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*There are too many people in Britain, including a lot of young people, who do not really know about the EU. More should be done to teach people about Europe... every pupil is a European. It is vital that young people engage.*

(Peter Hain, TES 2002)

## **Introduction**

When asked if Britain was part of Europe, a group of seven years olds were divided in their response: some said definitely not, one thought it was, and another thought it was ‘maybe in the middle- like half in’. Eleven year olds were a little more knowledgeable but even then one concluded: ‘I don’t understand all this Europe stuff’. These children were part of a study carried out in 2002 to ascertain primary children’s knowledge and understanding of Europe. The findings, reported here, raise questions about how much we feel our children ought to know about Europe, its people and its geography as the European Union (EU) enlarges. In particular:

- How can schools help foster a sense of national and European identity?
- What approaches in the primary school can help children learn about the people and geography of Europe?
- How can we help children understand the role of government, both in their own country and in the EU?

Such questions are important if we wish to have a united Europe, and to avoid conflicts rooted in cultural differences. There is a concern for this both within individual nations (Runnymede 2000) and between European nations (Lastrucci,

2002). Cogan and Derricott's summary of the characteristics needed of world citizens apply equally well to the needs of an integrated Europe. This indicates 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. (Cogan and Derricott, 2000).

Within member states there have been many attempts over the past two decades to promote projects which foster intercultural understanding and mutual respect, notably the EU funded Socrates and Comenius projects (eg Only Connect, 2001, Euro.Geo project 2002). Individual countries have also promoted teaching about citizenship or civics education and in the UK education for citizenship became compulsory in 2002 for secondary pupils. However, there has been little comparative research across European countries about children's own understanding of identity (both national and European), culture and respect. This paper reports on a study which arises out of one such EU funded network, where collaborators from eight European countries investigated how children perceive themselves, how they perceive others and what they currently understand about their own nation and Europe. Our findings have relevance for all countries concerned with how we should best educate young people for participation in an increasingly interdependent and global economy, whilst at the same time respecting cultural identity.

The study focussed on four key areas:

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

- Children's political literacy

## **Methodology**

The eight European countries participating in the project were Belgium, Greece, Hungary, United Kingdom, Finland, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia. Of these five are already in the EU with three waiting to join. Belgium, Greece, Finland and Portugal have the euro; the others do not. Some are multicultural (e.g. the UK), others are still monocultural (e.g. Finland, Poland) but becoming more ethnically diverse.

The research methodology was both qualitative and quantitative. 192 children, 24 in each country, were interviewed altogether. 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. 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 different ethnic groups, asking them 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 prefer to sit by 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. In a bid to understand their knowledge of their own state's democratic processes, they were asked about their country's rulers and political processes. Interviews were tape recorded with the

children's permission and have been analysed using constant comparative technique (Miles and Huberman 1984.)

## **Findings**

Key findings from the UK are reported here: they are then compared with findings from the other seven countries. A fuller version of the findings from these countries can be found in Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2002.

The four focus schools in the UK were located in the South West of England. They ranged from a small village primary school with children from mainly farming backgrounds to an inner city school with pupils from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The 24 pupils (twelve from each age group) were selected to ensure a balance of gender and socio-economic background. Whilst these findings cannot be said to be representative of children across the UK, they do tell us about a group of children at a particular time and place and as such, may raise questions for teachers about the knowledge and understanding of their own pupils.

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

All of the white children considered themselves to be British, but whether or not the younger children from ethnic minorities considered themselves to be British appeared to depend on information from their parents. Two of the 7 year olds from an inner-city school were of Jamaican origin: one said she was British because 'my mum told me I am', but another said her mum and dad had explained that she was 'three-quarters Jamaican and one quarter British'. An older Sikh boy said he was definitely British, whereas a girl in his class felt 'more Jamaican'.

The children overwhelmingly identified language as the key feature which made them typically British. A 7 year old of Greek origin said her own children would 'be British for a start but then if I teach them Greek they will be a little bit Greek'. As well as speaking the same language, some also mentioned that British children have the same clothes and like the same games or activities. These included computer games, music and sports. One child from a rural school said all British children were white, but he was contradicted by his peer who said that this was wrong as 'there are other colours. My friend is English and he's brown'.

#### *Children's perceptions of tolerance and difference*

When asked how children from other cultures and countries might be different (or similar), again it was language that was the defining feature, with some of the white children also mentioning colour. An 11 year old boy described a German family who came to his area of the south west every year on holiday: 'they talk differently, and they eat different things but they're not so much different, they have eyes and noses and mouths and hair'. The ethnic minority children from the inner-city school added that as well as having a different language, children from another culture might have 'different hair and some different religions and symbols'. The majority of the 24 children saw non-British children as being poorer materialistically, not owning computers or televisions.. This was especially true of children in less economically developed countries- an 11 year old girl thought that many children 'probably wouldn't know what a computer was if they lived in Kenya or somewhere like that because it's a poor country'. Others added that such children 'might have wars' in their country.

Most of the children had not been to any other countries (from which to obtain this knowledge). Four of the younger children were confused about parts of the UK and other countries: one said she had been to Bournemouth when asked about trips to other countries. Karanjah, the Sikh boy, said he had heard lots about India (his family's country of origin) but had never been there. He would definitely like to go there, he said, but 'they say there's a lot of rats there, fat ones, and lizards hanging off that fall in your dinner'. Thus even a child with immediate family connections to another country and culture shared the generally held view that other places were less desirable than the UK. This echoes previous research which indicates that many children in the UK hold negative images of other (particularly third world) countries, believing them to be poor and lawless (Scoffham, 1999).

Despite these negative views of other countries and cultures, 23 of the 24 children said they would welcome children from other cultures or countries into their school. There was a uniform enthusiasm for learning about the cultures of others and in particular learning another language. 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 it's like learning different stuff and different languages'. The exception was an 11 year old boy from an all white school who felt children from other cultures or countries could be a problem as they might 'have bad habits' and 'get into trouble more'. He felt that there were 'enough people in this school anyway'.

*Children's understanding of Europe and European identity*

Responses from the British children indicated that their knowledge of Europe was very limited. Only two of the twenty-four said they were European and few had any idea of what Europe might be. The younger children were very confused about which countries might be in Europe: three thought the USA was a part of Europe, ‘cos they speak our language’, while one was convinced that Portugal was a long way away ‘with kangaroos and polar bears’. Older children had more knowledge but this was often stereotypical- three said Belgian chocolates were all they knew about Belgium, and two described Greece as ‘hot with beaches’. Only two had heard of Hungary, Slovenia and Poland. One maintained that ‘Japan is definitely in Europe’ and two were again convinced that the USA was in Europe. Their knowledge was strongly influenced by recent school projects or current news. One group of younger children was able to relate in detail how bees were kept in India as a result of a recent project on this country, and many from both age groups were knowledgeable about Afghanistan as a result of ‘9/11’: the terrorist attack on New York’s twin towers.

The children had very little idea of what the EU represented, although most had heard of the euro. They were not at all sure if it would benefit the UK to join the euro or even if we should have closer ties with other European countries. One of the 11 year olds said that being in the EU would benefit us if we went to war, but a child from a farming family pointed out that foot and mouth disease could have been caused by ‘the transport of animals... because we take quite a bit of food from other countries’ so it might be better if England had less trading with Europe. A few thought the introduction of the euro would be a good idea but many did not want to lose the pound which, as the younger children pointed out, ‘we’ve just learnt about’. An 11 year old thought old people ‘might get confused’ and for him ‘everyone’s happy with

it, so why change it?'. These findings reflect a recent ICM survey of 18-24 year olds, who knew 'little or nothing about the EU' (TES, 2002).

### *Children's political literacy and their role as young citizens*

The children's knowledge of the UK parliamentary system was a little better than their understanding of the EU but was still mainly limited to knowing that 'there are elections when you vote'. Many children from both age groups thought the UK was run by the queen and Tony Blair, with two 7 year olds claiming that 'the prime minister lives with the queen' so he can 'help her'. An 11 year old explained: 'well the prime minister sorts everything out and he goes to all the debates ... and the queen is just ordering... well not ordering but just making sure everything is alright when it happens'. Two children thought Bush was the prime minister of the UK, whilst some could not name any political leaders. All said that they were not taught about these things in school apart from a special assembly if there was an election going on, but the older children were adamant that they ought to be taught these things as 'it affects our future'. Many thought this would be part of the curriculum in secondary school.

In summary, the majority of the UK children held common values (tolerance towards others, willingness to learn from other cultures) but the origin of the child (and the beliefs of their parents) affected his or her sense of identity. Knowledge and understanding of Europe was limited. Very few knew anything about the countries mentioned, some thought the USA was in Europe and none had any understanding of the EU. Knowledge of the British parliamentary system was also limited.



### **Summary of findings from the seven other countries**

The results from the other seven countries showed many similarities: in all cases language was seen as the first determinant of national identity, followed by clothes, customs and in some cases, skin colour. The majority of the children were open to meeting children from different cultures and countries, wanting to learn new languages and games. Only two Belgian children echoed the British boy in the rural school, saying they did not like refugee children (from Kosovo and Chaldea) joining in their games because they did not understand the rules. Parents came across as influential: many children were keen to spend a weekend with a child from another country or culture but were not sure if their parents would approve. Whereas the British children felt that other children might be materially less well off than them, two Portuguese children said they themselves were poorer than children in other countries and some Slovenian children thought that children in both Africa and Japan might be unhappy due to hunger and overly rigorous schools.

The majority of the children from these seven countries felt themselves to be European, either because they knew they were geographically in Europe or because they had the euro. Polish children talked about eating European food, wearing European clothes and having European customs whilst Portuguese children mentioned a common past and cultural heritage. However, like the British children, their geographical knowledge of the countries of Europe was not good, and again some thought that the USA was part of Europe. Many knew more about Japan, Afghanistan and the USA than they did about other European countries. Few had travelled: most of their information about other cultures came from what they had learnt from tourists

to their own country. Slovenia, Hungary and Poland were the least known about countries.

Like their British counterparts, the children from the seven countries did not know much about how their country was governed, with the exception of Greece where pupils were more knowledgeable as civics was taught to older primary pupils. Some of the older Finnish and Polish pupils could talk about the difference between democracy and monarchy, but most could not go beyond this. Belgian children, like the British, confused the role of monarch and parliament. Most of the children watched the news on TV only occasionally: the exception was the older children in Belgium who watched it most days as it was required for their 'world orientation' course at school.

## **Discussion**

This article started by asking three questions. These will now be taken in turn and discussed in relation to the findings.

### *How can schools help foster a sense of national and European identity?*

Most of the children in all eight European countries had a sense of national identity, but the fact that in both Greece and the UK some children from ethnic minority groups were unsure of their identity, has implications for teachers. Before we can talk about European identity, we need to ensure that children first of all understand their own national identity and that they feel a sense of belonging to their country. It would seem, then, that there is a place for our schools to help children establish a sense of what it is to be British and help them understand that our nation is composed of

people from many cultures. This has particular implications for Britain where there is currently a debate on the dangers of ‘overburdening’ or ‘swamping’ schools with refugee children. In this study those with the most exposure to children from other cultures (i.e. the inner city children) were in fact the most tolerant: they welcomed children from other countries or cultures in their school and felt they could learn from them. This may lend weight to the argument that refugee children should be educated alongside their peers, to the benefit of both groups. The few children who were dismissive of those from other cultures came from mono-cultural areas. This raises questions about how we can help children understand and respect those from cultures other than their own. Our study suggests that it would be fruitful to foster more links between children in mono-cultural and multi-cultural areas both within countries and across national borders. There may also be a place for specific teaching on issues connected with stereotyping and racism within personal, social and citizenship education.

*What approaches in the primary school can help children learn about the people and geography of Europe?*

Whilst the majority of the UK children (and most of those in the seven other countries) held positive attitudes towards children from other cultures or countries, nonetheless they had very limited knowledge of the geography and peoples of Europe. This may be indicative of the way that geography has been squeezed out of the English primary curriculum in recent years, with the pressure to cover mathematics and literacy. There is inspection evidence that ‘problems of coverage’ are ‘particularly marked in design and technology, art, music and geography’ (OFSTED 2002, 2). Even where geography is taught effectively, the current emphasis is on ‘a locality in

the UK and a locality in a country that is less economically developed' (DfEE/QCA 1999). This means that many schools teach a local area in the UK and then 'leap' across Europe to study a country in Africa, Asia or the Caribbean. This is not to decry a study of the latter, but to argue that we should not neglect our closest neighbours, especially at a time when the countries of Europe (the UK included) are striving for greater integration.

The current campaign for more creativity in primary schools (TES 2003) also calls for a more cross curricular approach where teaching combines numeracy and literacy with projects which engage children's interest and relate to the modern world. We would suggest that learning about other children and their lifestyles, i.e. giving more time to both physical and human geography and the related field of citizenship is one way forward. This needs to cover not just the study of less economically developed countries but also countries in Europe. Children can learn about themselves as Europeans and their fellow European citizens, both in terms of geography and history, art and culture. Such a cross-curricular approach would enable teachers to link teaching about a European country with teaching about its languages and stories. The majority of the British children in our study displayed an interest in learning new languages and there is evidence that learning about European countries through their languages and stories can increase children's understanding of that culture (Holden and Wilson, 2003). This does not mean that we should have teachers of Spanish or Greek (for example) in our schools but rather that looking at the stories and languages of such countries can provide opportunities for the beginnings of an appreciation of other cultures and an interest in languages.

*How can we help children understand the role of government, both in their own country and in the EU?*

The lack of political literacy on the part of the British children, which was echoed across most of the other seven countries also raises questions. The impact of the school curriculum was evident. Only the Greek children in the survey had been taught about political institutions and it was they who were most knowledgeable about such institutions. Only Belgian children included reference to the day's news and only there did children regularly watch news bulletins. If we wish to have children aware of the importance of our democratic institutions, our European heritage and what is happening in the world, then again we must make time for such topics. Geography offers one such possibility- the other is the recent introduction of education for citizenship in England. This advises that children are taught 'to research, discuss and debate topical issues.... (and) what democracy is, and about the basic institutions that support it' (DfEE/QCA 1999). The fact that the British children in our study knew about '9/11' and to some extent about what was happening in Afghanistan, as well as being aware of the euro, indicates that they are picking up on some 'topical issues'. With the advent of education for citizenship there are many opportunities for schools to go beyond circle time, to tackle controversial, topical issues and to teach some of the basics about our political institutions. (Clough and Holden, 2002).

Whilst our sample was only small, it would seem to suggest that many of today's young Europeans have a tolerance and openness to others and are keen to learn more about their language, customs and culture. Indeed we appear to have a group of civic minded young people who show 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 country and in Europe and specific human knowledge about other people, their language and cultures. If all education is for the future and the future of Britain lies in Europe, then we owe it to our young people to redress this balance and prepare them for an active role as European citizens, knowledgeable not just about their fellow Europeans but also about their own role as future voters and stake holders.

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**Note:** the eight countries participating in this research are all members of the Erasmus Thematic Network Project, Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe (CiCe), co-ordinated by Prof. Alistair Ross at London Metropolitan University.

Other projects which focus on linking children across Europe are:

Speak Out on Europe: [www.citizen.org.uk/speakout/](http://www.citizen.org.uk/speakout/)

ESchola- Learning Together; [www.eun.org](http://www.eun.org)

Euro.Geo. Project: [www.eurogeo.org](http://www.eurogeo.org)