

CoE Conference:
“Shared Histories for a Europe without Dividing Lines”
Drammen, Norway. May 16th 2010

Minister of Education Kristin Halvorsen, Welcome Speech

Thank you very much for the invitation to address you at this conference. On behalf of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research -- a warm welcome to you all!

First I would like to emphasize the importance of the work of the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe plays an extremely important role within its 47 member states and Norway has always supported the work of the Council of Europe. The council is an important mediator and facilitator between states with most different traditions and political systems.

One hundred years ago an independent Swedish journalist called Ester Blenda Nordstrøm left the busy, urban life in Stockholm. She headed for a job as a maid in the countryside as she wanted to write an article about the extremely hard-working, invisible, poor and voiceless maids that did so much of the hard manual work for their landlords.

At the turn of the century there were 140 000 girls working as maids in Sweden. When Ester Blenda Nordstrøm wrote her article, this had

been the most common position for women to take for hundreds of years. In order to fully understand how these women lived their lives, she found it necessary to go undercover.

Nordstrøm worked sixteen hours days on a big farm. Her only time off was a two hours break every Sunday. The farm had twenty cows that she had to milk three times a day. In addition she had to feed the hens, pigs and calves, and to cook all the meals in the household. A household that included the landlord and his wife, their five children, four hired men and four woodworkers. But the day wasn't over before she had done some weaving, baking and slaughtering as well..

Nordstrøm writes about all the hard work but also about the companionship, the humour and the pleasure they shared in their work. She experienced a strong fellowship that she had never ever seen in her social circles in Stockholm.

In Swedish language a new word has been added to the word-lists. It is not, as it possibly should have been, the verb “to Nordstrøm”, but in ordinary language you can now make use of the word “to wallraff”. It has its reference to the German writer and journalist Günter Wallraff and the methods he used to get insight into hidden stories and society's rather problematic mechanisms.

Many of you will remember how Wallraff in 1985 posed as a Turkish guest worker to be able to write from the inside about the

mistreatment that he and his Turkish colleagues received from employers and the German government.

My point is that in all societies, through all times, there is a need to fight stereotype ideas and judgements. In history writing and history teaching we need to ensure that no one's left out voiceless or that the stories that we tell secures only certain groups interests or views.

We all know how necessary it is to build trust and understanding in complex societies. We have a responsibility to work against stereotype ideas and the tendency to create myths and unwarranted rumours about groups and individuals.

Diversity is a resource

The Norwegian society is complex, diverse and plural. This may often be regarded as a problem. That is why I keep on emphasizing that diversity is a big resource in our Norwegian society, as well as in the rest of Europe.

Diversity means complexity, fruitfulness, nuances, possibilities and richness.

Diversity is for instance a big advantage when it comes to **languages**: for a small country like Norway it is of great importance to have pupils who can speak languages spoken by important partners in other parts of the world. -- To have several languages represented in one

school or in a local community is a gift both to teachers and the rest of society.

Diversity when it comes to **culture**: to know the ways and cultural codes of other countries is obviously an advantage for a small country like Norway.

And if we succeed in handling diversity as a resource the result will be:

- More peaceful and **sustainable democracies**, (basis for cooperation, understanding, respect etc.)
- A good starting point for **economic growth**, (through trade, tourism etc.)
- **cultural richness**
- **scientific curiosity and development**
- **inclusive societies**

To reach the aim of recognizing diversity as a resource there is still room for improvement. What can we do?

The key element is knowledge - pupils with knowledge. Education is a human right, and knowledge is the basis of democracy. Within each country, the school system plays an important role. To create a stable Europe with a high level of inclusion and participation,

knowledge is essential. Knowledge in a wider sense leads to understanding and respect. Knowledge also leads to the ability to look at things through different angles and it plays an important part in getting rid of stereotypes. Knowledge helps us to be able to talk about delicate subjects and to have a common space for dialogue. The project “The Image of the Other in History Teaching” is an example of that.

To convey knowledge the role of teachers is significant. It is crucial that we have competent and dedicated teachers who look upon diversity as an asset.

Furthermore, we can support and promote the work of the Council of Europe

- I have great respect for the competence and work of the Council of Europe, especially when it comes to history teaching, education for democratic citizenship, human rights and intercultural understanding. I find it important that the Council of Europe continues the work within the field of history teaching, where the teaching of history is regarded as a means to reach reconciliation and peaceful solutions among nations.
- As a matter of fact Norway finds this work so important that we also have decided to support it financially.

We want to continue the activity done within the project *The image of the other in history teaching* and therefore support this conference and the further work in the field.

This project proves that history learning can be an important resource for intercultural dialogue. The project aims to promote approaches and produce guidelines to history teaching which reflect the increasingly diverse societies of Europe, thus promoting values such as tolerance, openness to and respect for others, human rights and democracy.

In order to obtain this, I think that the idea of *multiperspectivity* represent both a basic method and a basic value in history teaching. If history teaching can contribute to develop the pupils' abilities to recognize and understand the value of multiperspectivity, then history teaching will play an important role in building peaceful relationships between individuals and societies.

I am impressed of what have been obtained so far by the project "The Image of the other in history teaching." I have been informed that the project has covered a wide range of themes and issues, with contributions from participants from different parts of the world. In this way, the project in itself is a very good example of how to bring people and ideas together. So my appeal is: Carry on the good work!

I also think we can achieve something through the actions of The European Wergeland Centre

Resource centers like the European Wergeland Centre can be an important tool when it comes to preparing the pupils and teachers in Europe for living together in diverse societies. One main concern for the centre is to play an important role in bridging the gap between policy and practice. To help distribute what we know about education for democratic citizenship and intercultural dialogue to the people who are involved in this field. I can guarantee you that the Norwegian government will continue its support to the centre and its activities, and I invite you all to make this centre yours. It is open for all countries of the Council of Europe. Please help us to make the centre important.

Finally, I will wish you all good luck with this conference. I am sure it will be a success due to the diversity you all represent, -all the different perspectives and competences present. I am confident that this will result in a fruitful and very interesting conference. I wish you all good luck with the conference and with your future tasks.