

Educational Leadership in Europe

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Education systems are one of the most explicit and direct manifestations of national cultures, identities and social and economic priorities. Indeed almost every component of a school system is subject to a wide range of variations that reflect historical, cultural and economic priorities. Within Europe, education systems have so far been immune from the sort of trans-European initiatives that have influenced political, economic, financial and legal systems and structures across the European Community. This paper seeks to contribute to a debate about the aspects of education in Europe that are not specific to one system and which may form the basis for a deeper discussion of issues that transcend national boundaries and school systems.

It is not the purpose of this think piece to speculate on the issues surrounding possible standardisation or integration of education systems. The principle of subsidiarity clearly prevents such moves with education being seen as a classic example of an area which should be the preserve of national systems. However it could be argued that there are a number of super ordinate issues which transcend national systems in that they reflect the historical, geographical, cultural, political, economic and ethical dimensions of what it means to be a European.

While subsidiarity does emphasise the importance of locating authority at the lowest appropriate level it also implicitly recognises that there are some issues which are properly the concern of transnational bodies. These are recognised as certain fundamental rights which are properly the domain of supra national bodies. It might be that there are generic aspects of the educational process which fall into this category. Thus the freedom of speech has wide acceptance as a human right but is subject to a number of significant variations at national level e.g. the status of freedom of information in the USA and the UK.

The gradual emergence of the concept of Europe since 1945 has been in sharp contradistinction to the previous 150 years which saw the dominance of nationalism and the creation of national identity and the nation state as the key political imperative.

This did not really diminish recognition of economic and political interdependency and a cultural and moral heritage that transcended national interests and preoccupations. It is this latter area that it might be possible to find a degree of consensus as to the nature of what it means to be European and so a component of education that can be identified as common to all systems and thus an appropriate area of concern for educational leaders.

Until the late 18th century, the internal boundaries of Europe were largely linguistic with borders being shown by dots rather than lines to reflect the permeability of national identities.

The changes in travel and communication, made possible by cheap-fare airlines and all forms of electronic messaging promise a return to a Europe of dots rather than lines. (This paper is a product of email and low cost airlines.)

A liberal consensual view of Europe would stress diversity and eclecticism as positive virtues and the thoughtful debates about the nature of Europe stress the accommodation of apparent contradictions. There is unity in diversity in many areas of common concern increasingly fostered by an awareness of the impact of globalization that paradoxically has forced a simultaneous awareness of wider and narrower horizons. The growth in the membership of the community has been paralleled with an increasing awareness of regional identity and aspirations. The growth in the membership of the community in 2004 makes it even more important to have a meaningful debate on the nature of a European identity and the role of education in fostering such an identity.

Central to this debate is the role of educational leadership. For the purpose of this discussion, leadership is perceived as a higher order activity that has as its primary concerns:

- The ethical principles of the educational process
- The creation of education for the future
- The integrity of human relationships.

Used in this sense leadership has an over arching responsibility for matters which are concerned with fundamental educational principles as well as the responsibility for managing the implementation of national policies. Of course, this is an artificial dichotomy; leadership and management are two sides of the same coin but without the recognition of the higher order responsibilities of leadership management can become instrumental, reductionist and pragmatic. There are multiple permutations of the nature and purpose of leadership. In the context of this debate, a number of propositions can be advanced; leadership is fundamentally concerned with:

- Creating a shared sense of purpose
- Inspiring and enthusing
- Securing engagement with a shared vision
- Recognising the emotional dimension of work
- Creating authentic relationships
- Securing motivation and sustained performance
- Ensuring the moral integrity of professional work

This is to argue that leadership has responsibilities over and above institutional system and national concerns. If this proposition is accepted then it becomes necessary to argue for the specific components of the ethical principles that might inform a debate about the European, common, component of educational leadership. In one sense there is already a hegemony based on the Judaeo-Christian tradition that is shared by all current members of the European Union.

Even secular states have legal systems, social mores and political expectations which are explicitly derived from this common source.

These principles are largely reflected in the underpinning assumptions guiding the work of the European Community:

- The primacy of the rule of law
- The centrality of democratic institutions
- The right to freedoms of speech and association
- The right to employment and economic security
- The right to education

These principles make a number of fundamental ethical assumptions that have historically been associated with the most basic questions about the nature and purpose of education in society. At the most fundamental level, this is a debate about equity and entitlement. It could be argued that the preoccupation of national education systems in the last two decades with standards and performance have diminished the capacity of educationalists to relate their work to the more fundamental issues of educating. All societies make choices between a limited range of options. The debate for educational leaders is both about what choices should be made and how they should be made. The transversal policies of the Union provide a focus on issues that are perceived to be implicit to educational activities i.e.

- Promote equal opportunities between women and men
- Promote equal opportunities for disabled persons
- Contribute to the fight against racism and xenophobia
- Promote social and economic cohesion
- Promote ICT in education
- Promote language learning and teaching.

It is difficult to envisage any national education system that would not implicitly and explicitly espouse and promote these policies, but they might do so from a national perspective. There might also be a case for arguing that there are some issues that transcend European issues, i.e. those with global implications such as climate change, population growth, poverty, disease, starvation and international security. This is not to deny the very real issues in moving the debate about leadership out of specific cultural contexts. Leadership is a social construct informed by a wide range of situational variables. Both within and between systems there will be significant variation in terms of organisational maturity, models of accountability and the inherent security and success of the system.

The issue therefore is to find a common approach which is not dependent on an anodyne consensus but rather actively promotes a distinctively European perspective which is based on fundamental cultural norms. It might be possible to summarise such an approach in the concept of liberal humanism, a philosophy rooted in tolerance, mutual respect and an aspiration to work towards rationality and objectivity.

This could lead to a consideration, by educational leaders, of shared values based on a common cultural heritage which might include such elements as:

- The shared inheritance of the ancient world, notably Rome and Greece;
- The fundamental influence of the Jewish and Christian traditions;
- Creativity in the arts;
- Invention and discovery in the sciences, recognising the Arab contribution;
- The humanistic tradition;
- The tradition of exploration and entrepreneurship;
- The radical questioning of norms and beliefs;
- Tolerance and acceptance of diversity.

Of course, for each of these there is a negative corollary and Europe has demonstrated its capacity for intolerance and exploitation more than most of the rest of the world. However, this list might serve as starting point for a debate that seeks to extend the current boundaries of educational leadership beyond organizational integrity and limited definitions of success to a discussion of the principles that should inform the creation of educational systems for the future. The great danger is that the future of education in Europe will be the result of short-term bureaucratic incrementalism rather than values based strategic thinking. The creation of a model of European educational leadership may therefore be seen as a genuine educational process based on the creation of a shared understanding of a common cultural and intellectual inheritance rather than the promulgation of bureaucratic consistency. This would mean the development of a leadership 'curriculum' which is as much concerned with the development of cultural understanding as with the professional knowledge necessary to lead schools.

Issues for discussion

1. What does it mean to be a European?
2. To what extent does the principle of subsidiarity compromise any moves towards a European perspective on education?
3. Is there a consensus as to what constitutes educational leadership as opposed to management or policy implementation?
4. Is there a meaningful shared understanding as to what it means to be an educator in modern Europe?
5. What are the implications of the approach proposed in the think piece for the education of educational leaders?
6. What are the barriers to any attempt at a common approach?
7. What might a 'curriculum' for European educational leaders look like?
8. How might the emphasis on the European dimension be mediated so that it does not diminish the significance of the global?

Note: This think piece grew out of a keynote given by John West-Burnham at the ESHA Conference in Tallinn, Estonia in 2002. The debate that was generated led to the British Council funding a seminar that was held in Prague in 2003.

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