

PUBLIC HEARING "Best Practices for Arts Education in Schools."

Monday, December 5, 2022, (16:00 - 18:00).

European Parliament, Brussels

Speech by Michael Wimmer:

European citizenship through arts and culture

On the initiative of the Czech Republic, which holds the EU Presidency this fall, the European Parliament's Committee on Education and Culture (CULT) held a public hearing on "Best practices in the teaching of arts in schools". This two-hour event featured a number of initiatives from selected arts schools, particularly in the Czech Republic, Spain and Italy, while the head of the Schools and Multiculturalism Unit in DG Education and Culture spoke about the status quo of the European Commission's programs related to arts education efforts. Unfortunately, only a small number of Members of Parliament were present. No guidance was given on how to deal with the issue in the future.

My role in this event was to give some indications of the dramatically changing context in which arts education is taking place in Europe today.

Let me start by telling you about a school on the outskirts of Vienna: Himberg is a very ordinary place where mainly people from the lower middle class live. Among them, too, there are fears of growing unemployment caused by deindustrialization. Colleagues talk about social problems in families, there is a pressure to migrate. It's no wonder that young people are confronted with uncertain prospects for the future.

In this small town there is a school that has successfully learned to be relevant to the local population. The best thing that can be said about the school is that the young people do not want to leave as soon as possible; on the contrary, they want to come even on weekends. For them, the school has become an important social space to meet, relax, exchange ideas, gain experience and be creative.

The teaching team, together with the principal, has transformed the school to make it an attractive learning environment for young people. With the approval of the state education authority, colleagues have adapted the normal curriculum. School life at Himberg is characterized by a flexible schedule: Regular classes in the tradition of frontal knowledge transfer are as short as possible (max. 30 min); thereafter, "real" learning takes place in a variety of inclination groups across different age levels, which can deal with chess, soccer, philosophy, local economy, ecology, job application, theatre, health care, limnology, traffic, painting or whatever the students suggest. To facilitate this variety of offerings, the school collaborates with local institutions and experts of all kinds (including an artist in residence), making the school an open learning centre where aesthetics is a living force of every learning process.

After this local snapshot, I would like to start with reflections based on the assumption that a comprehensive transformation process is underway in Europe. Since the flare-up of a series of crises, uncertainties in all sectors of society have been creating dark clouds over the future, breaking the national optimism of increasing segments of national societies. The result is increasing polarization, dividing defences and all those who see the current transformation as an opportunity to fill positive

perspectives with appropriate content. While a majority is convinced of continuing the prevailing hegemony, a growing number of contemporaries are convinced that we must fundamentally question the pursuit of a one-way street, Fe in terms of the belief in eternal economic growth. Instead of blind continuation, unleashing resilience, imagination, courage will be crucial for the continent's further development.

This is even more true for our ability to meet the ecological challenge. Quite a challenge, especially for schools, when assumptions are becoming more and more plausible that the next generation must not only be prepared to meet the needs of labour markets (which no one knows what they will look like in a few years). But rather, they deserve the chance to learn about the world that is more than a warehouse of products to be consumed. What is needed is a new attitude toward conceptual terms like "culture" or "nature," which can only be negotiated through aesthetic codes that stimulate all our senses. The most important message for schools: Young people can only participate in the world if they have the opportunity to co-create these codes as a means of shared understanding in a diverse society.

Contradictory concepts of school education

Against a necessary (and, as we know, overdue) reinvention of public schooling stand strong forces of institutional inertia (evolution from teacher schools to student schools) within the European school system. The influence of those who, in times of growing insecurity, believe that schools must serve the needs of 19th century industrial society more than ever. Especially after the pandemic, there has been a significant educational backlash: The so-called "Nuremberg funnel" as the main didactic tool finds its revival by cramming students with knowledge to be repeated in exams and tests.

The consequences: The stronger the defences, the weaker the willingness to seek alternative learning spaces. As a result, the school fears losing its monopoly as the preeminent site of a shared public sphere, making its approaches to comprehensive personality development increasingly irrelevant.

New trends in the world of the arts

In the world of the arts, art production, mediation and reception are valued as a highly professional field in a diverse and socially fragmented society. They rely on an elaborate cultural infrastructure (usually privileged by the state, but used only by a minority of the national population). Like their counterparts in other sectors of society, their representatives are currently suffering the consequences of the pandemic and already have serious deficiencies from earlier times. Confronted with the changing cultural behaviour of people who have learned to navigate a hybrid world (constant switching between analog and digital approaches), their fears of being marginalized with their traditional offerings are justified.

It is an advantage in the current transformation that we have a lot of experience from at least 30 years of school development. They have carefully implemented and tested contemporary concepts of school that are student-centred, problem-based, cross-curricular, project-based and integrative.

And we are confronted with a new understanding of art. A new generation of artists is defending their work not only as a contribution to concepts of "l'art pour l'art" of a better past, but as a powerful force in the current transformation process. New tendencies like "artivism" (Peter Weibel) believe in the arts as cross-sectoral interventions, leaving their traditional silos that exclude them from the everyday life of ordinary people. And they intervene in all kinds of social disputes. And so, too, in education.

In this way, the arts are implementing a long-neglected cultural policy advance, born as early as the 1970s, that all members of society (and thus all students) are cultural beings and thus actively participate in the advancement of what constitutes "culture." Not just the lucky few consumers of high culture. This is a cultural challenge with serious consequences not only for cultural institutions, but also for the school system.

Schools as cultural institutions in the full sense

My most important recommendation, therefore, concerns a new wave of cultural school development: such an emancipated understanding of "culture" must find its counterpart in the school system. This means abandoning the idea of categorically separating science, language and art, thus pushing the arts or music to the margins of the curriculum in two weekly lessons, without any significant effects.

Here is also a note regarding the ecological crisis: since it is itself a cultural phenomenon, it cannot be addressed by separating "nature" and "culture" as distinct subjects of learning. Instead of these old traditions of teaching isolated packages of knowledge, it is high time to reposition schools as open places where new ways of experiencing the world can be established that consider that learners are always both natural and cultural beings.

As an example of good practice, I would like to mention the "Kulturschulen in Hesse/Germany" program: There, the arts are no longer represented somewhere on the margins of the curriculum, but are an integral part of everything that happens in the school. In addition, the cultural schools serve as an open community centre that collaborates with all kinds of initiatives and institutions in the community, welcomes people from outside and brings in their expertise to negotiate issues relevant to civil society with young people.

What arts education can contribute to European citizenship

Today we are thrown back on the revival of what we call European values - the recovery of future perspectives within the framework of participation, democracy and human rights in the context of diverse societies.

The Austrian writer Robert Musil proposed to distinguish the world into spaces of reality and spaces of possibility. Within this framework of thought, schools can be anchored in society as public spaces where reality and possibility can be brought into a productive relationship in which the future of both learners and teachers can be credibly and convincingly anticipated. The arts can be crucial in this regard in practices that playfully yet seriously combine a critical understanding of what is with knowledgeable and reasoned assumptions about a better future.

Following this approach, the future of European civil society will depend on contemporary schools as open learning centres where European citizenship can be practiced practically and future can be experienced in a playful yet actionable way by connecting questions of "nature" with questions of "culture."

In such an environment, the arts are crucial, as they connect the rational, emotional and affective dimensions of any learning process. They are an excellent way to create an attitude of students as an active part of the European civil society, even if a growing number of obstacles pave the way to the future in which they can and will play an active role.

How to support such a new wave of cultural school development - this is primarily a question of educational and cultural policy. In this context, the influence of national policy makers, but also of members of the European Parliament, cannot be overestimated.

It is also up to you to make Himberg not only a rare beacon in the great sea of an outrageous mainstream, but the new flexible and ambitious normality of school in Europe.