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Christoph Wulf (Ed.)

**Education in Europe
An Intercultural Task**

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Christoph Wulf (Ed.)

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European Studies in Education

The political, economic, and social developments in the European Union pose new challenges to education in Europe, where each country has its own system. Under these circumstances, the relation between national, regional, and local traditions on the one hand and supraregional, transnational aspirations on the other must be conceived. The field of education is seeing the rise of new issues, responsibilities, and research requiring scholars from different European cultures to work together.

European Studies in Education constitutes an international forum for the publication of educational research in English, German, and French. The multilingual nature of this series mirrors that of Europe and makes it possible to portray and express cultural diversity.

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Christoph Wulf

Content

Introduction:

Education in Europe An Intercultural Task	5
--	---

Congress Opening

<i>András Masát (Budapest)</i> Words of Welcome	17
--	----

<i>Christoph Wulf (Berlin)</i> The Challenge of Intercultural Education	19
--	----

<i>Gustavo Egas Repáraz (Amsterdam)</i> The Network Educational Science Amsterdam Tasks and Perspectives	26
--	----

Educational Science. The State of the Art

<i>Christoph Wulf (Berlin)</i> Paradigms of Educational Theory The Development of Educational Theory in Germany	35
--	----

<i>Vasilios Makrakis (Rethymnon)</i> Paradigms in Educational Research Complementarity or Unity?	43
--	----

<i>P. Kreitzberg/E. Grauberg (Tartu)</i> Democratic vs. Scientific and Expert Legitimation of Educational Decisions	48
<i>Dieter Geulen (Berlin)</i> The Idealistic Bias in Educational Programs	53
<i>Elena Besozzi (Bari)</i> Social Change and Patterns of Socialization	57
<i>Lars Jalmert (Stockholm)</i> Fathers' Importance for their Children	62
<i>Silvio Scanagatta (Padova)</i> The Generation Gap: Youth Culture - Teacher Culture	72
<i>Jörg Zirfas (Berlin)</i> Ethics and Education. Sisyphos or Why Must We Educate?	79
<i>Bernhard Dieckmann (Berlin)</i> Some Remarks on Experience and Education	84
<i>Bernard Kruithof (Amsterdam)</i> The Civilizing Offensive and the Protection of Children in the Netherlands in the Nineteenth Century	88
<i>Richard Aldrich (London)</i> Joseph Payne: An International Educationist	94
<i>Michael Göhlich (Berlin)</i> Learning Landscape and Home? Studies of the Postmodern Classroom and its Historical Forerunners	99

Vasilios Koulaidis (Patras)
Empirical Research Paradigms
The Case of Science Education 105

Andy Green (London)
Core Skills, Participation and Progression in Post-
Compulsory Education and Training in England and
France 110

Education and Educational Science in a Period of Social Transition

Sjoerd Karsten / Dominique Majoor (Amsterdam)
The Present and Future of Education in East Central
Europe 119

Peter Hübner (Berlin)
Continuity and Change in the School System of the
United Germany 124

Vlastimil Parizek (Praha)
The Vision of Education in the Czech Republic 128

Csilla Meleg / Anna Aszmann (Pécs)
Youths at Risk of the Period of Transformation 132

Benô Csapó (Szeged)
Students' Perception of the Effects of Social
Transition 138

Erzsébet Golnhofer (Budapest)
Theoretical Attempts of Modernizing the Hungarian
Education between 1945 and 1948 145

<i>Palmira Juceviciene (Kaunas)</i> From Pedagogy to Educational Science, from Western Europe to Lithuania and from Lithuania to Western Europe	149
<i>Irena Zujienė (Vilnius)</i> Education in Lithuania - An Object of Reform	155
<i>Tatjane Koke (Riga)</i> Democratization of the Educational System in Latvia	159
<i>Rasma Garleja (Riga)</i> Humanitarian Aspects in Higher Education in Latvia	164
<i>Sirje Priimägi (Tartu)</i> Democracy in Education	168

The Teacher as an Agent of Change

<i>Henrietta Schwartz (San Francisco)</i> The Four Paradoxes of Teacher Education	175
<i>Yiorgos Mavroyiorgos (Ioannina)</i> Teacher Education and Teachers' Work Trends and Contradictions in the European Community Context	179
<i>Henryka Kwiatkowska (Warsaw)</i> What Teacher Education for the Integration of Europe?	185
<i>Alacja A. Kotusiewiczowa (Warsaw)</i> Education for Democracy in Search of New Values in Teachers Education	189

<i>Zoltan Vastagh (Pécs)</i> Teacher Training Reform in Hungary	193
<i>Anna Koczan (Pécs)</i> The Role of Feedback in the Change of Teaching Behaviour	198
<i>György Szépe/Zsófia Radnai (Budapest)</i> Applied Linguistics and Teacher Education	202
<i>Jack R. Fraenkel (San Francisco)</i> Characteristics and Behaviors of Effective Social Studies Teachers	208
<i>Eugene Michaels (San Francisco)</i> Cognitive Psychology and Instructional Systems Theory An American Perspective and Theoretical Interpretations	214
<i>Kaare Skagen (Tromsø)</i> Supervision Theory in Teacher Education A Comparative Study	216
<i>Wiel Veugelers (Amsterdam)</i> Value Education Related to Labor	220
<i>Frank McLaughlin (San Francisco)</i> Survey of Education and Human Services Credential Recipients: 1990-1992	226
<i>Éva Balázs (Budapest)</i> Needs for and Forms of Educational Management Training in Hungary	230
<i>Jan Solfronk (Praha)</i> School Management at the Pedagogical Faculty at Charles University Prague	238

<i>Jiri Kotásek (Praha)</i> Major Trends of Higher Education Renewal in the Czech Republic	243
<i>Görel Strömqvist (Stockholm)</i> Recent Change in Nordic Higher Education	247
<i>David Hartley (Dundee)</i> Contradictions in Scottish Education Policy: Signs of the Times?	252

Media in Education:

New Tasks, New Perspectives

<i>Philip Drummond (London)</i> Media Based Education in Europe	257
<i>Birgitta Quarsell (Stockholm)</i> Young People and New Media Reflexions and Questions	263
<i>Jerzy Szmagalski (Warsaw)</i> Professional Communication Skills Training with Video Feedback	270
<i>Jan Sklodowski (Warsaw)</i> Computers and Informatics in Educational Theory and Practice	277
<i>Elena Ramirez Orellana (Salamanca)</i> A Proposal of an Analysis Methodology for the Information Contained in a Picture	281
<i>Shigekazu Takemura (Hiroshima)</i> Media Based Education in Japan	286

<i>Aihara Kazukuni (Hiroshima)</i> Research into the Role of Images with Reference to Comparative Culture in Education	296
<i>Skigeru Mori (Hiroshima)</i> Effects of Videogames on the Development of Computer Literacy	299
<i>David Pucel (St. Paul)</i> Technological Literacy A Critical Worldwide Literacy Requirement for all Students	303

Women Studies

<i>Marian de Graaf/Saskia Grotenhuis (Amsterdam)</i> Gender, Socialization and Child Development from a Constructivistic Approach	313
<i>Lisa Adkins/Diana Leonard (London)</i> Family Work and the Educational Careers of Working Class Girls in England	321
<i>Janet Ouston (London)</i> Women in Education Management	330
<i>Eva Széchy (Budapest)</i> Antinomies in the Schooling in a Changing Society	338
<i>Alexandra Fredericos (Athens)</i> Gender Images in the Greek Primary School Readers	342

Chryssi Inglessi (Ioannina)
Gender Issues in Students' Counseling Center
The Case of Ioannina University, Greece 346

Marilyn J. Boxer (San Francisco)
Women's Studies and Feminist Goals in a
'Postfeminist' University 350

Integration of Children with Disabilities vs. Special Education

John L. Romano (Minneapolis)
Social and Psychological Issues of Youth:
Educator Prevention Training 361

Alan Hurst (Preston)
Including Children and Young People with
Disabilities and Learning Difficulties in Mainstream
Education in England
The Potential Impact of Recent Changes in National
Policy 374

L.T. van der Linden (Utrecht)
Towards an Integrative Diagnostic Appraisal of the
Educational Relationship 379

Carlo Catarsi (Florence)
Beginning from the Juvenile Court 385

Marie Cerná (Praha)
Current Special Education Issues in the Czech
Republic 393

Edina Gabor (Budapest)
The School Prevention Possibilities 396

<i>Emoke Kovacs-Vass/Zsuzsanna Kovacs-Feher/Katalin Vecsey (Budapest)</i> A Concise History of Segregation and Integration of Children with Speech Disabilities in Hungary	400
<i>Lajos Kullmann/Judit M. Benczúr (Budapest)</i> Somatopedagogic Teacher Training for Physically Handicapped	405
<i>Juozas Petrusevicius/Vytautas Karvelis (Siauliai)</i> Special Education and the Problem of Integration in Lithuania	409

Intercultural Learning: Experiences and Perspectives

<i>Crispin Jones (London)</i> Europe, Europeans and Intercultural Education	417
<i>Josef A. Mestenhauser (Minneapolis)</i> Neglected: Intercultural Perspectives on Educational Transition as Intercultural Task	422
<i>Fred N. Finley/John J. Cogan (Minneapolis)</i> Global Environmental Education Curriculum Interacting Natural and Social Systems as an Organizing Theme	427
<i>Stephan Sting (Berlin)</i> Education between Interculturality and National Orientation	433
<i>David F. Hemphill (San Francisco)</i> Critical Rationality from a Cross-Cultural Perspective	441

<i>Gerd R. Hoff (Berlin)</i> Multicultural Education in Germany Policies Related to Multicultural Education	451
<i>Jan Karl Koppen / M.E. Voorthuis (Amsterdam)</i> Enrolment of Migrants to University Education in the Netherlands	468
<i>Hans Merkens (Berlin)</i> Youth at risk Work Orientations of Youth in Different Eastern and Central European Countries	479
<i>Krystyna Bleszyńska (Warsaw)</i> On Education of Ethnic Minorities in Contemporary Poland	487
<i>Myoung-Ouk Kim (Washington)</i> Family Conflicts Among Korean Immigrants in the United States of America	491
<i>Elizabeth L. van Dalsem (San Francisco)</i> Migration, Race, and Ethnic Relations in California as Researched and Experienced in the Microcosm of San Francisco and the Greater San Francisco Bay Area	496
<i>Xue Suzhen (Shanghai) / Christoph Wulf (Berlin)</i> The Nuclear Family in China and Germany Commonalities and Differences	499
<i>Jagdish S. Gundara (London)</i> Intercultural Teacher Education	506
<i>Hanneke Farkas Teekens (Amsterdam)</i> Working Towards a European Diploma in Teacher Education?	510

<i>Ken Foster (Preston)</i> Evaluation of the NESAs Teacher Training Intensive Course	516
<i>Panel-Discussion</i> Education in Europe: An Intercultural Task	523
<i>List of Contributors</i>	556
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	567

Students' Perception of the Effects of Social Transition

The sudden collapse of the ideological-political system and the following peaceful social transition yielded a unique context of development and socialization for the adolescents in Hungary in the early 1990s. The values and attitudes required by a multi-party parliamentary democracy and a market economy were just the opposite of those proposed by the one-party political system and the centrally planned economic system. A series of investigations were launched in 1990 to study adolescents' perceptions of the changes around them and their attitudes toward the possible effects of the transitional process.

In the early stages of the research it seemed clear that after years of limited freedom, the majority of adolescents would value the principles of a democratic society. At the same time, however, it was also foreseen that transformation of the political, social, and economic system would be a long and difficult process with many painful side effects. From the perspective of the future of a pluralistic society and a market economy, it seemed crucial to further study how today's adolescents would cope with the difficulties of the years of transition, how the short-term troubles would affect their long-term commitments to the democratization process. Thus, it was decided to replicate the data collection in normal times with the same or similar questions to track the changes in students' attitudes.

Some preliminary results of the first data collection were already presented at other conferences (Flanagan, Csapó, and Rékasi, 1991; Csapó, 1991a, 1991b). This paper focuses on the analysis of the second survey, on the changes of students' attitudes, and shows examples of further and deeper analyses.

In the spring of 1990, around the time of the first free parliamentary elections, a representative sample (N=250) of eleventh grade high school students from Szeged (one of the major cities of

Hungary) were given a questionnaire. Their mothers were asked the identical questions. The data collection was repeated three years later (spring 1993) with students of the same age and attending the same high schools (N=400).

The main part of the questionnaire consisted of two sets of questions: (1) how some features of life in general will change and (2) how strongly they agreed with some anticipated changes in the educational system caused by the political shift. The questions were answered on a five-point scale. The second questionnaire was basically the same, only the wording of some questions was modified, taking into account the different time perspectives. (Students had to express their opinions about life standards of the year 1992 retrospectively in 1993, which was a future point of time in 1990. Certain processes that were only anticipated in 1990 were already in progress in 1993.)

The mean of the rank numbers of the students' responses for the questions concerning the changes in the everyday life is depicted in Fig. 1. (After the recent political changes, how the constraints of everyday life; the chances of finding a job; the possibilities of earning money will change? Much less=1, less=2, same=3, more=4, much more=5.) In 1990, students thought these changes would have little, but a positive effect on the everyday constraints and earning money, but they felt that there would be less opportunity for finding employment. In 1993 they were more pessimistic in each aspect of life. The most significant decrease in their expectations was in the case of earning money.

The data indicated that students in 1990 were still enthusiastic concerning changes in the educational system: they supported every anticipated change. (Will people be better motivated to learn? Much less=1, ..., much better=5. The state ideology comes to an end; it will be possible to establish private schools; the state control over schools is decreasing; schools can choose their own teaching material; and the role of churches is growing. Strongly disagree=1, ..., strongly agree=5.)

Figure 1: Students' opinion about social changes

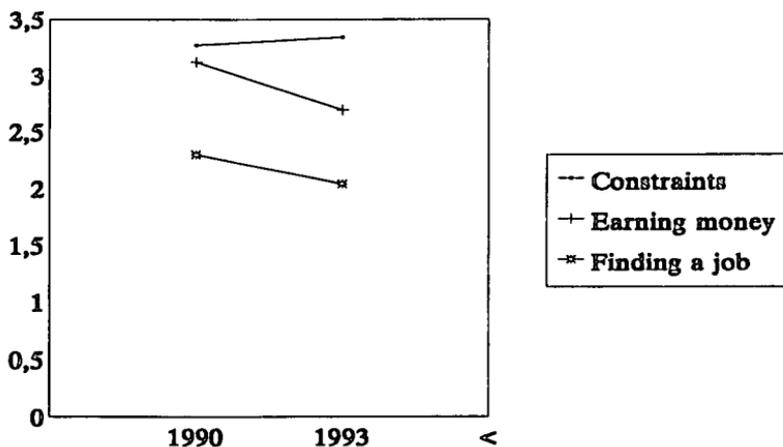
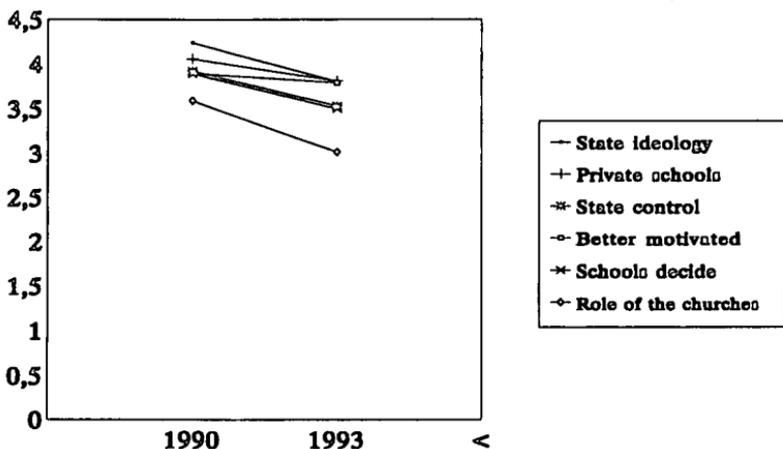


Figure 2: Students' opinion about the changes in the school system



In 1993 they were less supportive in these questions; however, they still tend to agree with the new trends. (The means are above 3.) In 1993, the students were less enthusiastic in agreeing with the

decreasing state control in education or with the growing freedom of schools in selecting teaching material. The most significant difference between the 1990 and 1993 sample was found in the attitude towards churches: in 1993 students indicated much less support for the increasing role of churches in education than the 1990 sample indicated.

Students' views on changes in the standard of living are depicted in Fig. 3, as well as the opinion of mothers asked in 1990. (Compared with 1989, how the life standards changed/will change by ...? Much worse=1, ..., much better=5.) In 1990, both students and their mothers hoped that after a short term decline, the life standard would soon improve. However, in the short term, mothers were more pessimistic, while their long-term prediction was the same as their children's. In 1993, students were more pessimistic. They thought that the decreasing life standard would improve only after a longer period of time.

Figure 3: Students' opinion about the changes of life standards

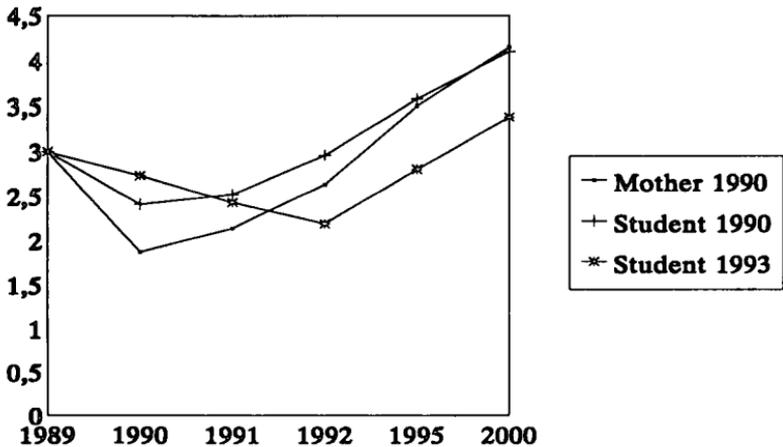
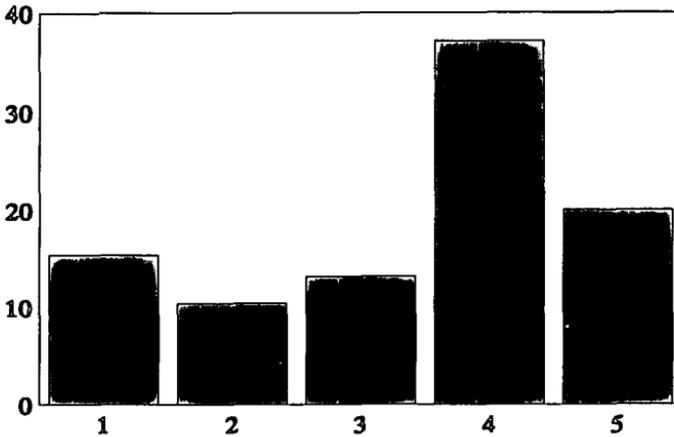


Figure 4: Compared with 1989, how the life standards will change by 2000?

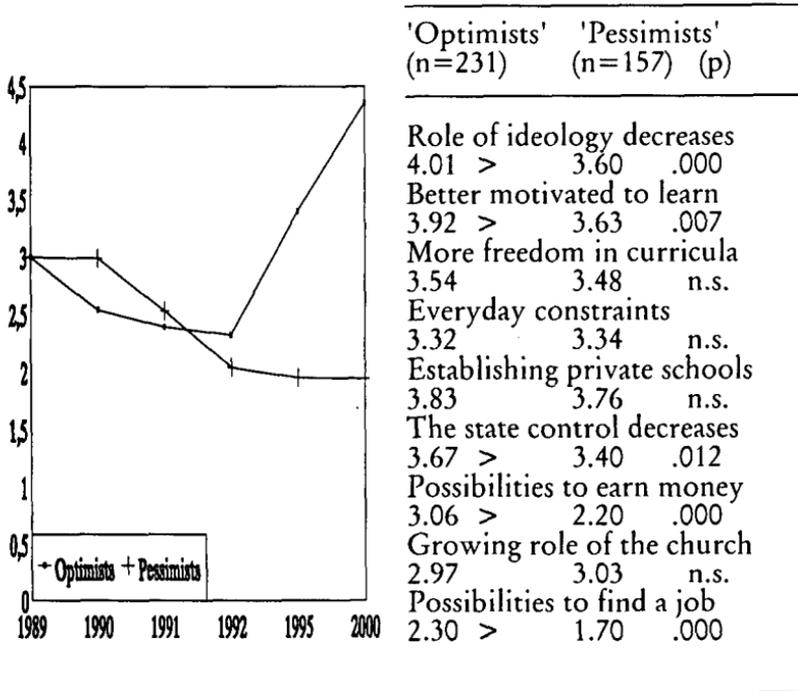


In most cases, the students' opinion were polarized. Behind the means there were a large variety of views: different students had different opinions about the same situation. Figure 4 shows the distribution of the responses of the 1993 sample for the question "Compared with 1989, how the standard of living will change by 2000?". On the bases of this distribution, we can distinguish two different types of students: (1) those who thought that the living standards will be better or much better by 2000, and (2) those who thought that the life standards will be the same or worse. Let us call the first group "long term optimists" and the second one "long term pessimists". We can assume that the long-term predictions were not much affected by the actual situation and circumstances. Thus, we can form the hypothesis that the long-term expectations depended on students' general views on the transitional process.

Figure 5 shows that these two groups of students really had different opinions about changes in the standard of living, not only for the future, but also about its past level. The figures in the Table indicate further differences of the two groups. Those who saw the future negatively did not appreciate that the role of the

ideology and state control of schools decreased; they did not believe that people would be better motivated to learn; furthermore, they thought that there would be less possibility to earn money and find employment.

Figure 5: "Optimists" and "Pessimists" about the changes of life standards



The results suggested that the first years of the new political system did not fulfill many Hungarian adolescents' expectations. Their pessimism and disillusionment negatively impact their socialization and their adaptation to the new economic and political environment. Those students considered the actual difficulties as inherent attributes or at least long-term characteristics of the new political order. Another group of students associated the difficulties with the transitional years. They were the supporters of reforms and believed in the long-term improvement of life stan-

dards. Fortunately, in 1993 this group formed the majority.

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