

KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS OF POPULATION ISSUES IN SOME EUROPEAN COUNTRIES: RESULTS FROM THE EOPEI-SURVEYS

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In view of the growing impact of demographic events on daily life, some experts state that more people should be sensitized for the moral and factual aspects of population issues. Programs of "population education" have been established over the last decades in almost all regions of the world.

The core question of this contribution is whether a relationship exists between knowledge on population - transferred through curricular or extra-curricular education - and young people's perceptions of population phenomena and groups. The results of a survey conducted among 6412 students in five European countries are presented.

Despite profound educational reforms in Western societies, the contents of schooling programmes are still, to a large extent, steered by economic objectives. Many experts state that a genuine awareness of population, family and environmental issues is lacking in today's curricula. The EOPEI-surveys investigate, to what extent schools transfer knowledge on some important population phenomena, and to what extent this knowledge contributes to students' reflection on these phenomena.

The students' knowledge was measured at three levels: the country, the European and the world level. The results point out that the 'country' variable is the most determining factor for differences in knowledge between countries. On the basis of the opinion-questions, three attitude scales were constructed: solidarity towards the elderly, tolerance towards migrants and tolerance towards new emerging family types. We examined the question whether the knowledge acquired in the course of scholarisation influences opinions. The positions in favour of solidary intergenerational relations, in terms of employment, and duties of children towards the elderly, do not diminish significantly among students having a weak knowledge on population issues. However, there is a significant relationship between knowledge and perceptions on migration issues.

In Europe, the process of educational expansion and prolonged education has reduced the impact of social class in the decision-making of parents regarding their children's school career. Our results indicate that social class remains important, but not as important as study orientation. However, a selection may be into play here, since students from lower classes generally attend technical classes more frequently than students from higher classes.

In conclusion, the survey results indicate that knowledge does play a role in attitudinal formation. From this point of view, a call for greater attention in school curricula for population issues, which is one of EOPEI's goals, is legitimate.