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## **Experiencing the European Dimension in Education: The Role of Interaction and Socialisation amongst Secondary School Students at Three European Schools**

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### **Background**

European societies have undergone profound changes as a result of devolution and regionalisation on the one hand, and ever-increasing processes of European integration and globalisation on the other. These overlapping processes have resulted in high levels of migration flows and mobility as people move across Europe for employment opportunities and study. European nation-states have consequently become increasingly characterised by cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. In recent years, tensions and conflicts amongst the different communities in Europe have escalated, as seen in the immigrant riots in France in 2005, the Danish 'caricature conflict' when Danish newspapers published an image of Mohammed that was very offensive to many Muslims, and the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005 (Georgi, 2008). As such, a key challenge to both national and European-level political systems is how to maintain social cohesion and a sense of solidarity amongst citizens, many of whom have multiple identities, beliefs, and value systems.

Education has a crucial role to play in enabling young people to become active citizens, engaged in politics and policy-making at local, national, European and international levels. In this complex era characterised by globalisation and super-diversity, schools need to provide students the opportunity to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to live and work together in diverse contexts. Students need to be able to explore, understand, and accept their multiple identities, particularly as citizens at these various levels, and to come to understand and respect the identities and cultures of others.

The European Schools, of which there are today fourteen in seven EU countries, were set up in the 1950s to provide the children of EU employees, who had moved to take up their new posts in the European Coal and Steel Community, with an education in their mother tongue that would be similar to that of their native country. Since their inception, the underlying ethos of these schools has been to maintain students' national identities as well as to cultivate the European idea and unite Europeans through the promotion of a common European identity (Swan, 1991, 1996; Hayden & Thompson, 1997). Indeed, the mission statement of the European Schools states that these children of diverse cultures should learn to respect each other, to live together in harmony, to learn that they 'belong together' and 'to become in mind Europeans [...] to bring into being a united and thriving Europe' (EC, 1977).

### **Research Questions**

This paper, based on an ESRC-funded research project completed at the University of Oxford, focuses specifically on the opportunities provided to students at three of the European Schools, located in England, Belgium, and Spain, to interact and socialise with one another. It looks at how the European dimension in education is influencing their attitudes and behaviours towards one another. It considers how students react to attempts to get them to integrate and mix with one another, looking in particular at their friendship patterns, issues around stereotyping and prejudice, language issues, and their sense of European identity and citizenship.

### **Methods**

The methodology for this project was based on a multiple case study design, carried out within the historical-philosophical tradition of comparative education. This approach draws on Bereday's (1964) four-step framework, which involves the description of educational systems and practices in one or

more countries followed by the interpretation of this information, the 'juxtaposition' of the data in order to determine similarities and differences, and comparison. The research has drawn on some of the techniques of ethnographic research, including semi-structured interviews with head teachers and teachers, individual and focus group interviews with pupils, documentary analysis, and participant observation.

### **Frame**

The data were analysed according to the thematic categories that emerged, and pupils' narratives of their socialisation patterns, attitudes, and identities were informed by aspects of social constructionist, postmodernist, and poststructuralist notions of multiple, hybrid, shifting, contingent identities that are constructed through social interaction and discourse (Bhaba, 1990, 1996; Hall, 1990, 1992, 1996).

### **Research findings**

The research findings reveal that providing young people with opportunities to be in meaningful contact with one another is a key element of the European dimension in education. The European schools provide many opportunities for these children from diverse European backgrounds to integrate and interact with one another. The research evidence also reveals the importance of having good language skills, which enables students to communicate and interact with pupils of different languages and nationalities. Those students who speak a greater number of languages feel confident in using them in their daily interactions and have greater success in forming friendships across national, cultural, and linguistic lines (Savvides, 2008). It is through such interactions, which take place both during lessons and outside of them that pupils learn about each others' cultures and languages. There are times when students face cultural clashes and tensions and when stereotypes about certain nationalities are reinforced. However, on the whole, students develop tolerant attitudes and challenge their pre-held stereotypes, forming an open-mindedness and adaptability that should enable them to live and work in diverse settings. In addition, students are in a space where they are able to mediate between cultures and hybridise their multiple and multidimensional identities.