



**INFORMAL CONFERENCE OF  
EUROPEAN MINISTERS OF EDUCATION**  
OSLO 5-6 JUNE 2008

**COMMUNIQUÉ**

**I Introduction**

Europe is a culturally diverse continent, and will become more so in the years to come. The enlargement of the European Union, more mobile citizens and globalisation have increased the multicultural character of our countries. This has added to the number of languages, religions, ethnic and cultural backgrounds found in our societies. This will provide Europe with great opportunities but also represents serious challenges to its policies.

In response, intercultural dialogue has an increasingly important role to play in fostering European identity and citizenship and building up an inclusive society. Europe has also a responsibility on the global level to contribute to the building of bridges between societies and to promote dialogue and understanding.

Schools have a particular responsibility for promoting dialogue and respect by providing knowledge and skills, developing attitudes in favour of intercultural dialogue and imparting common values such as democracy, tolerance and respect for fundamental rights. Educational systems all over Europe are facing this challenge. We must meet the need for more assertive action in schools to foster and maintain intercultural dialogue and respect for diversity within our communities.

The need to promote cultural diversity and to strengthen the ability of all those living in Europe to engage in an intercultural dialogue based on mutual respect and tolerance, has been underlined on a number of occasions both by international organisations such as UNESCO or the Council of Europe, as well as by the institutions of the EU - most recently by the Council of the European Union in its Conclusions on Intercultural Competences.

The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (EYID) 2008 recognises that Europe's great cultural diversity represents a unique advantage. It encourages all those living in Europe to explore the benefits of our rich cultural heritage and the opportunities to learn from different cultural traditions. Recent Council conclusions on promoting creativity and innovation also point out that there is evidence that cultural diversity is favourable to creativity, which in turn increases economic efficiency and social cohesion.

In the final communiqué adopted at their informal conference in Heidelberg in March 2007 the European Education Ministers underlined the school's responsibility for imparting common values

and intercultural dialogue.

Also on the global level, the need to build bridges between societies and to promote dialogue and understanding has been addressed, for instance through the initiative taken by the Secretary General of the United Nations in 2005 to launch an Alliance of Civilisations.

This Conference has brought together the Ministers of Education from the Member States of the European Union and candidate countries, as well as EFTA /EEA countries and the countries of the Western Balkans.

Following the traditions of their informal meetings, the Conference of the European Education Ministers discussed the role of institutions in identifying and transmitting common European values. It also examined how the education sector can contribute to pluralistic societies. It realised its ambition to make a contribution to the continuous debate concerning the development of future objectives for European education policy beyond 2010.

## **II Main Messages**

Through key note presentations, roundtable discussions and interventions from the participants, the European Education Ministers attending the Conference explored the very principles of intercultural dialogue and respect, the challenges they represent to us, and – through examples – ideas as to how education policy and practice can deal with this.

Scientific and technological progress in Europe has in the last decades been formidable. Closer international co-operation, increased migration and more mobility has shaped Europe today into a society of complexity and diversity, which makes it necessary for people with different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds to learn to live together, not just next to each other. This is a cultural and moral challenge for which there is no technological solution. A change of mentality is necessary.

Europe must learn from its history, and from its achievements. We must rise above our differences. In order to do this it is necessary not only to talk, we must also live the values – every day and on all levels. As politicians we should in our actions set an example; as citizens and family members we must demonstrate our dedication to our common values. With this in view also the young people should be given concrete possibilities to participate and to contribute. Dialogue is not an event, but a process that needs to go on every day and on every level.

Ignorance breeds intolerance, so education plays a key role in promoting tolerance and respect. This implies that education is not only about knowledge, but also about values. Values are what is needed for knowledge to develop into wisdom. Lifelong learning policies should aim at equipping all citizens with the key competences most relevant for a multi-cultural society. These include linguistic, social and civic competences, as well as cultural awareness and expression.

From this perspective multilingualism is an essential tool to promote intercultural dialogue. We should promote the learning of foreign languages, including through greater use of distance learning technologies, and encourage the learning of less widely used European languages and non-European languages. In their conclusions in May 2008, the Council of the European Union has invited the European Commission to draw up a proposal for a comprehensive policy framework for multilingualism.

Equitable access to quality education is essential for intercultural dialogue. Education policies should be aimed at integrating children from a diverse range of social and cultural backgrounds into mainstream forms of education and training, without any discrimination.

Teachers play a key role in transferring not only knowledge and skills, but also values and attitudes. Without teachers who are competent and dedicated in this field little can be achieved. Therefore the continuous development of teacher education in all our countries is essential.

We need to foster respect for diversity, but also for our shared values. Unity in diversity means common values and culturally diversified expressions. In order to contribute to tolerant and multicultural societies we must also be willing to agree on our shared values. Democracy, freedom of speech, and a universal concept of basic human rights are among these values. We must all be willing to commit ourselves to them.

It is clear that we all have work to do ahead of us, both in developing and implementing national policies and in our international education policy co-operation. On the European level we have developed comprehensive education policy co-operation, especially during the last decade. Our future European education policy co-operation beyond 2010 should continue to focus not only on the potential of education to contribute to economic growth in Europe, but also on education as a means to strengthen social cohesion, mutual dialogue, respect and tolerance among all.