

The unnoticed and slow influence of Europe on education Role of ECNAIS not played out after twenty years

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Governance of schools in the independent sector was the topic of the ECNAIS-conference 2008, which took place in Portugal. Approximately one hundred representatives of fourteen European countries came together for that purpose in a seminar on the outskirts of the old centre of Porto.

Before the actual conference, the President of ECNAIS, the Spaniard Carlos Diaz-Muñiz reflected, at the general meeting of ECNAIS-members on the 20 years existence of ECNAIS. ECNAIS was set up in 1988, and after twenty years it still provides for a necessity. More strongly, in 1988, there were more than ten international organizations which occupied themselves with education. During the years this number declined and ECNAIS grew. The explanation for this is possibly the fact that the members of ECNAIS are convinced of the importance of *independent* schools as an expression of freedom and democracy in Europe which recognizes more and more variety. In any case, it is important that ECNAIS is a financially independent organization, run and controlled by the members themselves (presently 22 national organizations for private education, originating from sixteen countries). When ECNAIS was set up twenty years ago, the European Union built up 'Europe'. Throughout the years, certainly after the expansion with ten new Member States, many people felt however that the only building happened in 'Brussels', on European institutions of which the usefulness and need are not always clear. The dissatisfaction that arose became most apparent in the rejection of the European constitution by the French and Dutch voters. The European *civil society* appeared to be able to talk and found their way to let the European elite hear a powerful 'no'; 'Brussels' was left in confusion. The past twenty years, ECNAIS has also concentrated on 'Brussels' and must observe that it is becoming increasingly more difficult to find the right acceptances. It is no longer sufficient for the current organization to stand up for *independent* education. If ECNAIS wants to continue to play a role in a united Europe, then ECNAIS must, just like Europe with its 27 Member States, become the ECNAIS of 27. This is necessary, because a lot is to be expected.

Dogmas

The European Union does not do so much with education formally. In all European treaties it is confirmed time after time that the Member States themselves continue to make decisions concerning their own education. Nevertheless, all Member States have decided unanimously and voluntarily that the pupils of now must have a number of core competences agreed in a European setting. It is up to the Member States to provide their own interpretation. Changes therefore, not *by decrees*, but *by degrees*, unnoticed and slow. And applicable for Europe as a whole; a strong ECNAIS will automatically get more importance this way. Informally, Europe will involve itself more and more with education. National organizations for *independent schools* can simply not allow themselves to only look within its own borders; fighting together for independent education, showing how private education in Europe has been organized and which social importance it serves, is the slogan now. It speaks for itself that we do not only ask our pupils to think European, but can also expect from our own national organizations to want to set up European.

In thinking European on education, two themes receive more and more attention. These are social cohesion and equal chances for everyone. In itself there is nothing wrong with this. But alarm bells should ring, these dogmas sound throughout Europe, when we hear that

independent schools stand in the way of these two main points: social cohesion and equal chances for everyone.

In the General Meeting of ECNAIS, the executive committee of ECNAIS asked for special attention to this. Appearances will be more and more against *Independent schools*, correct or undeserved. And there is only one party which can do anything against it and that is those *independent schools* themselves. Diaz-Muñiz called ECNAIS-members to come into action together. In his opinion there are four steps are which must be taken.

1. make it clear why these two dogmas are so important for those who emphasize them (what is the social and political meaning of social cohesion and equal chances?);
2. make it clear what *independent* education considers to be social cohesion and equal chances in relation to the education it offers;
3. analyze to what extent it is true that *independent schools* stand in the way of social cohesion and equal chances (if it does this in the first place);
4. make it clear how *independent education* contributes to social cohesion and equal chances.

If we don't do this, according to the ECNAIS-chairperson, appearances will be more and more against us: "Nobody except ourselves could help". But then we should first know what we will say to 27 European ministers of education, to 785 members of the European Parliament, to parents who themselves want to be able to continue to choose the best education for their children.

Conference on governance

Immediately after the General Meeting, the actual about controlling *independent schools* took place. As a school leader, how can you win over your team in addition to all that needs to be done? Society will demand more and more of schools and schools need respond to this.

Schools have a growing responsibility in this. But much more important than this *responsibility* will be the *response ability*. External pressure on schools is increasing: pupils must perform well; they must be prepared for society and for jobs of which we do not yet know what they will be like and then it must also remain attractive for them; informal learning continues to expand. You just go ahead and try, as a school leader!

Rudi Schollaert, of the Flemish Catholic Governing Board organisation VSKO, told his audience that, under similar circumstances, you can only manage with shared leadership: it is no longer possible for one person to do and know everything, therefore make use of someone else's qualities and try to allow as much diversity as possible. His is the only way to stimulate, communicate and apply new responsibilities and subjects. This is how coherence is created within a school, despite diversity. Schollaert compared this strikingly with a symphony orchestra which with very divergent instruments nevertheless produces a harmonious sound. The Polish Jolanta Kaluza, school head and founder-owner (!) of *Szkola Jak Dom* (school like home) in Katowice, emphasises in her successful school on bringing about good circumstances and creating an atmosphere in which the team can function as a unit with room for all individual conceptions.

The Sociocratic decision model stands central within 32 Consent-schools in Enschede (a member of the VBS for a few years). Bert Lambeck, director of the 'privatized' public

primary school Roombeek explained that only assuming the democratic game rules (the majority is half plus one) in a school does not work. Too many people can then feel shut out. In the sociocracy (the first idea about this came from Kees Boeke) concerns that all no-voters

substantiate why they are against something. In this way everyone takes an active role in the decision-making, which leads to an inner motivation and involvement (everybody's voice is heard).

The main thread in the lectures of the three participants is set in the observation that the authoritarian school head can no longer exist. Only working collectively on the many challenges to which schools must withstand. Only then can results be achieved. And sometimes those results are striking, just like in Finland.

Finnish secret?

When nowadays we speak about good education, Finland usually pops up as an example. What is the Finnish secret? Aki Holopainen of the Finnish association for *independent* education solved the mysteries, but tempered directly all highly spoken expectations by indicating that the success of Finnish education is closely cohesive with the Finnish society. The Finnish society offers everyone equal chances, parents are convinced of the importance of a good education (because they have had it themselves), the population is still very homogeneous and in Finland, a culture exists in which agreements are complied with. A Fin is pragmatic and does not talk too long and finally there is little corruption. Within these frameworks education is provided in a national curriculum by university trained teachers who are strongly left free pedagogically and didactically. Weak students receive direct support, problem pupils are included as much as possible in the regular education. And, unthinkable in many other European countries, teacher and pupil still have respect for each other and the pupil accepts the authority of the teacher.

ECNAIS have proved in twenty years that the role for *independent schools* has not yet been played out. But the dangers lie around the European corner. ECNAIS is obliged to itself and the connected members to provide answers. Possibly the 21st conference on 23-25 April 2009 in Sofia will offer the possibility.

ECNAIS stands for the European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools. Further information on ECNAIS can be found at www.ecnaais.org and www.vbs.nl.