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Dominant Discourses and Policies of Multicultural European Countries on National Identity and Religion in Public Schools

Talip Kucukcan*

This article analyses relations between state, education and the project of nation building through selection and control of knowledge distributed and imparted in the formal educational setting in four countries: Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands. It is argued in this article that the logic of school organisation is underlined by selectivity and moral order of the schools which is embedded in the organisation of time and space, structural rituals, status hierarchies, membership categories and community life. This structural and organisational functioning lead to cultural conformity to the dominant cultural forms, customs and structures in society, if not reproduce them.

This article is an attempt to offer a comparative picture of how Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands construct and transmit dominant discourses through education. It analyses how diverse cultures, different self-imageries and perceptions are inculcated within the context of relations between state, education and the project of nation building in these countries. This article argues that structural and organisational functioning of the education system in Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands lead to cultural conformity to the dominant cultural forms, customs and structures in society, if not totally reproduce them.

In order to gain a sense of underlying features of dominant national civil cultures, I will analyse official discourses about the aims of education, the organisation of curriculum and selection of knowledge transmitted via public education system in Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands. Such an exercise will enable us to understand the trajectory and repertoire of dominant political discourses and their embodiment in the educational practices to impart a selected set of knowledge and reproduce ideal national civil culture in state schools if one understands education system as 'the sum total of the institutional or customary mechanism ensuring the transmission from one generation to another of the culture inherited from the past (i.e. the accumulated information)'. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:10)

Analysis of official discourses, politics of curriculum making and mechanism of knowledge selection and its control will also yield important clues as to the processes of nation building, codification of national imagery and portrayal of civil culture in education.

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There is no doubt that formal education may help promote a particular civil culture. One can argue that formal and institutionalised education have the means and the power to impose an idealised sense of belonging/identity and nation building project through reproduction and distribution of accumulated intellectual and cultural capital. If the school education is an influential agency then a number of questions require answers to contextualise the functioning of pedagogic action. For the purpose of this article which is to highlight, but not to essentialise, similarities and differences of dominant civil cultures in Germany, Britain, The Netherlands and France as represented in political discourses related to education and codified in selected textbooks, I will briefly address the questions of who controls the knowledge; who decides and selects the knowledge transmitted in schools; what are the forces shaping school knowledge; what is the level of state intervention in determining the school knowledge; how sectionalism/particularism is reflected in the accumulated information as distributed in schools?

In order to give answers to these questions we now have to turn to the four countries to see which agencies, forces and sections play important roles in shaping the curriculum. Here the curriculum is defined as a 'historically specific pattern of knowledge, which is selected, organised and distributed to learners through educational institutions'. (Kliebard, 1992: 181) The curriculum is an important site to reproduce the national imagery. Therefore as Brint (1998: 104) suggests 'propensities of social actors (such as the upper classes and the state) insofar as they are involved in curriculum making' are among the most important macro forces shaping school knowledge.

Broadly speaking curriculum in Germany is prescribed at the local state (länder) not at the national level due to the federal system in this country. As the educational structure is differentiated after primary schooling on academic, general and vocational basis not all students are required to follow the same curriculum. They follow a special curriculum designed for the type of school they attend and the course they pursue. In The Netherlands, a central regulation exists concerning the compulsory curriculum and its national planning as well as its organisation and content of teaching. Yet, much of the responsibility of its implementation is left to the education authorities at the local level. In France the compulsory curriculum is centralised and local educational authorities do not have much freedom curriculum planning and its implementation. (Kellagan and Madaus: 1995: 82-83) As for Britain, the curriculum was nationalised clearly imposing a selected content for compulsory teaching. The National Curriculum is predominantly state controlled in nature.

Construction of Civil Culture in National Curriculum

It is argued that education is deeply implicated in the politics of culture. The curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing

in the texts and classrooms of a nation. It is always part of a selective tradition, someone's selection, and some group's vision of a legitimate knowledge. The selection of knowledge, design of curriculum, teaching and evaluation are part and parcel of how dominance and subordination are reproduced and altered in the society. (Apple, 1996: 22-23) As we will see later in this article similar principles and ideas about general educational aims can be found in all the four countries although their implementation and practices differ from each other. The principles of civil society and civic culture are translated into the curriculum and educational purposes in various ways. One obvious aspect of this translation process is how, by whom and on what basis civic principles and ideals are translated into the curricular subjects and how such mechanism of selection is legitimated. Looking at the curricular contents of particular lessons/courses one can argue that framing regulations tend to distinguish between subjects leading to a 'division of labour' and 'hierarchical order of importance' among the courses. One can relate this to the purpose of selection so far as it is related to the project of nation building, control of knowledge by the dominant section of the social structure and transmission of inherited knowledge as the basis of belonging to a community. In order to build a community of educated citizens who absorbed and internalised civic values as defined by the higher echelons of social and political order and distributed in the public schools certain subjects are attributed a special role such as history, geography, migration and religious education.

Organisation of a subject, selection of its contents and agencies that control the process of selection and transmission of knowledge in Germany, The Netherlands, France ad Britain provide us with some indications of the relevance of subjects and the rationale for the selectivity that impinge upon projects of nation building and generating a shared imagery in the four countries. An analysis of curriculum structure, the mechanism of its creation and implementation and the teaching materials containing selected knowledge will yield important clues as to how the nations are constructed; how the national images are codified; how the 'national projects' are implemented; how the image of civic culture is portrayed in schoolbooks. The four countries have different structures and mechanisms to devise legal frameworks and curricular guideline to communicate the special knowledge in the educational setting, ranging from strictly centralised national framework to locally decided curricular framing.

The differences in the educational regulations in the four countries regarding aims of education and its content are based on their different historical experiences and different political discourses. One can also attribute these differences to diversity of European national identities since European identity can not be described as a monolithic sense of belonging. (Wintle, 1996: 1-2) In Germany, there is a decentralised federative system (*Bundesländer*) which formulates educational aims. The decentralised federative structure in Germany differs from the centralised French system or the nationalized British structure. The Netherlands does not have a strict

central frameworks, control and selection of knowledge. The Dutch school system is fairly decentralised in contrast to French. Britain and France are on the other end of the continuum regarding direct state involvement in policy making in education and producing a nation-wide binding educational policy. Compared to Germany and the Netherlands Britain has a centrally regulated curricular framework. Before 1988 comprehensive schools were relatively free to determine their aims and curricula although constrained by the requirements of public examinations. Prior to the introduction of National Curriculum, schoolteachers as a section of the population had the power to dictate the aims and content of the curriculum. With the 1988 Education Reform Act (Education Reform Act: 1988), the power shifted to the government. France has also a centralised educational system. The state holds the power to manipulate, control and selects subjects in the school education. French schools, therefore, are obliged to follow the principles of national education *(Education nationale)*.

History as a site of national imagery

One can argue that some subjects have morel potential and influence in inculcating civil culture, imparting the dominant national imaginary and generating culturally loaded meanings. Subjects on science and technology would not compare other subjects such as history, geography, religion, political science for the latter set of subjects are more open to political manipulation, contain culturally, socially and politically significant meanings which can reproduce national images, shared heritage and legitimate dominant cultural orientations as well as boundaries. On these grounds now I would like to look at how subjects that have close relevance to civil culture and construction of national imaginary are dealt with in discourses and policies in education.

What follows is an examination of how history topics are related to civil cultures of the countries concerned. The purpose of analysing the status of history and similar subjects is to show the link between state policies, official discourses national educational practices and dominant civil culture. Such an evaluation will yield clues as to how these subjects are situated in the context of state educational institutions; how 'national imaginary' and 'common heritage' are coded in educational discourses; how self and others are represented and boundaries are drawn? History is a good starting point as this subject is taught in the four countries either as a compulsory or partly compulsory course.

Let's explore the status of history teaching in Britain as this case best reflects the significance of history in communicating national imagery through education. History is a compulsory subject in British school system. It is one of the foundation subjects of the National Curriculum. Its aims are related to knowledge, identity, sense of belonging, understanding one's own and other's cultures. *(The National Curriculum, History,* Department for Education, 1995). Through history pupils can achieve an understanding of their family, community and country they belong to. Learning

about culture, beliefs, customs and institutions and shared experiences will enhance their sense of identity.

It is argued in History Working Group's report (*National Curriculum History Working Group Final Report*, 1990) that Britain has a cultural diversity and therefore there should not be an imposition of a standard and uniform cultural package on young people. This seems to contrast other three countries where more or less a more uniform cultural heritage is transmitted, such as high culture in Germany and republican ideals in France. This diversity which lies at the roots of British identity is expected to generate toleration and respect for other cultures among pupils. More importantly, teaching history is believed to be an effective means of preparing young people for citizenship. However, giving pupils a sense of identity; helping pupils to have an understanding of their own cultural roots and shared inheritance seem to be confusing and conflicting identity constructions for minorities.

In debates on the aims of history teaching, frequent references to giving pupils a sense of identity implies a national project. It does not say which or whose identity will be inculcated. If Britain is a multicultural society with disparate cultural identities, then one can not or should not talk of imposing a sectional identity. Black, Asian, Welsh and English national/ethnic identities on the one hand and religious identities such as Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Catholic and Protestant in nature co-exist in modern Britain. Yet, when one looks at the subjects offered in the curriculum and the contents of the currently used book, it is not possible to see the presentation of such an array of cultural, national, ethnic and religious heritage. The question 'whose identity?' that very many people ask is not clearly answered.

In the Dutch case history teaching is aimed at creating continuity in the collective imagination of students as to the making of a Dutch nation state. Past is interpreted as a collective and shared heritage which should be transmitted to the present in order to preserve the common continuity.

The dominant discourse in Germany about national identity is reflected in discourse on the terminology used to denote workers that has undergone a certain degree of modification since the beginning of the organised labour migration. The traditional word for working immigrants was *Fremdarbeiter* (foreign/alien workers), which was replaced by the term *Gastarbeiter* (guestworkers) in 1960. Meanwhile the official term remained as *ausländishe Arbeitnehmer* (foreign employees). In the late 1980s, the terminology became more simplified. Currently the term *Ausländer* (foreigner) is used by nearly everybody. These terms and the concomitant labelling evoke a connotation which explicitly indicates the 'otherness' of immigrants who were supposed to be temporary residents. The unification of the two Germanys, The Federal Republic of Germany and The German Democratic Republic, raised further cultural issues as to the identity, nationhood, Germanness and citizenship of these people. The unification had boundary raising and ethnic marking effects.

All four countries have similar general aims for history lessons and similar topics. In all countries there is selected set of historical topics transmitted to schoolchildren. France and Britain have central control over history teaching whereas Germany and the Netherlands have a system of local selection and control. Construction of shared heritage and national identities, however, are codified differently. History in Germany is constructed along the line of 'Hochkultur', high culture, which represents cultural refinement and an elite culture rooted in cultural descent. Immigration and settlement of millions of foreigners to Germany with different religions, languages and cultural values did not alter the historical construction of German national identity. Definition of German citizenship and its image remained the same, still depending on ethnic descent, whereas especially in Britain the definition of image of being British changed. Dutch history on the other hand centres on an idea of detachment focusing on the idea of independence as an overriding feature of Dutch history. History lessons in Britain focus predominately on the British past. The histories of other nations are played down. Britain is portrayed as a great imperial power, confining conflict, reducing tension and accommodating diversity. (British media reports on the appointment of a president to European Central Bank conjure up images of Britain as mediator.

BBC reported on 2nd May 1998 that Germany and France had a serious conflict of interest in the appointment a president for the bank. The gap became wider and wider because Germany insisted on a Dutch candidate whereas France wanted the appointment of a French man. The read on that at that moment the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, intervened and through his mediation two sides came to an agreement and a Dutch person was appointed. The compromise was reached through the involvement of Britain). Even the de-colonisation period is used to show the greatness of the British. Britain, it is said in the history book has given India her independence whereas de-colonisation of French colonies is explained as 'gaining independence'. Fair play, traditions of toleration and parliamentary democracy are still shown as the core characteristics of British identity. The modern British identity is composed of nations and communities making this identity supranational. History lessons on immigration from Eastern Europe and Indian subcontinent confirm this. French historical consciousness centres on the concept of civilisation. French nation is portrayed as the most significant contributor to the establishment of modern western civilisation. Grand civilisational movements enter the imagination of French nation. French colonial experience seems to establish a paradox because despite the French history is portrayed as a contributor to world civilisation; its contradictions are not explained regarding its colonialism and repression in Algeria. It seems that in the four countries history has Euro-centric and nationally loaded meanings. Greek civilisation, French revolution, National Socialism, WW1 and WW2 are included in history lessons in all countries but interpreted somewhat differently in search for a justification of the dominant discourse. The eastern civilisations do not

seem to have similar significance for history classes. We do not learn much for example, about the accomplishments of eastern civilisations, contribution of Japan, China, East Asia and Muslim world to the development of world civilisations. Africa is only mentioned in passing because implicitly it is not seen as a contributor to the development of modern civilization.

Before moving on the representation of religions in schools, I would like draw attention to a different area, that is the national literatures in the four countries. It seems to me that in addition to history and geography one should also mention literature which has a potential power to strengthen the glorious image of a nation in the minds of pupils. Although Britain is always described as a multicuitural society, the choice of literary figures in school education is very much Anglo-Saxon oriented, mixed with one or two Irish writers. Shakespeare's plays; G. B. Shaw and C. Marlowe's dramas; J. Austin, C. Dickens, T. Hardy, J Swift, A. Trollope's novels; T. Hughes, W. Blake, M. Arnold's poems do not leave any space to the works of growing number of writers from different ethnicities. In WHL at least, one can not see the works of S. Rushdie, H. Kureshi, A. Roy and many other contemporary black writers in English literature classes despite the fact they write in English and widely acclaimed for their literary quality. Germany, France and the Netherlands concentrate on national literary heritage. New breed of literary figures from ethnic minorities do not seem to produce 'refined' and 'high cultured' works, therefore similar to the British scene they are unnoticed.

Religions in Secular National Contexts and State Education

Adriaanse (2001: 14) notes that 'the religious factor had indeed fallen into crisis numerous times throughout in its history, but it has also recovered numerous times. It is not so much the vanishing as the transformation of religion that characterises Europe. Accordingly, we are faced with the undeniable fact that religion in Europe is still very much present, and that id things are as they appear to be it will continue to be present for sometime to come.' There are differences regarding religious education and appearance of religious symbols in public school settings in the four countries. These differences stem from historical legacy and prevailing political cultures in the countries under study. Although West European countries are secularized to a significant degree it is only France which has a constitutional stipulation about the identity of the France as a secular country. A clear contrast to France is Britain where especially at the beginning of the 19th century the British self image was predominantly 'Protestant' in nature. For many, a century later this conception remained valid. (Robbins: 1993: 265) This image was re-circulated by a leading article in *The Times* on 8 July 1980 which wrote that 'The Church of England is the British national Church'. The Crown is also head of the Anglican Church in Britain which provides legitimacy and protection.

Institutionalization of religious education (RE) in general and Islamic education in particular took place in line with the Education Reform Act 1988 which enforces religious education in public schools. The nature of religious education must be dominantly Christian though other religions in Britain should also be taken into consideration. The 1988 Education Act requires that all new agreed syllabuses 'must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (section 8/3). It is the responsibility of local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) to advise the authority upon matters connected with religious worship in county schools and the religious education in public schools. Concerning the content of RE a different picture emerges in contrast to other compulsory subjects in the National Curriculum. In contrast to the centralisation of the education system through the National Curriculum, RE was decentralised, acknowledging the diversity of religious traditions in Britain.

The formation of SACRE's led to the production of agreed syllabus that also accommodated diverse religions in addition to Christianity. An agreed syllabus is required "to reflect the fact that the religious traditions of Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teachings and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain". The content of the agreed syllabus is influenced by the religions of ethnic communities. Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism were also included in the study of religions. The most significant aspect of religious education in relation to civil culture is expected to promote peace and toleration which fits well with the general image of Britishness being tolerant. One can argue that religious education which represents religions as beliefs systems rather than cultural and political belonging has a potential to stimulate a better understanding of "others", leading to mutual respect and acceptance.

Muslims in Britain as elsewhere in Europe are getting organised to provide Islamic education for their children in their own schools as well campaigning for more Muslim teachers in public schools. (Nielsen, 1989: 223; Kucukcan, 1998: 36) The daily act of collective worship and the content of religious education have become important concerns for Muslim parents. One of the responses of Muslims to the recent developments in the area of education was to establish their own private and independent Islamic schools where not only the National Curriculum subjects but also cultural and religious subjects would be taught. Muslims also wanted to make use of state funds, which are presently available to denominational and Jewish schools. In order to become voluntary-aided schools the Zakaria Girl's School in Batley and the Islamia School in London, for example, made applications in 1982. However, Zakaria Girl's and the Islamia School failed to receive recognition as a voluntary-aided school. (Dwyer and Meyer, 1995: 45) After the Labour Party's rise to the government, Muslims increased their pressure on authorities for recognition, which is completely unthinkable in France. Despite earlier rejections of its application, the

Islamia School persisted in its effort to receive state funds. In a letter published in the education supplement of a national newspaper article (The Guardian, 2 December 1997) leading figures campaigning for this state funding appealed to the Secretary of Education and Employment, David Blunkett, for Muslims to be treated equally with others in Britain. It is argued in the letter that Government backing of Muslim schools would promote shared values and good citizenship for all communities equally. In response to Muslims' demands, the Government decided on 9 January 1998 to grant state funding to Islamia School in London and Al Furqan School in Birmingham. The same day, two more Jewish Schools, Mathidla Marks Kennedy and Jewish Progressive primary schools were also given grant-maintained status.

In the Netherlands on the other hand, there is no compulsory religion education in public schools. There is, however, an implicit emphasis on the Christian world in history lessons. This emphasis on Christian world reflects the dominant position of Christian establishments representing a shared past. What Britain and The Netherlands have in common is the fact both countries made available state funds to Muslim schools. It seems that Muslims in the Netherlands achieved their goals more easily. Despite local opposition, Muslims in The Netherlands succeeded in opening state-funded Islamic schools in Rotterdam and Eindhoven in 1988 after heated debated (Rath, Penninx, Groenendijk and Meyer; 2001: 82), and over the years, the number of Islamic schools has steadily increased in this country to six in 1989-1990, 22 in 1991-92 (Shadid and van Koningsveld, 1992: 109) and 29 in the 1993-1994 school-year. All of these are primary schools. (Dwyer and Meyer, 1995: 40-41)

Germany also reflects the dominant and privileged position of Churches in society and in education. The German Constitution's Preamble cites the trust in God as the moral basis and facilitates the flow of significant amount of financial support to churches through the patronage of the state. This implies that Christian Churches are important institutions having a range of privileges that the Christian Churches in other European countries do not enjoy. There is a sharp contrast with France for example. German case can be likened to the case in England where the Crown is the head of the Anglican Church, giving it power and legitimacy. This recognition is reflected in the composition of the House of Lords where there are a number of seats for the clergy of Anglican Church. Religious education in schools is a regular course element and it is confessional in nature not inter-religious. The German Constitution guarantees religious education in public schools, being put into practice by the churches in the frame of subsidiary (*Grundgesetz* Articles 7.2 and 140, 141). Some federal governments bind the schools to provide religious education lessons and churches are recognized as partner institutions to deliver religious education. Except in very few places Islamic religious education does not take because there is no Muslim Church which can be recognized as a partner by the school.

France is an exceptional country regarding religion-state relations in Europe. There is no compulsory religious education in French public schools at all because

it is considered to be a contradiction to the secular ideals of French national imagery in the dominant political discourse. The principle of *la□cité*, as understood neutrality towards religious beliefs, means that there should be no religious signs and symbols in public schools. There is no religious education and crosses or other religious symbols are not allowed in public schools. The wearing of headscarves in most public schools has been forbidden in the name of this principle. Recent developments in France show us that in the French understanding of secularism there is no place to religious education and moreover the state has the right to ban religious symbols in public spaces including state schools. Recently, the 20-member group, appointed by President Jacques Chirac and headed by the national ombudsman, Bernard Stasi, recommended that all "conspicuous" signs of religious belief - specifically including Jewish skullcaps, oversized Christian crosses and Islamic headscarves - be outlawed in state-approved schools. (The Guardian, 13 December 2003). Based upon the recommendations of the Stasi Report Mr Chirac said that his conscience had persuaded him that "clothing and signs which conspicuously show membership of a religion must be forbidden in schools", adding that the state system, where the teaching of religion is banned, "must remain secular". (The Guardian, 18 December 2003) French restrictions on religious education and wearing headscarf led some Muslims to establish their own independent high school in Lillie (New York Times, 9 September 2003)

This article shows that there are significant differences in state-religion relations and the status of religious education in public schools in Germany, Britain, France and the Netherlands. These differences are based on political cultures and dominant discourses in the respective countries. In Germany and Britain religious education is present in the curriculum and available in state schools. In the French case there is no religious education in public schools because French political culture is based on strict separation of religion and state thus not allowing the state to get involved in religious inculcation. In the Netherlands there is no compulsory or formally prescribed religious education either.

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