

OWNERSHIP, SELF-ORGANISATION AND DIVERSITY AS THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

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New ways of organizing and funding schools

Independent schools all across Europe are using the latitude their national laws afford them to find new ways of organising and funding schools. In Western Europe, this is rooted in a long history of constitutional guarantees for freedom of education and freedom of parental choice; other parts of Europe revitalised these some decades ago. By exercising their constitutional rights, independent or private schools represent the diversity and pluralism inherent in European society. Parents and teachers have real freedom of choice in education thanks to the varied religious, philosophical and pedagogical backgrounds and different curricula and approaches of independent schools. These schools offer an educational alternative to the public schools regulated and controlled by the government, which results in a certain amount of competitiveness. This can raise the quality of education in the whole educational system. In countries whose governments fund public and private schools more or less equally, and where both school types enjoy a measure of autonomy, the quality of education is higher than in countries where this is not the case.

Research by the OECD and the World Bank has proven that if countries provide room for pedagogical entrepreneurship subsidised by the state, the quality of education for all children (both in public and in private schools) is higher compared to countries where there are no such programmes.

In this article, we present examples of the different approaches of independent schools in Europe, and of the added value of their strong ties to civil society. The meaning of private ownership connected to practice-proven models of self-governing and self-organisation of these schools will be illuminated. We will discuss the current situation of independent schools in the Netherlands and examine how they are organised and funded. Our particular focus will be on what ‘freedom of education’ means in Dutch society today, and on the ongoing public debate about this fundamental right. Finally, a look at the goals and activities of the European Council of National Associations of Independent schools will provide insights into the co-operation of independent schools in Europe and what they can learn from each other.

Social ownership and co-operation in education

Before we examine more closely the meaning of the term *diversity*, which is, in essence, a word denoting difference, we would like to focus for a moment on what we actually have in common. It can reasonably be asserted that on a basic level, the wish to lead a dignified existence is universal. We wish it for ourselves, for our children, and if possible, for everybody else – we all matter. Interestingly, the moment we affirm that we share this goal, it becomes apparent that each of us has different ideas about how to attain it. This is caused by the fact that every individual is unique. Now, considering the fundamental part that education plays in society, we feel this role should entail, on the one hand, the development of individual talents, and on the other hand, the development of ties and connections with society as a whole. We have witnessed several major developments in society that not only impact the day-to-day lives of individuals, but also the lives we have built together in the period of

stability and growth following the Second World War. Because these developments directly affect education, we have felt it is important to explore them more thoroughly.

First and foremost, we are referring to the internet and mobile phones or smartphones. Schools are no longer the principal access point to knowledge. Information is widely available: it is everywhere. For the past two decades, we have seen that the classical form of education, transfer of knowledge, has had to compete with modern forms of competency-based learning. Also, we are referring to globalisation. First, economic migration has led to a great deal of diversity in the Dutch population, which offers opportunities to gain new insights. Second, practically any place on earth can be reached within 24 hours and at relatively low cost. To us, the shifting of markets and industries to the East signifies new challenges to continue to prosper in this world by earning money: prosperity is generated by income. And then, of course, there is the pressure our spending patterns as consumers put on the earth's resources. We have not been living off the earth's interest for a long time – we are living off its capital. This cannot continue much longer. We do not just need to reduce our ecological footprint, but having now reached a world population of 7 billion, we need to do so drastically.

Dutch society is under enormous pressure to find ways of financing its welfare state, due to an ageing population and a decline in younger generations. We will need to muster all our resourcefulness and ingenuity to be able to continue looking after the people who need us. One thing is certain: our children's world will not look anything like ours. What we need is a transformation in many areas: a smart and dignified care system, an innovative and international economy, robust social structures, rural vitality, and so on. Interestingly, while the analysis is clear, the solutions are exceedingly complex. The current crisis is a signal that old social structures and thought patterns, old ways of institutionalising and enacting collective social forms, are coming to an end. This sentiment is widely shared by professionals in healthcare and education. They feel stuck in a bureaucratic limbo of increasing work pressure and demands, of continual obligatory transparency and accountability protocols, at the expense of primary processes. The credit crunch and concomitant global financial crisis have severely damaged the people's faith in financial institutions, which to them are abstract and anonymous. Critical and assertive citizens are on a quest to find new forms of self-organisation.

The key question we are all asking is: How can we apply our knowledge of today's world in educating for a dignified existence in the world of tomorrow? Evolutionary theory teaches us the importance of variety for the survival of species. The concept of 'survival of the fittest' does not refer to physical fitness, but to the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. And for that, variety is essential. The best way that we as a society can prepare for the unknowable future is to make room for diversity in the classroom. After all, we cannot anticipate which drastic changes of circumstances today's teenagers may have to take on as young adults. Diversity in education makes them more resilient; a broad education that does justice to their various talents makes them stronger. This equips them to fulfil their roles in society and on the labour market as responsible and confident citizens.

As the saying goes: If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together. We will need to go very far together to realise a dignified existence for everybody in the world, for ourselves, and for our children. And we can only do this if we are profoundly open to the talent that surrounds us, if we rejoice in differences, if we can enter into discussions full of

wonder at our own blind spots, if we dare to show our own true colours in these discussions and if we are aware of our own shortcomings. This means that we may have to see performance results in a new light, rather than using the limited view of the present. It also means we must continue to invest in different voices, in fundamental research, in inspirational sanctuaries, in the 'other' types of education. For all this, freedom of education is a wonderful foundation. The result and value of diversity is that it enables us as a society to make use of the full wealth of our talents.

We will need to apply ourselves enduringly to freedom of education and broad education. On an international level, this can be done by connecting with the Dutch initiatives taken in recent years to give shape to diversity as a power source for education in the Netherlands.

Diversity and variety in the Dutch education system

Below are some ways in which diversity plays a role in Dutch education based on the experience of VBS, one of the associations of independent schools in The Netherlands:

Tenacity

School boards are generally small, giving inspired school leaders manoeuvring space so that they in turn can provide room for teacher expertise and involvement.

Pedagogical entrepreneurship

Backing VBS is a wide range of innovating schools: both traditional reformist educators such as Dalton, Montessori, Jenaplan, Freinet, *Vrije Scholen*, *Werkplaats Kindergemeenschap* and Kees Boeke, and modern pedagogical entrepreneurs, such as bilingual education (*tweetalig onderwijs* or *tto*), internationally orientated education culminating in an IB certificate, European schools, *Iederwijs*, schools with enhanced curricula in the areas of culture, ICT or intellectual giftedness, and last but not least, a richly varied group of schools for special education, which for decades has been providing suitable education to vulnerable pupils.

Education as a meeting place

The affiliated schools of VBS go by the assumption that all philosophies of life and schools of thought are of equal value, provided that there is mutual respect for the other party's viewpoints.

The human measure & democratic boards

VBS backers include a large number of school boards that govern a single school, and school boards consisting of committed and knowledgeable parents. A striking number of these is organised in the most democratic legal form, Association (Dutch: *vereniging*).

Civil society initiatives

The schools cooperating within VBS are the result of private initiatives from the civil society.

Believing in freedom of education and school choice

These freedoms are held in the utmost regard within VBS, and they deserve to be safeguarded for the future as a pillar of the unique Dutch educational system.

Schools highly value diversity in education, because they feel it affords them the space to do justice to the varied talents of children and young adults, to make broad education actually work. This way, teaching and parental responsibilities can be harmonised, and innovative actions taken to bring a dynamic element into the system.

In the past years, VBS has taken several initiatives to invest in diversity in Dutch education, such as:

- The introduction of the co-operative in education, at the celebration of the 80-years' anniversary of VBS in 2001. In a co-operative, small-scale pedagogical entrepreneurs are able to work together without losing their individual identities. The co-operative as a co-operating association has become a permanent fixture of the educational system.
- The project LeerKracht Aanzet, in which VBS works together with a teachers' union on initiatives for using teacher professionalism to contribute to the school's organisation.
- The transformation of an existing school board into a teachers' co-operative (Dutch: *lerarencoöperatie*); this special type of co-operative was awarded the *LeerKracht Aanzet Award* in 2010.
- Taking on the secretariat of VBS-affiliated organisations for educational reform, such as *Nederlandse Dalton Vereniging* (NDV), *Nederlandse Montessori Vereniging* (NMV), *Samenwerkingsverband van Organisaties voor Vernieuwingsonderwijs* (SOVO) and *Vereniging Begaafdheidsprofiel scholen*.
- The project Combinatiefuncties Onderwijs, Sport en Cultuur, in which VBS plays an initiating role. The government, in a note on sports, 'Sport & bewegen in de buurt' (*sports and activities in the neighbourhood*) has declared it wants to strongly increase the number of professionals in combined jobs, specifically, the number of neighbourhood sports coaches.
- The foundation of the Landelijk Steunpunt Brede Scholen, for which VBS bears administrative responsibility. This centre focuses in particular on the co-operation between educational institutions and child care centres.
- The start of the course 'Levenskunst in onderwijs' (The art of living in education), in the spring of 2012, for school leaders and secondary school teachers, in co-operation with philosopher Joep Dohmen of the University for Humanistics, Utrecht.

As a VBS poll among school board members and school leaders has shown, the Dutch government's one-sided focus on performance in language and arithmetic is counter-productive to educational reform, creates a culture of fear of failure and devalues the public image of the school as a formative institution.

How to revitalise freedom of education in today's society

The Dutch constitutional education system rests on two pillars: freedom of education and the duality of independent schools (Dutch: *bijzonder onderwijs*) and public schools (Dutch: *openbaar onderwijs*). These two pillars are securely joined together by the equal treatment of private and public education in terms of funding. Freedom of education ensures leeway is given to initiatives from the civil society, making it possible for citizens to associate freely and take responsibility by founding and maintaining schools based on a range of educational values.

Self-governance and self-organisation form the basis of diversity in Dutch education. This diversity is expressed particularly in the level of commitment with which small school boards advocate the human measure in education, culminating in varied forms of pedagogical entrepreneurship. After all, at the heart of the text of the Dutch constitution concerning freedom of education lies the right to take bottom-up action to reform education. There are insufficient opportunities in the Netherlands for reforming education from within through the foundation of new schools. Freedom of education can only be a force of revitalisation if new parties reinforce the social dynamics of the educational system.

In the past decades, secularisation and individualism have been diminishing the binding force of the established religions in the Netherlands as collective providers of spiritual meaning. Still, of the two-thirds of schools in the Netherlands that are independent, 90 percent is religious denominational (Catholic, Protestant, Islamic, and so on). The remaining 10 percent are called non-religious denominational (based on a philosophy of life or of pedagogical reform). If freedom of education is to continue vitalising our education system, it is of the utmost importance that government funding also applies to independent schools based on (new) pedagogical ideas. This step would not cross the boundaries of the current constitutional framework or legislature. It would also help the Netherlands stay in line with the Treaty of Lisbon, which included the earlier Article 14 from the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. This article recognises **“the freedom to found educational establishments with due respect for democratic principles and the right of parents to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions shall be respected, in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of such freedom and right.”**

We feel it is the special responsibility of the government (on local, provincial and national levels) to provide opportunities for applying the right to freedom of education in new ways. It will require self-discipline on the government’s part to make ample room for freedom of education as a vitalising principle, and to facilitate and encourage initiatives from the civil society. Naturally, the government also has a duty to ensure the educational system’s soundness. However, the systematic straightjacket of uniformity that the government is forcing onto schools through publicly measuring results and a rigid inspectorate needs to be put to a stop. In addition, it would be good to rethink the scope of the constitutional notion of ‘soundness’. Within the framework of the constitution, this cannot be understood as anything more than a safeguard for a minimum or basic level of quality – popularly referred to as the ‘normative role’ of the government. However, in current legislation and funding requirements, it seems as if the government is to set and safeguard the maximum quality level.

School boards would do well to make clear that they use freedom of education in a socially responsible way. As far as VBS is concerned, independent schools practise corporate social responsibility *avant la lettre*. The legitimacy of independent schools as socially responsible institutions is heightened when school boards take the lead in a horizontal dialogue with the school’s social surroundings. As the profile organisation of non-denominational independent schools, VBS connects independent schools with the ‘other’ education types. As a recognised type of ideological education, the non-denominational independent school consider all ideological and philosophical schools of thought of equal value, provided that there is mutual respect for the other party’s viewpoints. Many non-denominational independent schools are based on convictions deriving from pedagogical/didactical schools of thought, a fact that ought to be voiced more strongly in order to be recognised. VBS considers it a duty to contribute to the public debate about education. Part of that is taking new actions to embed independent schools more firmly into society, and thus keeping freedom of education alive and future-proof. To educate is, above all, to give meaning, and independent schools do so from their own religious, ideological or pedagogical values and orientation. By applying corporate social responsibility as co-operatives, schools will not have to lose sight of the human measure and can remain true to their own ideological profiles.

The Dutch Education Council underlines the immense value of freedom of education

Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution gives privately-owned or independent schools the same right to funding as state schools. In practice, the schools that qualify for this type of funding are largely founded on the basis of an established religious denomination. Article 23 has been in the Constitution since 1917. The Dutch Education Council (Dutch: *Onderwijsraad*) was asked to revisit Article 23 and produce a new authoritative interpretation. In a recent report the Council underlines the present importance of this constitutional guarantee about freedom of education.

Article 23 of the Dutch constitution places state schools and schools under private patronage on an equal footing, and guarantees freedom of education. The Education Council believes that, although it is 100 years old, this Article is still of immense value, because it offers parents the possibility to choose a form of education that conforms with their own views on life. It creates conditions that allow individuals to connect with their education and common values. However, the Council believes that Article 23 should be interpreted more broadly in order to offer a better fit with modern times. Schools under private patronage now can be founded only on the basis of a religion or ideology, which must also be visibly rooted in society. The Council believes that it should also be possible to found a school on the basis of pedagogical beliefs as well as ideologies that are relatively new in the Netherlands. This would ensure that Article 23 better meets the needs of our diverse society. The Council also considers the right of individuals to a good education paramount.

If the concept of ‘persuasion’ (Dutch: *richting*) as used in the Constitution, was to be interpreted more broadly, the state would be forced to assess whether this concept also covers pedagogical beliefs. The Education Council believes that such would be beyond the reasonable remit of the government. We therefore advocate a system of persuasion-free school planning: a system where the concept of persuasion no longer plays a role in the foundation of schools. Any school capable of attracting a sufficient number of pupils could be said to have social acceptance and would thereby qualify for state funding. The Council has made a number of concrete proposals for the organisation of this system, which would still be based on freedom of education, and which would continue to endorse state schools and school under private patronage, but which additionally would allow a wider scope for establishing schools managed by a private patron. Furthermore, the Council recommends that the right to found state schools by parental initiative be restored. Finally, it should be possible to secure greater control over the quality of education provided by a school at the time of its foundation. The Council propose that funding requirements are tightened before initial funding is granted.

A broader interpretation of the concept of persuasion necessarily means that persuasion should no longer be a crucial factor in education legislation. Legislation should therefore be brought into line with an open concept of persuasion. This should be done in several areas where persuasion is a factor, including travel arrangements for pupils, exemption from compulsory education, protection from discrimination and inspection supervision. The Education Council has made practical proposals for applying the concept of persuasion in each of these areas. A broader concept of persuasion could encourage more discussion in schools about the way the school’s core beliefs are expressed. The Council therefore requests that the competent authority periodically assesses parents’ views in this respect. In extreme cases, parents could create their own schooling provision either within of outside the existing governance structure.

The Education Council agrees with the government-established minimum standards for education and feels that these aim to achieve real quality, because the development of individuals and of society as a whole are strongly related to the quality of education. The Council should establish a protocol for how the legislature deals with minimum standards and quality requirements. Standards established by the government must be based on sufficiently clear and, where possible, objective, broad statutory norms. Minimum standards are, as the name implies, the absolute minimum that must be achieved. If objectivity of the standards is impossible, this shortcoming should be compensated for by the introduction of procedural criteria, such as effective protection of rights.

Education offers a choice once more

In autumn 2012, early elections will be held in the Netherlands. In politics, we place particular emphasis on creating room for diversity, broad education, self-evaluation and the human measure. Education as a system should not be micro-managed and controlled by the government, as this only leads to more uniformity and standardisation. In these times of globalisation, what young people actually need is a broad personal background (*Bildung*) and space for diversity, creativity and entrepreneurship.

For schools, parents are pillars as well as partners. They play a significant role in the school's function as a community of values. Teachers deserve to be challenged as professionals to give shape and meaning to the school's organisation. We should not be afraid to use peer visitations and peer reviews as incentives to assess one another and keep teachers and school leaders on their toes.

In its advice about Article 23 of the Constitution mentioned above, the Dutch Education Council makes a convincing case for the relevance of freedom of education and freedom of parental choice in today's world. According to the Council, these fundamental freedoms strongly contribute to new generations forming ties to a rapidly changing society. Self-organisation, self-government and self-evaluation are pivotal factors in maintaining our educational system's much-praised diversity and philosophical multiformity. The government needs to expand its funding criteria, subsidising not just the schools founded on religious or ideological principles, but also the ones grounded in contemporary educational ideas and pedagogical insights.

There is ample cause for politicians to draw lessons from the disproportionate expansion of the managerial levels in education. The collapse of one such merged multi-site school and the dire predicaments faced by the combined school board of a group of former public schools turned independent demand that we as a society re-establish the value of smaller school boards. The many single-site schools in primary and secondary education – whose boards, together with committed parents, make every effort to run that one school for which they are responsible – deserve to be restored to their former stature by the government. The continued existence of these invaluable single-site boards must be protected by risk-sharing through the foundation of co-operatives and collective funds, by sufficient government funding, by independent merger tests, and by exploring the possibilities of responsible 'de-merging'.

The same protections must be extended to small schools. These, too, unflaggingly give shape and meaning to the human measure, in education and in the community, in the neighbourhoods and small villages. For this, the government allowance for smaller schools (Dutch: *kleinescholenstoelag*) is indispensable: without it, multiformity among schools will

inevitably suffer, limiting choices for parents and teachers. In areas with rapidly diminishing student counts, continuance of the *kleinescholentoeslag* could create co-operatives of low-enrolment schools, (child & after-school) care centres, libraries, sports associations and more, all under the banner of the 'broad school'.

Dutch freedom of education as an export article

Other European countries look to the Netherlands with admiration because the Dutch government funds private and public schools equally, and because almost 70 percent of all Dutch primary and secondary schools are subsidised private schools. This situation is based in freedom of choice for parents and the opportunity of doing justice to the differences between individual children, but also informed by the perspective of teachers, who are given freedom of choice as well. As a result, they feel in charge of the curriculum in the school of their choice. The Dutch situation generates a larger social involvement in education. It is astonishing to think that nowadays, independent education in the Netherlands is frequently forced into the defensive by politicians who cannot see the treasure within our constitutional educational system. In comparison, independent schools in other European countries are in far less ideal circumstances.

In 2004, when the Netherlands held the presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Dutch then-minister of education, Maria van der Hoeven, promoted the unique Dutch brand of freedom of education as an export article to her European colleagues. In particular, she referred to research that shows how much the Dutch system increases the quality of education through strong competition between schools. The quality increases even further because of how equal the funding of public and private schools is. Without this equality, private schools are more dependent on higher parental contributions, and thus no longer are broadly accessible. That is not something these schools choose for themselves, but the direct consequence of a country's government lacking the political courage to subsidise private schools to the same extent as they do the public schools.

The difference in the funding of European independent schools

Although every European country recognises independent education or independent schools, the Netherlands is unique in that its independent schools are 100 percent government-funded, and form the majority. In most other European countries, independent education has a minority position and independent schools are seen in light of protecting minority rights. In the Netherlands, self-organisation and self-management have become the supporting principles. The situation in Flanders and Denmark appears to be the most similar. In Belgium, independent schools are also in the majority (most are Catholic schools) and government funding is at 85 percent. In Denmark, funding is also 85 percent, but only 11 percent of schools are independent. In countries like Italy, France and Spain, independent education is mainly Catholic and under the wings of the church. In Eastern European countries, independent schools are often based on various pedagogical ideas, and privately founded as a modern response to the former ideological monoculture of state-dominated education.

European Co-operation of Independent schools

In 1982, a former headmaster of a private school in the United Kingdom, Peter Mason, MBE visited a number of Associations of Independent schools in Europe. These visits revealed how very little contact or knowledge national associations of independent schools had of their counterparts in other countries, of their philosophies, their relations of the national systems and the legal controls or subsidies involved. Consequently, in 1988, Peter Mason initiated the

founding of the European Council of National Associations of Independent schools (ECNAIS). Among the founders were national associations representing Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Vision and mission of ECNAIS

ECNAIS is a non-political, non-confessional, international association for collaboration between national associations of independent schools in European countries. We use the term 'independent' in our statutes, but more common all over Europe is the term 'private' schools, meaning not governed or owned by the state. ECNAIS concerns schools which are strongly connected to the civil society. Membership is open as of a right to any national association of independent schools whose statutes accord with the objectives of ECNAIS and whose members, whether subsidised or not by state funds, do not form part of the public sector of education. Associate or corresponding membership is open to other national or international bodies or associations which share the same objectives. ECNAIS is managed by a Management Committee consisting of one representative from each national association.

ECNAIS unifies National Associations from more than 20 European countries. Today, it has a growing number of member associations from Central and Eastern European countries. The associations of private schools in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland were the first to join ECNAIS, followed by associations from Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania and the Ukraine. The Strategic plan of 2008 – 2012 contains the following vision statement: The human right to offer educational alternatives to state education is unchallenged in all European states, and is accepted and / or supported through national legislation. The parental choice of an alternative education is supported through state funding. Independent schools are free to pursue their own values within the framework of the European Convention on Human Rights, and have the autonomy to determine their own curriculum.

Independent schools are perceived as:

- Socially responsible and value-based entrepreneurs in education;
- Leading to bottom-up innovation in education;
- Having a strong connection to the community as a whole;
- Responsive to the new demands of the modern society;
- Proactive towards the growing diversity in society;
- Promoters of strong social cohesion, stimulating integration.

ECNAIS acts as a network for sharing information and knowledge between national associations. The mission statement in its strategic plan states that ECNAIS:

- supports and pursues the values embedded in a democratic approach to pluralism in the national educational systems, and respect of the parental choice;
- promotes the interests of all kinds of independent education, both confessional and lay, whose principles conform to those set out in the Universal Declaration of Human rights;
- develops political statements that promote the understanding of the values of the independent sector, and improve their acceptance and financial support in national legislation;
- targets policy makers at an international level by representing the independent sector at the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, the Commission of the European Union and other international organisations, on matters of common concern, based on an agreed programme;

- assists both current and potential members in their efforts to promote the understanding of the value of a democratic attitude in a plural society.

Quality and evaluation of independent schools

The annual ECNAIS conference, held each spring, and its annual seminar in autumn, offer opportunities for interested parties to meet and discuss a topical subject that holds significance for the development of private schools in different European countries, but also on the level of the European Council of ministers of education in the EU. The theme of the ECNAIS conference in Helsinki, in April 2010, was “Quality and evaluation of independent schools”. It was a follow-up to the previous year’s conference held in Sofia on “Benchmarks and Values” in April 2009, which concluded that it is crucial for the independent sector, as well as for the individual schools, that the following topics are clarified:

- the individual independent school is based on its own values;
- the values are clear and visible in how the school is run from day to day;
- the values are communicated to internal parties and external stakeholders;
- clear, visible and communicated values are of the utmost importance, as the most common assumptions made in the educational debate tend to focus on the measurable aspects of performance using available benchmarks.

The focus on values and quality was an addition to the ECNAIS seminar “Values and Evaluation” held in Rome in November 2009. The conference started out from the idea that independent schools are based on their own values. It touched upon and debated the theory that the focus may be shifting from the value-based part of the schools’ routine towards those activities that are easier to measure. The concept of “self-evaluation” was presented and formed part of the discussions about the development of independent schools. The issues raised instigated much discussion and debate on the future of independent schools, their social responsibilities, the sector's opportunities in the future and last but not least, ethical questions. At the November 2010 ECNAIS seminar in Berlin, we discussed the role which the national associations are playing in strengthening the position of independent schools in their own countries. Once again, we realised the importance of government funding for private schools, to make it possible that children of all social backgrounds can attend one. But we also became more aware of the struggle for life which many private schools face these days because of budgetary cuts. The participants of this seminar generally agreed that independent schools in Europe are under pressure due to demographic decline, the economic crisis, ideological framing by politicians, and a lack of a clear vision on the anthropological and intrinsic vision of education as public service. It was agreed that there is a need for:

- an overview of the various arguments to support the added value and social importance of independent schools;
- access to data about the results and real costs of independent schools, especially about their high cost-effectiveness;
- links on the ECNAIS website to international reports that prove the added value of independent schools in a plural society;
- examples to show that independent schools offer room for innovative teaching;
- examples to show that independent schools offer pupils an enriched learning environment;
- a proactive attitude of the national associations of independent schools towards their own governments, to show the social responsibility of independent schools and their positive ways of dealing with the growing diversity in society;

- a clear vision on the democratic right of freedom of education and freedom of parental choice in education within the framework of the European Convention of Human Rights and with respect to the constitution of each European state;
- an investigation of the legal status of private schools in different European countries' national legislation.

Diversity in education: Struggle for life or creating the future?

As a follow-up to the 2010 seminar in Berlin, the May 2011 ECNAIS conference in Madrid was themed 'Diversity in education: Struggle for life or creating the future?' On the one hand, we want to learn how the different national associations respond on the threats faced by private schools in their country, and especially about the actions they have taken to overcome them. On the other hand, we want to inspire each other to find new ways of making use of the freedom of education and the freedom of parental school choice. The ECNAIS strongly believes in those essential values of a democratic and pluralistic society. The independent state-subsidised school reflects the diversity present in every society, and in doing so, is influential in strengthening the civil society and the social cohesion of society as a whole.

The economic and financial crises we are facing in Europe highlight some important trends that are addressed in schools every day: globalisation, complexity, creativity and imagination. In Europe, it is a duty of the state to provide compulsory education. This provision implies different means and resources. In which ways do European states provide compulsory education? Can we recognise clear tendencies in politics, in the sphere of education, regarding the balance between public and private sectors? The economic crisis forced all governments to reduce public expenditure. Consequently, there is a shortage of resources for both public and for independent education. Education is a complex activity with many intangible aspects that are difficult to test and measure. We want to identify tensions such as educational results versus educational process, soft skills versus hard skills, competencies versus knowledge, test training versus holistic approaches. We want to establish good practices that enable independent schools to attain good results by giving room to creativity, innovation, eagerness to learn and autonomy.

In 2011, ECNAIS was given approval to start a Jean Monnet project within the EU Life-long Learning programme concerning the improvement of the diversity in education. An essential part of the project was strengthening the co-operation between national associations of independent schools in Eastern and Western European countries. Our experience has been that this co-operation really is of mutual interest. We have learned a lot from the results reached in a mere two decades by the Czech, Slovak and Polish associations for private schools. This knowledge helps ECNAIS support new associations of private schools in countries like Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania and the Ukraine.

European Meeting of Independent Education (EMIE)

For over ten years, representatives of ECNAIS have been meeting in Brussels with representatives of fifteen other European organisations, each year on the last day of May. Those organisations strongly support freedom of education and freedom of parental choice as well as the right to establish a school on religious, philosophical or pedagogical convictions subsidised by the state. As an NGO, we lobby and advocate on a European level for room for plurality and multiformity in the establishment of schools (religious, philosophical and pedagogical) in Europe's national education systems.

There is a strong tendency in the EU to see education merely as an instrument of labour market policy, something to strengthen the European knowledge-based economy so that it can compete with globally operating markets in the Americas and Asia. European benchmarks for education can narrow the schools' focus to quality measurement for short term goals, especially in language and arithmetic teaching. We have to become more aware that this process of 'neutralisation' of education is going on and that EU policy is part of it. As a result, independent schools can feel more and more forced to minimise their own value-based orientation. They have to respond to the government's increasing demands as if they were privatised public schools. That is why we need to improve the visibility of the social capital, broader outcome and long-term results of independent schools. We also have to demonstrate how public schools can benefit from the added value of independent schools within the national school system.

It is imperative that the different European organisations - which are all in favour of independent schools - develop a new common strategy and take actions to support the modern role of independent schools as a vital part of the civil society. In doing so, we avoid having to be on the defensive. ECNAIS wants to co-operate with EMIE colleagues on a new EMIE declaration about how independent schools are contributing to a plural and democratic European society in the coming decade. We need to educate and prepare our students for Europe 2020. If the global economic crisis teaches us anything, it is that the future of Europe does not lie just in economics but most of all, in values.

The importance of a variety of choices

Although they differ in many respects, all European education schemes allow room for self-management and self-organisation of schools. What connects these independent schools is that they have been set up as a private initiative, often by groups of citizens or enthusiastic educationalists, and that they are frequently based on a religious, philosophical or pedagogical movement. And all these schools have one thing in common: their initiators find upbringing and education to be so closely connected, that they consider value orientation equally important to education in the cognitive sense. Next to the guarantee of freedom of choice for parents, value orientation is also the most important objective of ECNAIS. These goals can only be attained if there is enough room for variety of choice in the national education system.

The danger of an overly unilateral approach by national governments is never far away. Naturally, language and mathematics are important, but the emphasis on cognitive subject teaching leads schools to place too much emphasis on test results and measurable outcomes. That is short-term thinking. The knowledge-based economy also benefits from life-long learning, from people who want to continue their personal development. Therefore, it is necessary that children become balanced individuals, with self-esteem and self-respect, and they are given space to develop their creativity and skills in order to co-operate and take enterprising initiatives. That is where the search for purpose, identity and personal development come in – in other words: value orientation. Attention to values eventually leads to qualitative results, and provides the only way in which children can enjoy life-long learning.

Pedagogical entrepreneurship

The broader results of education are crucial for social capital, which is one of the indispensable pillars of a peaceful and prosperous Europe. The push towards uniformity disregards the fact that an independent school is not purely an object of government targeting, as if it were a privatised public school. The independent school is, above all, an expression of the fact that citizens have a vision on, and want to carry responsibility for education and society.

A good example of an initiative to solve the modern social question of integration of immigrants in society was taken by the Cosmicus Foundation.

The Cosmicus Foundation is a Dutch foundation that aims to advance the education, development and careers of students and alumni through educational, cultural, social and scientific activities and projects. In 1995 the foundation was established by Dutch-Turkish students as a student organization with eight centres throughout the Netherlands. Its aim was to help and support students with a non-Dutch background in secondary school and universities. By time the organization grew and also its activities broadened. Nowadays Cosmicus has three pillars: education, diversity and sustainability. It is an intercultural foundation that is open for everybody, notwithstanding race, colour, religion or gender. It is a unique organization founded by 'new-Dutch people' that wants to contribute to the Dutch society and participate in it. It is a emancipation movement started by students and high educated 'new-Dutch people' with different backgrounds.

In its activities Cosmicus seeks to cooperate with other organizations, because it thinks it is important to not stand alone, but to work together with different groups and organizations to build bridges. Together better solutions for problems are found and by gathering the separate strengths of the partners a better result can be realized.

The Latin word 'cosmicus' derives from the ancient Greek word 'cosmos' and it means 'world citizen'. The Cosmicus Foundation advocates an ideal world in which world citizens will be able to interact in a harmonious way. This ideal world can only be established by people who are equipped with the required and right competencies which enable them to approach their environment with confidence, awareness, tolerance and respect.

For Cosmicus the main focus is on caring for human beings and trying to equip them in the best possible way for the future. To accomplish this, the education and development of the individual, by focusing on its behaviour, feelings and thoughts, are essential. It is their clarity and originality of perception of social, scientific, educational and cultural issues that makes Cosmicus so unique. It is also committed to accomplishing mutual acceptance and understanding, and it is aware of the fact that its members are indeed citizens of the world, with all the responsibilities this entails. To obtain the knowledge, mentality and skills this requires and to develop intercultural competencies, Cosmicus aims to offer opportunities to those who wish to develop themselves on the basis of this idea within and for the good of society.

The Cosmicus Foundation has a Board of Advice and a Committee of Recommendation in which a total of 15 experts in the field of education, diversity and sustainability take part. These people advise the foundation and have linked their name to Cosmicus. I, Simon Steen, am one of them.

Independent education is not a right that once acquired, will last forever. It has to be ‘earned’ and embedded into society continually. For these reasons, independent schools should continue to publicise the broader results of independent education and show how it contributes to solving the questions society faces today.