

What Are the Values that Will Guide the Development of Children and Young People in Our Schools?

Conference of European Ministers of Education

Grand Hotel, 5. June 2008

© Inga Bostad

[The objectives: foundation and framework]

What are the values that will guide the development of children and young people in our schools? Is it possible to agree on a basic set of ethical and moral standards now that will pave the way for a more tolerant, empathetic, and cohesive society in the future? The collective objectives and principles—generally referred to as “the objectives”—for kindergarten, primary and secondary educations, and training establishments, have both a functional and symbolic role. They describe the framework for the statutes and guidelines that follow them at the same time that they are an expression of our society’s norms and values.

The objectives function as the point of departure for practice in kindergartens and schools. This means that they, first and foremost, affect all children and young people who attend kindergarten, primary and secondary education, and training. They describe the basic roles and obligations for staff, parents, guardians, and other interested parties.

[The task]

The Bostad committee was appointed on June 2nd, 2006 with a mandate to analyse and evaluate the current objectives with an eye to making suggestions for necessary changes or writing entirely new objectives. The committee was instructed to give special consideration to several areas: the development of society through increased internationalisation and diversity; wording linked to the Christian value base; and changes in the educational system toward a more holistic and long-sighted educational continuum from kindergarten through high school.

The committee was also asked to consider the need to look at the objectives for kindergarten and education in relation to one another. Finally, we were asked to contribute to a broad debate about the objectives, and to make concrete suggestions during the process.

[The challenges]

The recent history of the objectives shows that they have often been an arena for political grandstanding, occasionally with polarisation and a lack of constructive compromise as the result. The committee is of the opinion that this type of polarisation is unfortunate, and that it has contributed to undermining the legitimacy of these statements and decreased their ability to function as a framework for the institutions that they are meant to serve.

The committee also finds it regrettable that the objectives governing basic education in Norway are known as “the Christian preamble,” and that nearly all discussion of the objectives is reduced to the word, “Christian”. This has contributed to creating a schism between the intention of the objectives and their function. It has also contributed to the decision in many schools—to a greater or lesser degree—to ignore the objectives as a foundation for institutional practice.

Modernising the objectives entails that one takes the challenges and opportunities that a modern society is confronted with seriously in terms of plurality and diversity—but also requires a different perspective on knowledge and competency in society. For the objectives for kindergarten, education, and training to reflect the diversity of modern Norwegian society, we must combine respect for differing viewpoints as well as willingness to compromise. It is crucial to recognise that there are many different perspectives on questions of values, identity, culture, belief, and personal philosophy. That is, simply put, the way it is in society, and the reason that the committee included a wealth of diverse viewpoints among its members. At the same time, it is necessary to recognise the importance, in a pluralistic community, for everyone to compromise a little without losing the essential aspects of themselves in the process. When people who hold different religious, ethical, cultural, and political perspectives live together, the ability, courage, and will to enter into constructive dialog is essential—even, or especially, where difficult and emotionally charged questions concerning values and religion, or culture and identity, are concerned. With a constructive and inclusive dialog as a foundation, it is possible to build a platform for democracy and peaceful society.

[The process]

The committee’s recommendation is unanimous, that is to say that there is not a minority and majority opinion worked into the proposal. The committee members have differing principle points of view about various aspects of the objectives, but have none-the-less come to a consensus on a recommendation for new objectives for kindergarten and general education.

The committee emphasizes that there should be no points of contention in the objectives of such important public institutions as kindergarten and basic education. The committee has, therefore, chosen to give the primary points in their recommendation a very high degree of visibility. This has been done to show both that, with a commitment to dialog and compromise, one can work out solutions that recognise disagreement within the framework of a consensus, and to strengthen the legitimacy and credibility of the committee’s recommendation. Consensus implies that most parties are in agreement about most issues, and that all parties do not necessarily agree about everything. The committee believes that this is a good starting point if the objectives are to include—and seem relevant to—as many groups and individuals as possible in kindergartens, schools, and training establishments.

[The results]

The committee’s proposals for the objectives for the future express a set of values that the greatest majority can support—whatever their cultural, religious, or national background may be. At the same time, there is recognition for both that, in Norway, these values are formed out of a Christian and Humanistic tradition and that they can

be formulated differently through different religions or philosophies. Moreover, it is emphasised that these values are anchored in human rights.

[Underlying values]

The foundational values must be expressed in such a way that the greatest majority can support them and feel themselves to be equally included in society and its institutions. The committee wishes, therefore, to discontinue the tradition that these clauses are based on the values of one religion and belief system. Rather, the committee wishes to see the basic values of education represent principles that can be supported by the broadest spectrum of groups and individuals in society, regardless of their religions or belief systems—and regards this as an historic opportunity to see it done.

”Human dignity” is named first and is the foundation for all of the values that follow. “Human dignity” is cited in the introduction and first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and is the basic value of most religions and belief systems. Intellectual freedom is a requirement for society’s cultural institutions—and both kindergartens and schools are cultural institutions. At the same time, in both society as a whole and in individual institutions, every individual must be met with respect for his or her ideological and religious beliefs. ”Charity,” ”Equality,” and ”Solidarity” are essential for human relationships, and complement each other with their different, but similarly focused, meanings.

[The Christian and Humanistic tradition]

The basic values in Norway grew out of a cultural context marked by a Christian and Humanistic tradition. The expression “Christian and Humanistic tradition” recognizes the historical and cultural influence that both Christianity and Humanism have had in the development of Norwegian society. When the committee chooses to use this expression, it is to emphasise that the two have historically complemented and corrected one another.

At the same time, the committee wishes to underline that the choice of values and traditions that are named in the objectives should not be interpreted as excluding other cultural traditions.

[Different religions and beliefs]

Kindergartens and schools operate in a society where religious and cultural diversity is more and more evident. The social perspective of the objectives should, in the committee’s view, reflect this diversity, both religion and belief have a place in the public sphere, and there is room for intellectual freedom in kindergarten and schools. A values-based education is a starting point for dialog, intellectual freedom, and respect for diversity. If the foundational values of education are to have legitimacy for all people as equals, it must be possible for children, students, parents, and staff with different religious and philosophical views and affiliations to support those values.

[Human rights]

The committee would like to use human rights as an anchor point for values and as a balance to religion. The Conventions on Human Rights are legal documents which describe the relationship between the state and individuals, and represent basic

values that have made a global breakthrough—in a very short period of time—as a common reference for ethical and political discussions.

The committee believes that its proposals are in complete compliance with Norway's responsibilities and commitments with regards to human rights. It has been important for the committee to assure the protection of an individual's right to intellectual and spiritual freedom as these are described in chapter 8 of the recommendation. The committee believes that the chosen formulations comply with the standards of human rights and are well suited to a modern, pluralistic society.

It is not enough that the objectives do not curtail or impede human rights—they should be based on the values of human rights and serve as a guide for the exercise and recognition of human rights in kindergarten and schools.

The committee has put a great deal of effort into formulating the values in the objectives such that they are in line with the requirements for freedom of religion and belief as set forth in the conventions and laws governing human rights. These are, after all, basic values that most people can support, regardless of their religious affiliations, at the same time that there is recognition that the values may be expressed and reasoned for differently in different religions and belief systems. There is not time here to go into detail about the other parts of the objectives, but you have received a copy of the text and will see that it is divided into three sections: the first section, which I have just talked about, is about foundational values; the second is about individual development—it considers the view of knowledge and learning that the objectives will build on, and what the institution's contribution to an individual's development will be; the third section covers the institutional aspect of how the objectives affect institutions in the day to day, as well as how the institution interacts with young people.

[Conclusion]

It has been important for me, during the course of this work, to work toward a set of objectives that will contribute to the development of individuals who are independent thinkers, yet who understand the importance of solidarity and have been equipped with the general education and knowledge necessary to contribute to the communities and social contexts in which they live. Society's double requirement that schools teach pupils both academic knowledge and values—guiding the individual's development while pursuing society's demand for competency—often subjects schools to a myriad of complex demands and pressures. There are many competing viewpoints and opinions that must be considered. Today in Norway, for example, we see a tendency towards changing educational goals. All too often, goals that are easy to achieve and measure are weighted more heavily than those that are not directly measurable.

The objectives for schools and kindergartens constitute a principle goal which is central to Norwegian education and, as such, should be given the attention that they deserve.

As Vice-Rector for Norway's largest university, I believe that it is important for us to build upon, and take responsibility for general, basic education. In that vein, I would like to cite two processes which are currently underway. First, we have set up a

general education committee for higher education that will build upon and integrate democracy and social understanding, critical reflection, and authority and independence in studies up to and including Ph.D. studies. Second, the University of Oslo, in cooperation with the largest of the other institutions of higher education in the area, is working on a new model for teacher education.

I am very proud of the work that the committee has accomplished in drafting a proposal for new objectives—the objectives represent solid values and express our drive to live up to the social ideals of Norwegian society, they are also a product of the type of constructive compromise that will only be more important as our world grows more connected and complex.

I would like to wish you all the best of luck with your work at this conference and beyond, and I hope that you enjoy your stay in Oslo.

Thank you.