

Signposts published– Council of Europe promotes the religious dimension within intercultural education

It looks smart, the new publication of the Council of Europe (CoE) with the title: „Signposts – Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education.“



The cover shows signposts with symbols of different religions. The aim of the publication is to promote the implementation of a recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of 2008: „Dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education.“ (CM/Rec(2008)12). The recommendation summarizes activities of the CoE on intercultural education and the religious and non-religious convictions.

Signposts has been developed by an expert group between 2010 and 2014 and written by Prof. Robert Jackson on behalf of the group.

What is *Signposts* ?

- *Signposts* is written primarily for teacher trainers, teachers and policy makers
- *Signposts* covers issues arising from a recommendation from the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the Foreign Ministers of the 47 member states, on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education.
- *Signposts* aims to give policy makers, schools and teacher trainers in the 47 Council of Europe member states, plus others who wish to use it, the tools to work through key issues in the study of religions and non-religious worldviews in publicly funded schools in the context of a broad ‘intercultural’ education within their own countries.
- *Signposts* suggests practical ways forward and ideas for practice-based research.
- *Signposts* results from the work of an international panel of experts convened jointly by the Council of Europe and the European Wergeland Centre.
- *Signposts* is written by Professor Robert Jackson on the group’s behalf, following a survey of education ministries of member states, and consultation with stakeholders in a variety of countries.
- Full title: *Signposts: Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious worldviews in intercultural education*
- *Signposts* can be ordered at: <https://book.coe.int/eur/en/human-rights-education-intercultural-education/6101-signposts-policy-and-practice-for-teaching-about-religions-and-non-religious-world-views-in-intercultural-education.html>

Content: The book consists of ten chapters.

1. The recommendation: background issues and challenges
2. Introducing Signposts and its key themes (“Religion”; “Culture”; “intercultural education”; hints on different ways and differences in understanding religion and religious understanding; findings of a survey among member states)
3. Terminology associated with teaching about religions and beliefs
4. Competence and didactics for understanding religions
5. The classroom as a safe space (oriented on dialogue)
6. The representation of religions in the media
7. Non-religious convictions and world views
8. Human rights issues (and teaching about religions)
9. Linking schools to wider communities and organisations
10. Promoting further discussion and action

Messages: The book makes clear that intercultural education need to deal with religion and non-religious convictions in order to do justice to the increasing plurality of civilisations (cultures) and world views. Intercultural education without this dimension has a deficit. At the same time we have to take into account that education systems are complex entities, influenced by a variety of factors and levels. There can be no “European solution” readymade for all existing contexts in education. The book promotes national and local adapted initiatives and developments that aim to reflect the proposals in the recommendation in a critical way and to connect them with the given situation.

Perspectives. The final chapter (chapter 10) has the aim to encourage further debate and emphasises, that the whole book should be seen as „adaptable working text“ and not as an “inflexible framework.” The colloquy of ICCS and CoGREE beginning of October in Klingenthal near Straßburg will reflect with support of the European Wergeland Centre in Oslo about possible events and methods to encourage national initiatives concerning „Signposts“. First ideas include stake holder meetings and round tables to discuss concepts of intercultural education that take account of the religious dimension in a national context.

Council of Europe (2014): Signposts – Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education, Strasbourg, ISBN: 978-92-871-7914-2, 19 €: Order: www.coe.int in the bookshop printed or as pdf.

Selection of Quotes:

The next challenge (...) is to succeed in reaching higher levels, of operationalisation in the member countries. This cannot be achieved by applying a single, ready-made recipe, which does not exist, but rather by exploiting the recommendation and Signposts to trigger a broader process of dissemination, debate, contextualization, experimentation and well-targeted action research. (Gabrielle Mazza, p. 8)

Signposts points to the future and powerfully contributes to the Council’s priorities as a foundation block of the yet to be constructed broader conceptual and operational framework (...) in which democratic and civic competences (including intercultural skills) can be identified and made to contribute to the nurturing of democratic culture. (Gabrielle Mazza, p. 9)

The recommendation acknowledges diversity and complexity at local, regional and international levels, and encourages connections to be made between ‘local’ and ‘global’. It

also advocates the exploration of issues concerning religion and identity, and the cultivation of positive relations with parents and religious communities, as well as organisations which relate to non-religious philosophies. The intention, through whole-school policies and the curriculum, is to introduce young people to a plurality of positions and debates in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. (P. 16)

The recommendation is sensitive to the educational systems and practices in operation in member states, and attention is drawn to “the already existing best practices of the respective member states”. It is an adaptable reference text, and not an inflexible framework. Sensitivity is also shown to the fact that different approaches would be needed with young people of different ages, taking “into account the age and maturity of pupils. (P. 18)

Signposts is an aid to thinking through issues of teaching about religions and non-religious world views in different national contexts, raised by the recommendation. The document is called *Signposts* in order to emphasise its flexible nature. It is a tool to be used by educators and other stakeholders in member states, developing their own policies and approaches to teaching and learning about religions and beliefs in their own contexts, but taking into close account the principles, values and ideas expressed in the recommendation. (P. 21)

In relation to religions, it is not sufficient to teach about the history of religions, or about the outward phenomena of religions. Religion is not restricted to practices, artefacts and buildings. It is also necessary to attempt to understand the meaning of religious language as used by religious believers, including expressions of their beliefs, values and emotions. Such understanding requires knowledge, but it also requires certain attitudes and skills that raise self-awareness and awareness and understanding of the beliefs and values of others, as well as values affirming human dignity. (P. 21)

It is important, from the point of view of method, not to drive too sharp a distinction between techniques used by religious believers/practitioners in developing “religious understanding” and religious “outsiders” in attempting to “understand religions”. For example, both the fields of theology and religious studies draw on similar techniques and dispositions, such as attitudes, skills and knowledge associated with the process of “dialogue”. (P. 22)

The fundamental goal or aim of the religious dimension of intercultural education is to develop an understanding of religions. Such understanding is developed through gaining competence, which includes selected knowledge, developing and applying relevant skills, and cultivating appropriate attitudes, against a background of upholding certain values, including tolerance, respecting the right of others to hold a religious or non-religious stance, human dignity and civic-mindedness. (P. 33)

“The image of “safe space” for civil and well-ordered classroom interaction when discussing controversial issues such as religions has been considered. Insights from research on the study of religions in schools, especially recording young people’s views and classroom interactions, have been reviewed. The general conclusion is that there are suitable methods and procedures for making classrooms safer spaces, but all classroom interaction involves some degree of risk, especially when controversial issues are discussed and different claims to truth are made. This can be minimized by increasing teachers’ awareness of power relations within classes, their knowledge of the backgrounds of students and their awareness of relevant research findings. Moreover, there is evidence that young people’s confidence and ability to participate competently in classroom dialogue improves with practice. Regarding freedom of expression, the view is taken that controversial issues should be covered, but that all views expressed should be sensitive to the plurality of viewpoints within the school, to minority groups represented in the school and to the principles of democracy and human rights.” (P. 57)

Organised religions are considered as institutions set up by and involving citizens who have the right to freedom of religion, and are part of civil society. Religions thus have “potential for

providing guidance on ethical and civic issues, which have a role to play in national communities". Therefore, the Council of Europe welcomes and respects religion "in all its plurality, as a form of ethical, moral, ideological and spiritual expression of certain European citizens, taking account of the differences between the religions themselves and the circumstances in the country concerned" (Council of Europe 2007, paragraph 3). (P. 67)

Religious and non-religious convictions are diverse and complex phenomena; they are not monolithic. In addition, people hold religious and non-religious convictions to varying degrees, and for different reasons; for some such convictions are central and may be a matter of choice, for others they are subsidiary and may be a matter of historical circumstances. The dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education should therefore reflect such diversity and complexity at a local, regional and international level. (Council of Europe 2008a, appendix: paragraph 3) (P. 67)

Signposts has been written as an aid to policy makers, schools and teacher trainers in Council of Europe member states so that they can interpret and act upon the 2008 recommendation from the Committee of Ministers on teaching about religions and non-religious convictions. It is not meant as a blueprint, but as a tool for use in developing policy and practice to meet the needs of educators in member states. The aim is to encourage suitable approaches to teaching about religions and other world views which contribute to the intercultural education of all students, regardless of background. Signposts does not promote any particular religious or non-religious viewpoint, but aims to promote dialogue, learning from one another, deepening understanding of one's own and others' background and traditions, tolerance of different beliefs held by others in society, civility and respect for human dignity. (P. 99)

Religious education and education about religions and other world views takes place in an intercultural context, whatever the system in operation or the particular types of diversity to be found nationally or locally. It is hoped that specialists in both "confessional" and "non-confessional" systems of education involving religion can work collaboratively with others concerned with intercultural education, to contribute to the development of policies, teaching methods and materials relating to teaching about religions and other world views in schools within a framework that respects human dignity. (P. 100)

It is hoped that policy makers, schools, teacher trainers and other stakeholders in individual states will use Signposts, in combination with the Council of Europe recommendation, in a variety of ways. For example, Signposts can be used:

- as a basis for in-service training of teachers;
- as a tool for initial teacher training;
- as a basis for discussing policy at national, regional and local levels;
- by specialists in religious education who are looking for ways of incorporating a study of religious and cultural diversity into their programmes;
- by specialists in intercultural education, or by religious educators together
- with those working in citizenship education, intercultural education, human
- rights education or other areas of values education, working collaboratively;
- for targeted advice to raise the level of awareness of this topic for children, parents, teachers, policy makers, politicians and other members of society. (P. 100)