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National identity versus a community spirit in uniting Europe among primary school pupils and their teachers

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Introduction

A sense of national identity is one of the crucial elements of social identity. Our ability to differentiate between ourselves and others, our cultural roots and the feeling of distinctiveness all satisfy the natural need for security, affiliation and membership. We develop ties with our nation very early in life, and they are of great significance in how we perceive ourselves and others as members of a given community. In the current social, economic and political situation, with trends towards globalisation and the formation of inter-state unions, it is interesting to investigate the correlation between national and supranational (for example, European) identities. A separate and equally interesting problem is to determine which elements affect the development of national and supranational ties. There are many such elements, some of which may be associated with one's home/family or friends, but others may also be with school. Teachers usually enjoy respect among their pupils, especially younger ones, and they often have a profound influence on children's opinions and attitudes.

This paper presents the results of investigations conducted on 70 pupils, aged 7 to 10, and their teachers. The aim was to define the feeling of European identity in children and their educators, paying particular attention to the similarities and differences in their opinions and attitudes, and to examine the nature of the influence exerted by teachers on their pupils' views.

Methods

The studies were conducted in January 2001, with a group of 70 teachers who were all working with pupils aged 7 to 12. All the teachers had attended a course on dealing with children who had learning difficulties, and most of them were city dwellers; only 15% lived and worked in the country. The vast majority (80%) were aged 30-40, which indicates that they had acquired broad professional experience.

Each teacher was asked to interview one of their pupils. Before the interview, the teacher participated in training on conducting this kind of enquiry (including establishing contact, presenting the questions, asking additional questions, and so on). The questionnaires included detailed instructions on the conduct of the study and on recording the child's answers. The questionnaire concerned three problems:

- Part 1 – the sense of national identity
- Part 2 – the concept and sense of 'Europeanness'
- Part 3 – the relationship between local, national and European ties.

After completing the interview, each teacher received a similar (in many points identical) questionnaire and was asked to complete it in my presence. I obtained data from 53 teachers and 44 pupils.

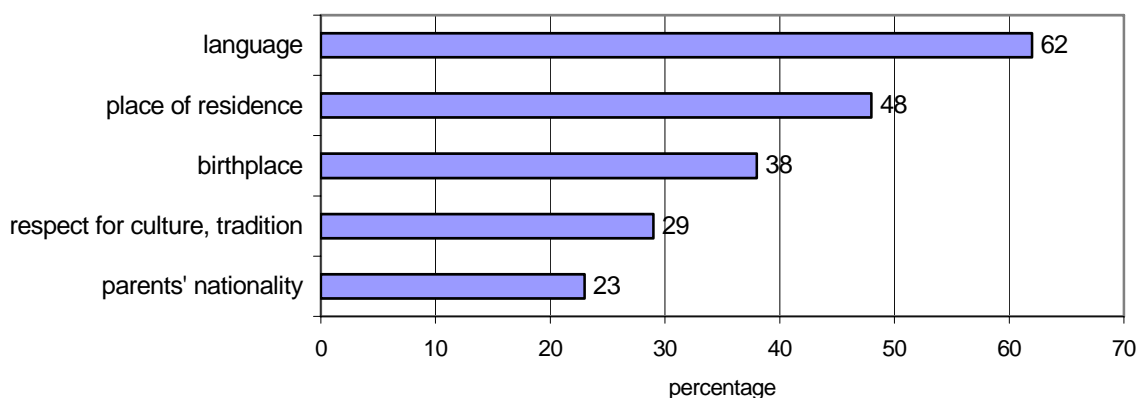
1. The sense of national identity among pupils and teachers

Both the teachers and pupils were asked two questions:

- the first one asked them to diagnose the categories upon which the national ties are based: *What does it mean for you to be a Pole;*
- the other was aimed at discovering ‘the level of citizenship’, that is, of social and political activity. It was inspired by a question in the questionnaire devised by Dr Luisa Freitas (2000), and asked about participation in actions, participation in discussions, participation in voting, participation in elections and volunteering.

Figures 1 and 2 show the categories used by the pupils and teachers to describe their national status.

Figure 1 Categories connected with national identity of pupils



As can be seen, the pupils link national identity with ‘observable’ criteria, such as the language or place of residence. The teachers tend to emphasise volitional arguments, such as attachment to culture and tradition, awareness of national history, and responsibility for the mother country and its development. Some of the teachers refer to traditional and religious values shared by the Poles. As might be expected, the descriptions given by the teachers are more complex, but there is a surprising similarity between pupils and teachers regarding their participation in public life.

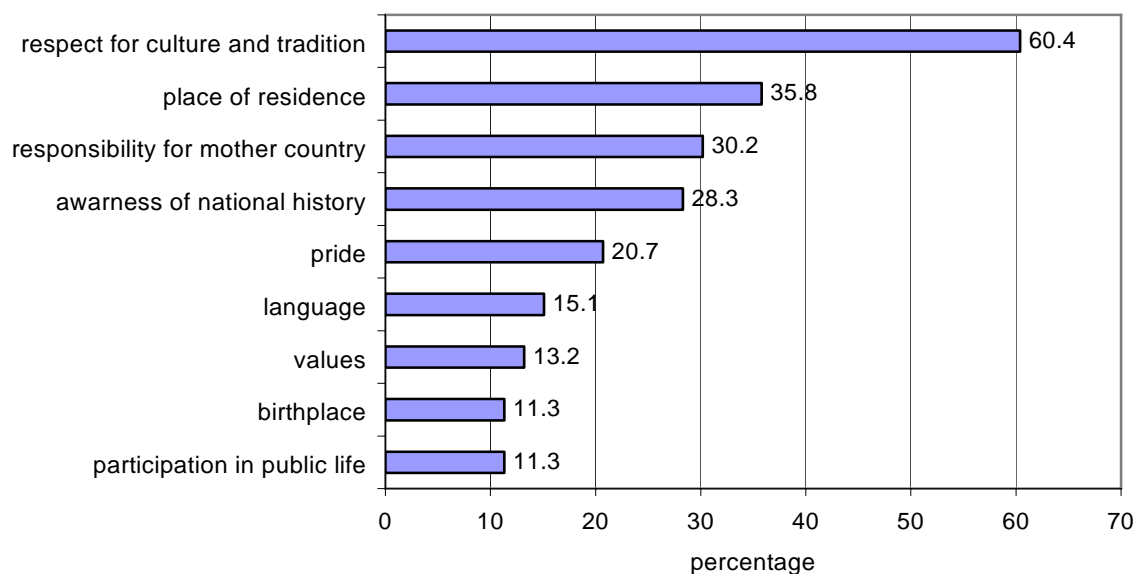
Figure 2 Categories connected with national identity of teachers

Table 1 presents the kinds of activity preferred by the respondents and the percentage of their choices.

Table 1: Social and political activity of teachers and pupils

Category	% of choices made by pupils	% of choices made by teachers
Participation in actions	84.1	84.9
Participation in discussions	65.9	79.2
Participation in voting	61.4	71.7
Participation in elections	47.7	62.3
Volunteering	43.2	26.4

Both pupils and teachers willingly participate in occasional social actions and discussions. Long-term voluntary work is of least interest, although the pupils seem more idealistic than their teachers. Over half of the teachers and pupils take part in voting and elections.

Conclusions

1. In the case of teachers, the sense of national identity is connected with social or mental activity.
2. The children believe that nationality is somehow 'imposed' upon them by the conditions they live in.
3. Regardless of age, the feeling of national identity is based on three fundamental concepts: attachment to culture and tradition, living in Poland and the language.
4. There is a clear similarity between the kinds of social activity chosen by both pupils and teachers.

5. The teachers are not much engaged in political life, although they stress responsibility for the mother country and loyalty as the key characteristics of national identity.

2. 'Europeanness' in the eyes of pupils and teachers

Many researchers examining social relations and psychological phenomena are interested in what is called 'Europeanness'. The concept is new and may be associated with the creation of the European Community. This phenomenon may be examined from different perspectives: psychological, social, political and economic. I will concentrate here on Europeanness as related to social identity and a sense of group identification. My research was not based on a particular definition of this concept; my aim was to determine certain basic categories that may be connected with it. I therefore used mainly open-ended questions, hoping that this would allow a preliminary diagnosis of the research subject, and at least a partial understanding of what Europeanness means for children and their teachers. My intention was also to grasp the differences and similarities in their comprehension of this phenomenon.

I asked them to perform several tasks. Firstly, they were given a list of 18 nationalities, and asked to rate each on a scale of five from the most European (5 points) to not European at all (0 points). The questionnaire for teachers included all European nationalities and three from outside Europe (the Americans, the Vietnamese and the Japanese). However, I felt that a list of all European countries would have been too long for the children to concentrate upon, and that this could discourage them or result in guessing rather than analysing, so I arrived at the final list of nationalities by including in the questionnaire for children:

- (a) the Poles - to see if children associate their own national identity with Europeanness or not;
- (b) the Germans, the Czechs, the Ukrainians, the Russians, the Byelorussians, the Lithuanians, the Slovaks, the English, the French and the Gypsies – representing the nationalities that are the best known to children, including Poland's neighbours and minorities characteristic of the region examined (chosen on the basis of earlier studies, Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz et al. 1999);
- (c) the Americans, the Vietnamese and the Japanese - well-known nationalities from outside Europe, constituting a kind of control group in determining the extent to which the concept of Europeanness is connected with the continent itself or with cultural similarities/differences;
- (d) the Portuguese, the Greeks, the Turks and the Norwegians - representing countries situated at the periphery of Europe, and which are not very well known to children - to find out if lack of contact, less knowledge about them, and their geographical location would influence children's perception concerning their Europeanness.

The results may be compared in Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3: The most European nationalities according to pupils

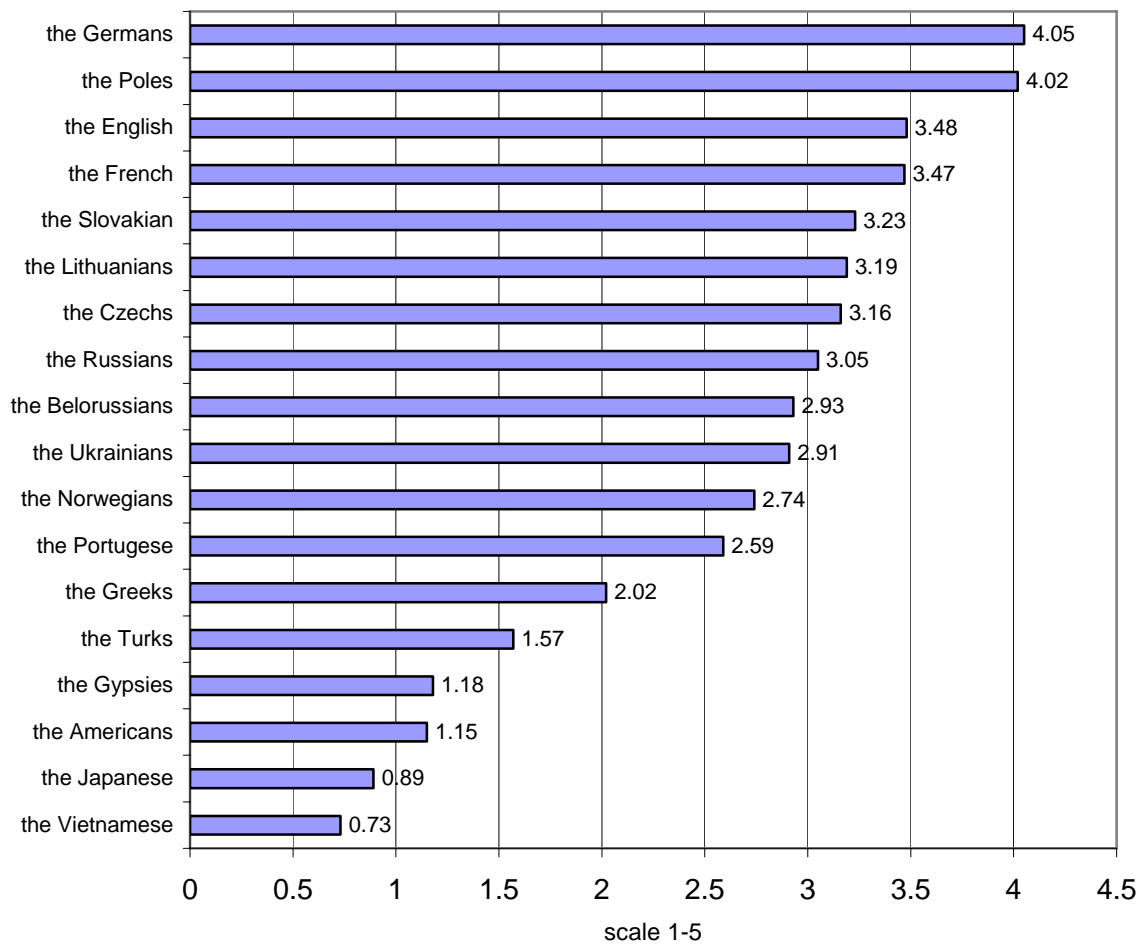
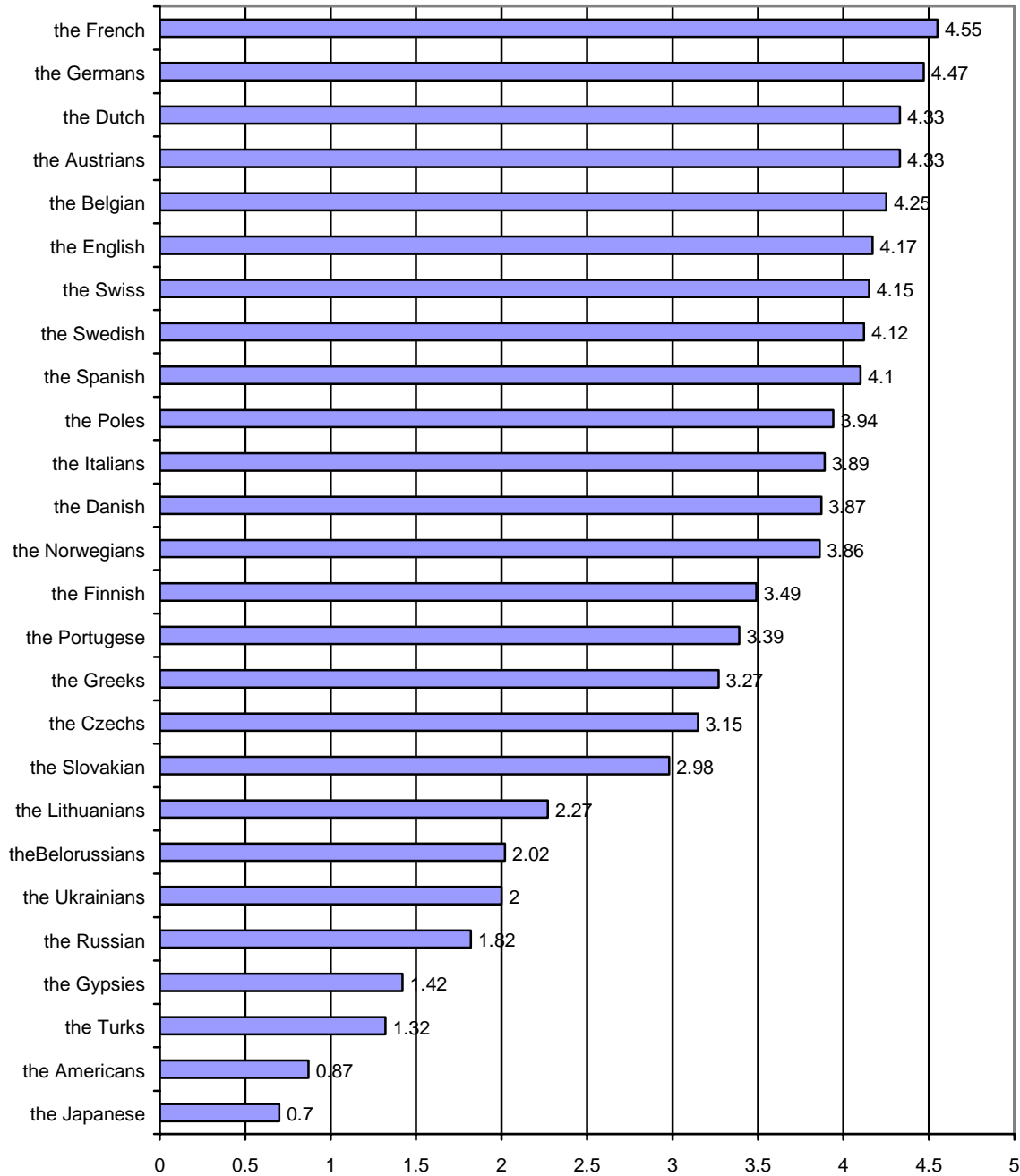


Figure 4: The most European nationalities according to teachers

Both the teachers and children demonstrated a decided preference for West European countries, which were perceived as the most European. The 'peripheral' nations (e.g. the Greeks, the Norwegians, the Portugese) were considered less European. All the respondents also regarded Central and Eastern European countries (including Poland's neighbours) as less European. The Gypsies (a significant national minority in Poland) were perceived as not very European by both groups. The geographical criterion seems important in perceiving Europeaness, as countries situated outside Europe were treated as non-European (although in children's opinion the Americans are as European as the Gypsies). As regards Europeaness of their own nation, most of the children used Poland-oriented arguments. The teachers rated their fellow Poles as less European than members of other nationalities, but placed them in the group of West European states.

Asked to justify their choices, the respondents gave a variety of reasons that can be grouped as follows. For more than 40%, the degree of Europeaness depended on popularity – “they know all the new things, other countries follow them, you can hear about them on TV, they are active, and I know them”. About a fifth of the children used Poland-oriented arguments – “they are close to Poland, they are Polish”. A fifth also took into account the geographical criterion – “they live in Europe/Central Europe”. The teachers emphasised culture and its promotion in Europe (43%) and a high level of economic and social development (industrialisation – 34%, democracy – 11.3%, education – 11.3%). They also took into consideration the geographical criterion (“they live in Europe” – 32.1%).

The pupils were often unable to justify their decisions when they said that a nationality had a low degree of Europeaness. They usually mentioned the criterion of knowledge (“I do not know them, they are little talked about”), different culture (“their customs are different”) and financial conditions (“they are poor”). The teachers also found it hard to provide arguments for the low degree of Europeaness of some countries. Like the children, they often talked about different customs and culture and insufficient industrialisation. 67% of the pupils did not describe as European the representatives of those countries which they said were not situated in Europe: this was for most children the Japanese and the Vietnamese, and sometimes the Americans. Many children also believed that such countries as Norway, Portugal or Greece do not lie in Europe. Insufficient knowledge of geography, combined with low levels of media attention to these nations, probably helps to explain this. According to the majority of the teachers (60.4%) people who live on continents other than Europe are non-European.

At the next stage of the investigation the respondents were asked the question: *What does it mean to be a European?* Both the pupils (72.2%) and teachers (47.2%) declared that to be a European meant “to live in Europe”. However, the children’s views were of a simpler nature. Only a few of them associated Europeaness with education (11.4% - e.g. “knowledge of foreign languages and technological innovations”), systems of values (6.8% - e.g. helping the poor), similar culture and tradition (6.8%). Some of the pupils mentioned European roots - the fact of being born there (9%) and having European ancestors (6.8%). The teachers’ opinions were more complex. They stressed the values: tolerance - 24%; freedom (understood as “the possibility to establish direct contacts with other people and to travel”) - 24.5%; education (“knowledge of foreign languages and technological innovations”) - 22.6%) and European culture - 18.9%.

Almost all of the children (91%) said that they felt European because in addition to the fact that this continent is their place birth and residence, they speak foreign languages, maintain contact with European nations, cherish similar traditions and follow a similar lifestyle. The teachers had more doubts. 7.5% of them did not consider themselves to be Europeans, 11.3% did not have an opinion. Their dilemmas concern firstly their inability to communicate with members of other nationalities (they do not know foreign languages), but also an unfavourable financial position which makes it difficult for them to travel.

Conclusions

1. The criteria applied by the children to determine Europeaness were more clear-cut than those used by their teachers; the pupils concentrated on a nation’s popularity and

- its relations with Poland; the teachers paid attention to culture, economic and social development. Both groups found the geographical location important.
2. All the respondents were aware of the significance of culture and values, and treated them as determinants of Europeanness; however, historical arguments (roots) were more important for the children, while personal development (freedom of contact, education) mattered more to the teachers.
 3. All the respondents focused on western countries and demonstrated a marked preference for their own nation.
 4. Both the children and teachers felt European, but the latter had more doubts about it.
 5. An important criterion in perceiving shared Europeanness was the ability to communicate with members of other nationalities. Due to their better command of foreign languages, the pupils felt more European than their teachers.

3. Local, national and European ties of pupils and their teachers

The relationship between local, national and European ties is complex. On the one hand it may be assumed that these concepts are mutually exclusive (the stronger one kind of tie becomes, the weaker the others are), but on the other hand such ties may be expected to have a concentric structure, where one is included in another. It may be that the intensity and activation of each kind of tie depends upon the context in which a given question is asked. The children's responses do not enable a unequivocal interpretation, as none of the identity levels was predominant. In the case of self-presentation (*If you meet an American boy you tell him that you are from Warmia, Poland, Europe etc.*) and culture (*What monuments would you show to an American boy: local, national etc.*) national identity always took precedence, but in the questions requiring a more empathetic consideration (helping poor children from different places: local, national etc.), local ties were of primary importance. Regional ties, both cultural and emotional, were similar to European ones.

The teachers' answers were also ambiguous. They declared strong national and local ties, and their sense of ties with Europe and humanity as a whole was much weaker. However, the question concerning their behaviour in a concrete situation (engaging emotions) elicited slightly different preferences. The teachers' choices were here determined by the willingness to participate in the life of a local community. This time they seemed not to favour their own national group; they were ready to help children from other countries, and not only European children, but declared no intention of helping Polish children from outside their own hometown!

Conclusions

1. It is difficult to observe the gradation of intensity of three kinds of ties, i.e. local, national and European, both among the pupils and teachers.
2. The sense of national identity is preferred at the declarative level.
3. At the level of behaviours of an emotional character, the respondents are guided by local ties.

Summary

The aim of the research presented in this paper was to answer two questions: how pupils and teachers understand the concept of Europeanness, and what is the correlation between their sense of national/local identity and their openness to supranational ties. It was especially interesting to compare the views of the two groups of respondents, and to determine the kind of influence the teachers had on their pupils' opinions.

It seems that national and European identity is a 'mental phenomenon' of a similar nature. Both these concepts are described by means of the same categories that may be grouped as follows:

- geographical criterion (living in a given state/on a given continent),
- roots (birthplace, parents' nationality);
- culture and tradition (language, awareness of common history),
- values (tolerance, democracy, freedom, religious beliefs),
- development – of the whole country (economic) and personal (education).

The teachers perceive the phenomenon as more complex, while the pupils' views are more clear-cut – they usually concentrate on a single criterion. The teachers refer to volitional arguments (education, values, culture and tradition); the pupils use observable (geographical criterion) or historical, stable categories (roots). According to the teachers, national identity and European identity are concepts close to each other, but the first is more connected with responsibility and pride, while European identity is associated with personal development (education) and economic growth (good financial position). The pupils focus on external criteria: culture (including the native language) in the case of their national identity, and place of residence in that of European ties.

The attempt to analyse the relationship between various kinds of identity (local, national and European) brought more questions than answers. Distinct differences could be observed between the declarative and situational levels (placing oneself in a given situation). It also seems that particular questions (concerning emotions, self-presentation, culture) 'activate' different kinds of ties. In other words, certain emotional, personal or social factors (and probably many other) can intensify our feeling of a given type of identity.

How can the teachers affect the opinions and attitudes of their pupils in uniting Europe? The research shows that they approve of the idea of a European Community. Most of them feel European. They place Poland among the EU members rather than among the associate states. Moreover, they declare a strong sense of national ties, attachment to Polish tradition and culture, pride in and responsibility for their mother country. This suggests that school may encourage children to defend their national distinctness, but also promote such 'European' values as education, tolerance and democracy.

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