

Forum on Minority Issues

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The main points which I hoped to raise in response to the Draft Recommendations, if the time allowed for each speaker has not been so drastically limited, are as follows:

1. The Draft is formulated in rather general terms which do not do justice to the very wide range of different types of minority. Nor do they provide as useful guidance to teachers in the classroom and educational administrators as to which approach may be most beneficial for the particular type or types of minority children in a school.
2. As a number of participants stressed, it is important to recognise and differentiate between the different circumstances and requirements of the full range of minorities which must be provided with quality education. The current Draft Recommendations focus heavily on 'national' minorities which are located in relatively large numbers in their place of origin or in well established settlement patterns. They do not adequately address the particular needs and practicalities in respect of dispersed minorities and immigrant or migrant minorities. In some of these cases there are only a few families or children of each language or cultural community in each school area. As a result it may be necessary to integrate a large number of different minority children in a single local primary school. Ideally each small group of children will be assisted by a bilingual teaching assistant in the initial stages of their primary education. But the objective will normally be to give them sufficient confidence in the dominant language within the school to enable them to participate in mixed classes. This issue is particularly relevant in many large European cities in which there may be children from 20 or 30 different linguistic groups in a single school. This will usually involve some element of separation into different classes on linguistic or ethnic grounds. Article 21 of the Draft Recommendations should recognise this.
3. Different issues may arise in deeply divided societies like that in Northern Ireland. Experience in Northern Ireland suggests that the provision of equal public funding for segregated schools for each major community may contribute to more general patterns of social segregation and sectarianism and ultimately to communal conflict. Given the high commitment to religious ethos in education in a society like this, an attempt to impose wholly secular schooling or joint religious instruction classes may not be acceptable to many parents. The provision of separate classes for religious instruction, and in Northern Ireland preparation for first communion, may be the best approach. There is a equivalent but slightly different issue in the Irish Republic where the vast majority of primary schools are controlled by the Catholic Church which currently insists on maintaining an exclusively Catholic ethos throughout the school curriculum, creating difficulties for many non-Catholic families and the increasing number of immigrants in many areas. In these circumstances a separation of the children into separate groups for these purposes may be the best approach.. Article 21 of the Draft Recommendations may again need to reflect this.

4. Attention may also be drawn to the fact that some parents and children from minority communities, particular in second and third generations of settlement, may prefer to integrate wholly with the dominant national language and culture rather than maintain their separate linguistic or ethnic identity. Examples of this were referred to by participants from Ecuador and Austria in their account of programmes designed to make education in a minority language compulsory in certain areas. The Draft Recommendations do not fully reflect this issue and could usefully emphasise that members of minority communities should not be deterred from abandoning their ethnic or linguistic origin and asserting their rights as undifferentiated citizens if they so wish. All the recent minority rights instruments assert clearly that membership of a minority is a matter of choice rather than allocation.
5. Some of these issues were developed in more detail in a paper for the Council of Europe Expert Committee on the Framework Convention on the protection of National Minorities in 2006. A copy is attached.
6. These considerations suggest that the Draft Recommendations should be revised at least to recognise more clearly that the same approach will not always be appropriate for each different type of minority and if possible to give some more explicit guidance on the most appropriate approach for each of the major types, in particular those resulting from current patterns of migration and the highly diverse communities which they give rise to in many major cities.

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