April 2010 aimed to display the similarities and differences regarding the religious values of European citizens by using the maps prepared by the AoEV (Atlas of European Values).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MAPS IN THE ATLAS OF EUROPEAN VALUES

Apart from the experience of the different educational systems, the attitudes of the pupils towards the student teachers and the subject matter affected the participants of the project.

Although most of the pupils do not have a chance to discuss the issue of 'religion' in their usual curriculum, they were very enthusiastic about the topic when the student teachers explained the terms and they really wanted to make comments using critical thinking methods. The assignments and the maps prepared by the AoEV are not normally used in classes except maybe in geography classes so this was a new experience for the pupils and they were very curious about the data coming from different countries in Europe. Their enthusiasm impressed most of us since, generally, we thought that the issue of 'religion' would not catch their attention.

The usage of the maps was one of the reasons why the pupils were very enthusiastic to participate. Normally in geography classes, colours used in the maps only show the differences between regions, countries or cities without offering much, if any, opportunities for discussion, for example, if they use the shades of colours to show differences in the population density of the countries across Europe. However, the pupils do not have a chance to discuss the reasons for these differences, or they do not have the opportunity to make comments about it. The only thing that they can do is just

describe the patterns and trends, which is not very effective in terms of fostering and encouraging critical thinking. Furthermore, the pupils may not find that these aspects relate to their own lives. Nevertheless, thanks to the AoEV maps and the assignments delivered by EVE, the pupils can have the opportunity to experience a different teaching method. The maps are used in order to show the differences or similarities of religious aspects of the different European countries without making any comments about the situation, since they only show the data which were collected from the citizens of those countries. After showing the data, the maps allow the pupils to think for themselves about the reasons for why there are differences or similarities between the European countries. In this thinking procedure, pupils can reach the higher level thinking skills by applying the methods of critical thinking. They have the chance to make a lot of comments on the reasons for the difference and they are able to express their opinions and participate in the discussions that are made throughout the lesson.

TEAM TEACHING

Seriously working with a partner on a given task and the fact that everybody had known his or her partner for approximately five months helped the student teachers to interact better with one another. After learning about the different working styles and getting used to them, sharing the responsibility becomes easier and as a result, the effectiveness while planning the lessons increases.

The student teachers came from different countries (Turkey and the Netherlands), that means, they are used to different educational systems and have different backgrounds regarding values, so one may predict that working together may turn out to be difficult. However, after working in real harmony with a common aim, which is making use of the assignments and trying to achieve good results and to get a highly positive feedback, it was obvious that coming from different curricular backgrounds and different cultures did not pose any problems. In contrast, it made the planning process stronger because different background knowledge and experiences could be combined and prejudices questioned. To be

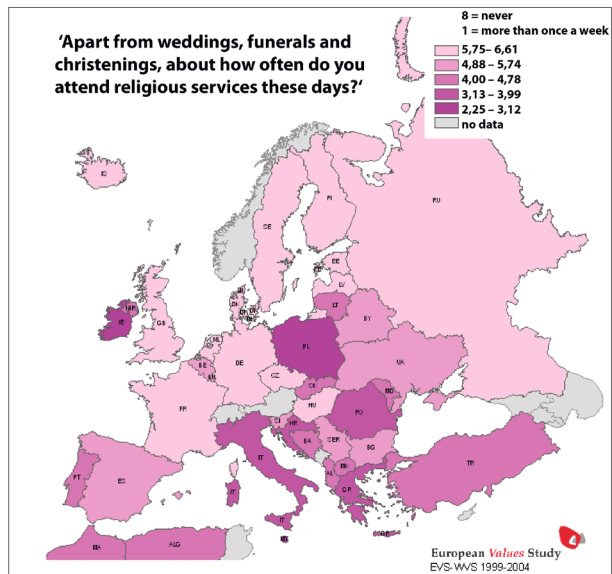


Figure 1: Attendance of religious services

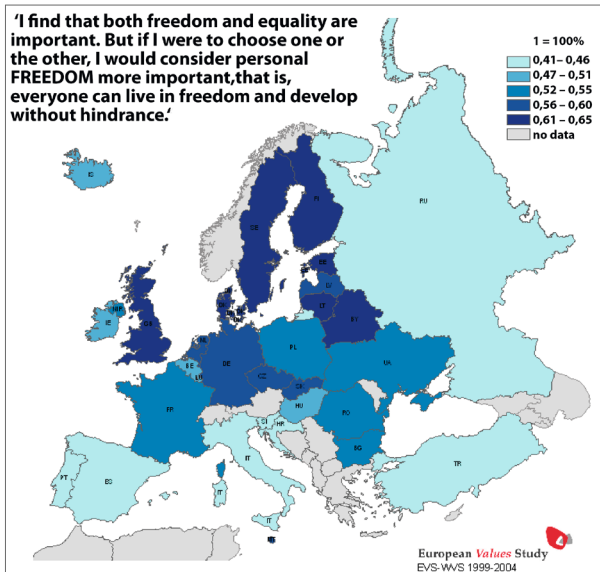


Figure 2: Freedom or equality?

more specific, an example from one of the classes will help to understand the effectiveness of mixed student teacher groups. During the lesson the pupils asked for some specific information about Turkey to be able to compare the countries and to be able to find the reasons for the differences between them. For example in a lesson based on the assignment entitled 'Secularism in Europe', one of the pupils asked one of the Turkish student teachers why she wasn't wearing a headscarf. Evidently, he thought that wearing a headscarf is obligatory in Turkey. Answering this question would have been difficult for the Dutch student teacher, but the Turkish student teachers were able to offer an explanation to show that it is not always the case in the country. Additionally, during the lesson based on the assignment entitled 'Why be religious?' (see fig. 1 and 2) the pupils asked the student teachers, why citizens from The Netherlands chose freedom instead of equality. The Dutch student teacher, by relating the answer to the pupils' lives, helped the pupils to better understand the issue because the examples given by the Dutch student teacher were well-known to them. In this way, the two people teaching improved the teaching process. These examples show that team teaching enabled the student teachers to find more adequate answers to their questions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCUSSIONS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Nowadays, it is very important to know and understand that the belief that everyone shares the same values in Europe is not true. Pupils in secondary schools have to learn to be respectful of other people's values, and, with the help of the Atlas of European Values, we could achieve this goal. First the pupils had to share their opinions about different aspects of religion. To be able to reach this aim, many teacher teams used the traffic light game in the lessons. This game was very influential in the classes. The student teachers asked the pupils questions from the assignments. When the pupils wanted to answer the question negatively, they raised their red card. When the answer was 'yes', they raised their green card. The questions asked by the student teachers were open-ended questions, so that the pupils needed to think about the questions deeply

before choosing their cards. When each pupil raised a card, they were given a chance to compare their answers with their classmates' answers. The student teachers had to do this too because they needed to know the pupils' responses for future usage. After this part, the student teachers asked some pupils for further explanations because it is very important for the pupils, if they get in contact with people who have other values or answers. Therefore by comparing and discussing their answers, the pupils realised that even in their own class, there were a lot of different values.

ASSIGNMENTS

One of the most important issues in terms of using the assignments is how they differ from normal lessons. That is to say, the student teachers should be aware of this in order to hold a better lesson.

To start with, there are some similarities between the assignments and the normal lessons that the pupils have in their curriculum. An important example is the fact that pupils in the Netherlands, unlike in Turkey, are used to having discussions about really controversial issues. Therefore, the student teachers do not actually need to put in a lot of effort into having the pupils participate in the discussions. By being aware of this, a lot of precious time can be saved and deeper discussions can be achieved.

In the case of Muhammed & Desiree M., and Marloes and Çağlayan, the lessons took place in a religion class, so their assignments were already quite similar to what the pupils would normally have had. They were able to go deeply into the subject after a relatively short introduction phase.

On the other hand, there are also some differences between the assignments and the normal lessons. To illustrate, textbooks do not usually include discussion activities; thus, teachers need to prepare the activities themselves. In that sense, this project could be very helpful to student teachers.

The teaching of these assignments was also different from usual teaching in the sense that there was no specific course just for these assignments, so it can be said that it was something 'extra-curricular'. There was a negative side to this as well as a positive one. The positive point was that the pupils were often more enthusiastic about learning something different from their routine lessons. However, it had a negative effect on a few students in that they were not interested in topics other than their usual lessons. Here, the teacher has the responsibility to make it interesting for them in various ways such as relating the topic to the pupils.

A good example of making use of differences can be seen in that most, if not all, of the student teachers used some games in their teaching, which seems to have helped a lot, as can be seen from the pupil's evaluations. Using the traffic light game was very effective in getting the pupils' attention and encouraged the pupils to participate much more in class discussions.

Another issue to be taken into consideration while preparing the assignments was the issue of universality. To put it in other words, the topics of the assignments should not be only about one country or culture. For example, the assignment about football and religion did not have much to do with other cultures and that is why some of the pupils found it uninteresting. What is more, in one of the classes, almost none of the pupils had enough background information about the topic to be discussed and hence, the student teachers had to spend a considerable time explaining the history of football in the United Kingdom. This resulted in not having enough time for a deeper discussion. In addition, the aims of the assignment were not fully achieved due to the loss of time at the beginning of the lesson.

According to Mustafa, the assignment ‘Lucky Charms’ included too many tasks about patterns and very little about ‘lucky charms’, which can be a very interesting subject for the pupils. Other than that, the assignment ‘Unity in Diversity’ had some concepts, which were so abstract that the pupils had a very hard time to understand them. The level of the assignments was mostly too high. The level of English was too high as well. Thus, the student teachers who implemented the assignment stated that the assignments should be more practical for use in high schools; or at least different assignments should be prepared for different levels of students.

In these examples, we can clearly see that the perception of the assignment developers and the pupils are relatively different from each other. This is something that the developers of the assignments should take into consideration. For instance, they can include more concrete examples for pupils instead of concepts, which are too abstract or make the assignments more related to the pupils’ needs, interests, and age ranges. In other words, pupils’ perceptions need to be taken into consideration; otherwise the pupils may just become de-motivated with the tasks, as some of them did in the class mentioned above.

In order to overcome such problems, the student teachers came up with the idea that including them in the preparation of the assignments could be a solution. The student teachers can play the role of a bridge between the assignment developers and the pupils. Another reason for the idea is that the student teachers were not fully informed about the broad aim of the assignments, which was felt to be a very crucial deficit in preparing the lesson plans. Sometimes we could not be sure what the most important task is in the assignment, but this is important to know while preparing the lesson plans because we need to focus on what is the most important, rather than other less important issues. Also, we were usually obligated to omit some of the tasks because of time limitations in schools, which also brought up the issue of the wider aim and the most important task of the whole assignment.

IMPACT

Based on the evaluations from the student teachers, it was obvious that this project and the assignments will have effects on the student teachers' own way of teaching. Most of them are already excited about using the critical thinking component in their future lessons. The assignments and the project help not only the pupils but also us to be able to develop our critical thinking skills. One of the student teachers stated that thanks to this project, he now has a better knowledge of alternative ways of having the pupils focus on tasks by giving them freedom of speech and freedom of discussion. Also, a lot of student teachers have learned that games might make the lesson less boring.

Mark, a geography teacher in a school where the assignments were tested, explained that he could already think of a lot of explanations for the diversity in Europe when he looked at a map or when he read an article. However, thanks to the assignment, he could develop more explanations for the 'whys' and 'hows' of things, and more ideas to use in his lessons.

One of the student teachers mentioned in her evaluation that she was not planning to be a teacher although she studied in the English Language Teaching department. She said that this project made her realise how fun and important teaching was and she considered her future plans again.

Another student teacher explained the prestige of having teaching experience in a foreign country when applying for a teaching job.

COMMENTS

During the whole project, all the student teachers had a lot of practice and ideas on how to adapt the assignments in the project. They are mostly positive but they also have some ideas about how to improve and develop the assignments and the project itself as a whole. Most people expressed their ideas about time limitations. The general need that the student teachers mentioned was that they would have liked more time to prepare the lesson plans and more time to work on the evaluation and the publication as well as more time to teach the lesson. For instance, if an assignment is going to last the duration of two lessons, the student teachers should be able to ask for that length of time. If the level of the assignment is high, a class with students of a higher level should be arranged to implement the assignment.

The last comments and ideas were that there should be a network where all students from each country can share their project experiences because we all want to know what other exchange students have done, or are planning to do. In addition, some examples from previous exchanges could be handed to participants at the very first session of the project (on the first day, during the introduction part). Also, coordinators from each country can share their experiences with students, as well.