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**Contribution to**

**THE CULTURAL DIMENSION OF THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION**

Report by the Special Rapporteur on the right to education

Ms. Koumbou Boly Barry

**Who we are and what we do.**

EuroClio is an international association, founded with the support of the Council of Europe, whose mission is to promote mutual understanding and peace through history and citizenship education. Since 1992, it has provided professional training, designed teaching tools and issued policy recommendations for various stakeholders, including history educators, cultural associations and education authorities at the regional, national and international level. In order to encourage multiperspectivity and mutual understanding, the numerous projects run by EuroClio were and continue to be aimed at engaging different groups, such as ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious minorities, migrants, people with disabilities and others.

**How we responded to the call for contributions.**

EuroClio has several Ambassadors who, as experts in history and citizenship education, have been involved with us for many years and contribute to our mission at a local level. The present contribution is largely based on first-hand information provided by twenty EuroClio Ambassadors from sixteen different countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Georgia, Italy, Lebanon, Malta, Moldova, North Macedonia, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland, The Netherlands, United Kingdom and Ukraine), who were invited to submit evidence based on their personal experience as educators. This approach provides valuable insight into the challenges faced by concerning cultural diversity, it stresses the need for inclusivity in education, and also offers concrete examples of effective teaching practices.

The present contribution will not address the first three questions of the questionnaire which refer to specific countries because EuroClio’s international experience is better suited to provide answers to the second set of questions.

**Difficulties encountered in ensuring an inclusive and quality education that allows cultural diversity and the cultural rights of each person to flourish.**

1. Promotion of an official history excluding alternative interpretations and dissonant voices

In states affected by internal conflict or tensions related to identity, it is not unusual for political elites to select a single, convenient interpretation of the national history to legitimise their leadership. Such interpretation, which marginalises and excludes alternative narratives, serves the homogenous (re)construction of national/ethnic identities specifically designed to promote the political allegiance of citizens to the state. In multicultural and multi-ethnic societies, such as, for example, ex-Yugoslavia and Lebanon, this entails that minority groups and their point of view on the recent conflict are hardly represented in history education. Furthermore, one-sided narratives may be supported not only by political elites but also by other stakeholders (e.g. associations of war veterans and/or victims, religious organisations and churches); these narratives are conveyed through a variety of channels, including social media, fictional literature, movies, museums and cultural associations.

This simplified version of history, prescribed by education authorities and narrated in history textbooks, makes it challenging for history educators to teach history in a way that is inclusive and respects diversity. Furthermore, a crisis environment, such as in Greece, can fuel negative responses to attempts to include alternative or marginalised aspects of history teaching and promote cultural diversity and cultural rights.

In our experience, many teachers are open to the idea of multiperspectivity and willing to include alternative narratives in their teaching but are hampered by the fact that they need to prioritise the official curriculum that students must learn to gain academic qualifications. There can be a lack of political will in education authorities to push past such constraints to solve the problem. Furthermore, some teachers feel uncomfortable and inadequately equipped to teach sensitive issues and thus prefer to follow the state-sponsored version of the events. In some contexts, attempts at promoting multiperspectivity in history education have been met with resistance by teachers.

1. Overrepresentation of the national dimension in history education

Since education policies are designed by national governments, history curricula tend to be nationally oriented while broader, local and varied dimensions are often underrepresented. This can isolate historical events and phenomena from their international contexts, a necessary element to fully understanding such occurrences, and occasionally leads to their complete absence from history curricula. These limitations negatively impact the perception of cultural diversity and, in particular, that of migrants, even beyond the first generation. Migrant pupils are often seen as ‘others’ by teachers and students alike. The history of human migrations, which is frequently transnational, can be ignored in textbooks that do not reflect the multicultural realities of the classrooms in which they are used. On their part, pupils with multicultural backgrounds may struggle to identify with the national narrative taught in schools and are often denied opportunities to contribute the history of their place of origin as it does not fit into the curricula. In several cases, this adds, at least initially, to difficulties constituted by language barriers.

1. Inadequacy of teacher training and teaching tools

Subject specialist training and continued professional development for history educators often fail to provide teachers with a solid knowledge of the content that they deliver, making it difficult for them to include alternative narratives reflecting and promoting cultural diversity. When opportunities for specific training are provided by national and international history associations, such as EuroClio, the UK Historical Association and others, teachers often struggle to participate due to work overload. In some countries, such as Portugal, a single history and citizenship teacher can be responsible for up to 200 students, and the heavy workload allows very limited time for professional development activities. Furthermore, educational institutions often do not allow their teachers to attend training sessions during school hours, nor do they provide funding for professional development. This lack of systematic training can be aggravated by a lack of young/new teachers being placed in schools for prolonged periods of time. For instance, in Greece, new teachers have not been placed in some schools for as long as twelve years causing a lack of new knowledge and fresh approaches as well as reluctance to adopt them.

Some countries do not have specialists in the design of history curricula because the national higher education system does not produce these kinds of professionals and the government refuses to avail themselves of the expertise of foreign educators. Consequently, the quality of teacher training and tools, such as textbooks, is generally poor and cultural diversity is not taken into account. This may also happen in countries experiencing a sudden massive influx of migrants from various cultural backgrounds (e.g. Malta). In these cases, education authorities usually struggle to rapidly devise solutions and recruit experts to tackle unprecedented problems, thus leaving teachers and educators without support in dealing with high numbers of linguistically and culturally diverse pupils. It is also possible that, due to the “centralisation” in the drafting of school textbooks, the local dimension and its peculiarities are overlooked. This is, for example, the case of Cyprus, whose textbooks are produced in the mainland and history is being taught from a Greek point of view, making little reference to the island’s cultural diversity. There are also cases in which financial constraints have prevented the application of new and more inclusive curricula to the revision of school textbooks (e.g. Ukraine). On the other hand, in those countries in which more efforts are being made to design and implement an inclusive history curriculum (e.g. the United Kingdom), it is difficult to select topics to eliminate to make space for new ones reflecting cultural diversity. This is, however, necessary as the time for history teaching at school remains limited.

**Specific mechanisms established to consult and ensure the participation of various stakeholders for a better understanding and effectiveness of the right to education, including its cultural dimension**

In general, parents are the stakeholders most commonly involved in various aspects of history education, ranging from the planning of extracurricular activities to the selection of topics to be taught (e.g. Italy, Macedonia, Portugal, and other countries). Parents are often represented on school boards. However, this does not necessarily influence a general understanding of the cultural dimension of the right to education. In some cases, parents do not support tolerance and inclusiveness in education. Nevertheless, positive experiences have been reported since, in other instances, parents are very engaged and sensitive to this aspect. For example, they are often active in the organisation of meetings and exchanges between schools from different regions of the country (e.g. North Macedonia), and thus represent different cultures, languages and religions.

It is common to have not only parents but also other stakeholders sitting on school committees, such as local representatives of various groups and associations. Their presence can significantly improve the multiperspectivity of the history curriculum delivered in their school by ensuring that different groups constituting the local community are included. For example, when a school registered a high presence of children from another country (e.g. Polish children in British schools), the history of that country has been given special attention in history classes. In other cases, local communities have been involved in oral history projects envisaging the collection of memories of recent conflicts (e.g. Lebanon) in order to familiarise students with different narratives.
The local dimension has a strong impact on how history education reflects cultural diversity since the most effective initiatives in this regard are implemented at this level. Nevertheless, there are also examples of countries where alternative narratives are the result of national policies towards minorities. Representatives of old resident minorities (e.g. Sami population in Norway) are actively involved in the design of the history curriculum, as prescribed by law; however, this is not the case for representatives of recent minorities constituted by immigrants to the country. At the same time, it is possible that, although minorities are allowed to receive instruction in their own language, education authorities do not assist them in the creation of textbooks and didactic material. Furthermore, since minority pupils attend their own schools, this translates in education segregation rather than in the inclusion of cultural diversity (e.g. Ukraine).

Finally, it seems that students are seldom consulted regarding their history education, and it appears that, overall, they are not officially represented in any board or committee involved in formal education.

**Recommendations for states and stakeholders**

The recommendations listed here focus on the principal actors in the implementation of educational policies: history and citizenship educators. In concrete terms, efforts should be made to:

1. Provide opportunities for the professional development of teachers specifically aimed at encouraging the adoption of plural and inclusive narratives;
2. Improve existing regulation to make sure that teachers’ attendance at professional development sessions is supported and encouraged by their schools and managers;
3. To be held accountable to the spirit of international agreements or conventions (UN; UNESCO; Council of Europe, EU) that were meant to regulate different aspects of cultural rights
4. Decrease the work overload for teachers in order to facilitate their attendance of activities for professional development throughout the entire course of their career in education;
5. Facilitate and promote the encounter, exchange and co-operation of teachers from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds across regional and national boundaries (see, for example, the EU Erasmus+ programme);
6. Allow teachers more freedom to deviate from the prescribed curriculum to focus on themes relevant to their specific students;
7. Design new educational tools and improve existing ones in order to allocate more time for social and cultural history, and to provide material supporting the teaching of plural and inclusive narratives;
8. Include Social Emotional Learning in teacher training to raise awareness about the potential impact of history teaching on students’ emotional wellbeing and classroom social cohesion, particularly in societies experiencing cultural and identity tensions.
9. Engage the wider school community in dialogues about teaching aims and outcomes which can help inform parents, teachers, and other stakeholders

Teachers, since they are directly in contact with students, who spend the majority of their time at school in subject classes, have the potential to play a central role in the promotion of cultural diversity in history education. Therefore, they should constantly receive appropriate support and training, which can only be provided through the involvement of different stakeholders, such as educational policymakers, teacher trainers, curriculum experts, school administrators, textbook authors, assessment specialists, teacher associations and parents. The engagement of local, national and international stakeholders is instrumental in raising awareness among all sectors of society of the potential of history and citizenship education for the inclusion and promotion of cultural diversity. It can translate, for example, in the creation of partnerships and networks involving schools, cultural knowledge organisations (e.g. museums, libraries and archives), social/civil organisations (e.g. sports associations, local heritage associations) and universities. However, it can only be effective if it is accompanied by dialogue and cooperation between the stakeholders. This will ensure that all actions taken, such as the drafting and implementation of new legislation, are comprehensive and interconnected. For example, it is the responsibility of policymakers in each country to devote efforts (e.g. financing research) to the identification of groups that, although present on the national territory, are not represented in historical narratives (e.g. migrant workers, minorities, women, and others). Subsequently, those in charge of curriculum design, textbook production and teacher training should be provided with adequate theoretical expertise and practical tools to ensure the inclusion of the abovementioned groups in history education.

**Conclusion**

The present contribution voices the opinions of history and citizenship educators who, as Ambassadors of EuroClio, are committed to an inclusive approach to education that fosters mutual understanding and promotes respect for diversity. Despite the variety of political and cultural backgrounds influencing their experience as educators, it is possible to identify common trends among the Ambassadors’ concerns as well as suggestions.

Significant differences in the situation of history and citizenship education exist between the various countries considered here. In some cases, a single narrative of the past is conveyed to legitimise the state’s political leadership, while in others, education authorities lack the competencies, but not necessarily the will, to promote multiperspectivity in history. In all cases, however, cultural diversity is not sufficiently promoted through teacher training, curriculum development, textbook design and school regulations. Therefore, teachers often lack the knowledge, skills and instruments necessary to improve the quality of the education they deliver. Although educators can play a fundamental role in the promotion of cultural diversity, they need the mobilisation of all the stakeholders involved, from education authorities to parents, as well as the support of civil society organisations and networks.

20 February 2020, The Hague

EuroClio - European Association of History Educators
Steven Stegers, Executive Director

Riouwstraat 139, 2585HP

The Hague, The Netherlands

steven@euroclio.eu, +31 70 381 78 36