

Contribution of Simon Steen, Chairman of ECNAIS to the opening session of the 25th Anniversary Conference of ECNAIS ‘Schools as reservoirs of hope’ in The Hague 18-20 April 2013

Dear members and guests of ECNAIS,

I welcome all of you on this annual conference of the European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools, which I shall briefly mention in the rest of my speech as ECNAIS.

I represent the Executive Committee of ECNAIS and you can see sitting behind the table my two colleagues in the Executive Committee, Sofia Reis from Portugal and Per Kristensen from Denmark.

This conference in The Hague is a special one because today we celebrate the 25th anniversary of ECNAIS. I will come back later on the background and foundation of ECNAIS and on the vision and mission of ECNAIS. Then I will also mention the main activities of ECNAIS in the last 5 years and pay attention to the recent development of ECNAIS and our plans for the near future.

But first of all I want to say a special word of welcome to the speakers on this conference to begin with the official speakers representing the Dutch ministry of education and the city of The Hague:

- Ms Anke Buiteveld, director International Policy of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and
- Ms Ingrid van Engelshoven, alderman of education and deputy mayor of the city of The Hague.

And also a warm welcome for the other speakers who are already present here at this moment Mr. Alan Flintham from Great Britain, Mr. Geoff Newcombe from Australia, Mr. Maarten Knoester, Executive Director Stichting Het Rijnlands Lyceum and Mr. Ercan Torun, General Secretary of the Cosmicus Foundation. I will introduce them later.

Today we are gathered with more than 80 participants from 15 countries.

Among them there are two former chairmans of ECNAIS which I want to mention by name. First Mr. Carlos Diaz Muniz, honorary member, and chairman of ECNAIS from 1998 till 2008 and secondly Mr. Cor de Raadt, who was chairman from 1997 till 1998 and before that he was the first treasurer of ECNAIS.

And last but not least I want to mention Mr. Kjeld Peter Ahlmann Oleson, who was the first Secretary-General of ECNAIS from 1988 till 2002. He will arrive later today.

The theme of the conference is *Schools as reservoirs of hope*. As subtitle we choose for *The new landscapes for Independent Schools: opportunities and boundaries*.

As you have seen in the program there will be several speakers, not only from Europe but also from other parts of the world and from within the Netherlands, which will help us to realize and think global about the opportunities and boundaries for independent schools nowadays.

I am looking forward to the presentations of all the speakers and hope that this will lead to an inspiring dialogue with them.

But first I want to inform you about the background of ECNAIS, the main activities in the last five years and the development of ECNAIS in the near future.

1. The background, vision and mission of ECNAIS

European Co-operation of Independent schools

In 1982, the former High Master of Manchester Grammar School, Peter Mason, MBE visited, when he was retired 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).

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. ECNAIS acts as a network for sharing experience, information and knowledge between national associations.

We unify 20 National Associations not only from western Europe but also a growing number from Central and Eastern European countries and not to forget from Iceland as well.

Furthermore we have as associated members The Independent Schools Council of Australia and The Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship.

The Strategic plan of ECNAIS 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.

It is our common wish that Independent schools are perceived as:

- Socially responsible and value-based entrepreneurs in education;
- Leading to bottom-up innovation;
- 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 and
- Promoters of strong social cohesion and stimulating integration.

As Peter Mason, who was chairman of ECNAIS from 1988 till 1995, stated in his article "Ten Years of ECNAIS" in 1998 already that it was felt from the very beginning as an urgent need to cooperate for a better public understanding of the widest degree possible of parental choice in all patterns of independent schools, both lay and confessional, and that ECNAIS' objective should be to complement rather than to compete with national systems. He also emphasized that associations have a responsibility to admit to membership only schools whose goals were truly educational rather than aimed at private gain.

It was Carlos Díaz Muñíz who stated in April 2008, when we celebrated the 20th year of existence of ECNAIS that it was the strong and common belief in ourselves and in the values we represent, that ECNAIS could survive while many other European organisations are disappeared.

The more the European societies and Europe as a whole becomes plural, the more we – as he said – believe in the vital role of the independent schools as sign and guarantee of freedom and democracy.

With these remarks in the back of our mind we started to clarify and express the values where ECNAIS stands for and has to stand for in the near future.

2. ECNAIS' activities in the last five years

For the conference held in Sofia in April 2009 we choosed the theme “*Benchmarks and Values*”. At the end of this conference it was concluded that it is crucial for the independent sector, as well as for the individual schools, that the following topics were clarified:

- the individual independent school is based on its own values;
- the values are communicated to internal parties and external stakeholders and
- clear, visible and communicated values are of 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 theme of the ECNAIS conference in Helsinki, in April 2010, was ‘*Quality and self-evaluation*’. 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.

At the November 2010 Seminar in Berlin, we discussed the role which the national associations are playing in strengthening the position of independent schools in their own countries. 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:

- access to data about the results and real costs of independent schools, especially about their high cost-effectiveness;
- examples to show that independent schools offer room for innovative teaching and enriched learning environment and for
- a proactive attitude of the national associations towards their own governments, to show the social responsibility of independent schools and the way they respond to the growing diversity in society.

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

As a follow-up to the 2010 seminar in Berlin, the May 2011 conference in Madrid was themed ‘*Diversity in education: Struggle for life or creating the future?*’ On the one hand, we learned 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 inspired each other to find new ways of making use of the freedom of education and the freedom of parental school choice.

In 2011, ECNAIS was given approval to start a Jean Monnet project within the EU Life-long Learning programme concerning *'the improvement of 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 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.

The theme of the conference in Bratislava last year was *'Entrepreneurship and innovation in education'*

We had a vivid discussion with a panel of six young Slovak entrepreneurs and a young English-Asian entrepreneur.

From them we learned how important it is that schools offer a free space for what they called *'independent learning'*.

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. There is a strong tendency in the EU to see education merely as an instrument of labour market policy. That is why we need to improve the visibility of the social capital, broader outcome and long-term results of independent schools.

3. ECNAIS as a living knowledge centre in the near future

By cooperating within ECNAIS for so many years we became more aware that ownership, self-organisation and diversity are the main characteristic of independent schools.

Through the years we have learned a lot about the strength and weaknesses of independent schools by meeting representatives of different national associations of independent schools all over Europe and outside the EU.

As counts for the life of an individual person also counts for an organisation: there is no forever given order or structure. We have to open ourselves for permanent change and to accept boundaries, but also to find ways to make use of new opportunities.

ECNAIS' boundaries are mainly our financial restraints. We don't get subsidy from the EU (only once for Jean Monnet project in 2011) and we realize that for a lot of our members it will be difficult to pay a higher annual subscription than they are used to now. But we are still from the beginning rich with ideas.

We want to develop ECNAIS in the near future further as a living knowledge centre. Later this year we will - with the support of the AEEP - publish a special Booklet about the history of ECNAIS.

In the annual program of this living knowledge centre there are two central elements: the conference in spring, where we meet and share experiences and expertise on an inspiring theme by making use of external speakers and as always by visiting schools. In the autumn we will continue with organizing a seminar with a actual topic, where we share our expertise with speakers from the member associations themselves.

We managed this year thanks to Sofia Reis – who did very good work - to renew the ECNAIS website which was launched two weeks ago and can function from now on as an interactive database for our members. This makes it also more easy to find ECNAIS partners for school projects or study visits.

We also renewed the electronic newsletter from ECNAIS, which turned out to be very popular among our members. Peter Warnders from the VBS is running this Newsletter.

And finally we have started with roundtables each time we meet where we discuss the actual situation of the independent schools in the different European countries.

This year the theme will be the consequences of the financial and economical crises in Europe for the solidarity between independent schools in the different countries and within the national associations and also within ECNAIS.

We are very grateful for the donations ECNAIS received for the 25th Anniversary from some member associations and also from the Dutch Jan Kersten Foundation. I want to thank Mrs Wobine Buys, chairman of this foundation and also of the VBS, who is present at the conference, for their generosity.

Over the years we have seen changes in the membership of ECNAIS.

In the beginning it were the existing associations of independent schools which were well organized in their own country. They were interested in sharing knowledge about European educational developments and how these developments could influence the situation of their own schools.

Nowadays we have a growing number of associations who are representing new social initiatives to strengthen the participation of parents in education or to establish more diversity in the national educational system. This is inspiring for the “old” members of ECNAIS and it gives a good feeling that we can be of help for new members.

We support the national educational platform of the Ukraine and the Ukrainian Association of private schools in their efforts to convince their politicians that it is in the benefit of the whole society if they make room in the national legislation for independent schools based on religious, philosophical or pedagogical ideas.

Another example is a social initiative in Austria where active parents strive for more room for pedagogical diversity in education. Per Kristensen could support them recently by sharing his experience with them as a former headmaster of a pedagogical renewing school in Denmark.

We are happy that we succeeded last year in making connections with a Swiss association that lobbies for a stronger influence of parents in education.

Later this year I will visit a group of private schools in Turkey and inform them about ECNAIS.

Independent education is not a right that once acquired, will last forever. In a way 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.

The Netherlands are being seen as the paradise on earth for independent schools. Our schools – public as well as private - have a lot of autonomy and independent schools are fully funded by the State in the same way as the public schools. The majority of schools in The Netherlands are independent schools.

The president of the Education Council of The Netherlands, prof Ms Geert ten Dam, will reflect later today on the actual meaning and dilemma's of the constitutional freedom of education in The Netherlands.

Each conference participant can take part in the school visits on Friday morning. During the cocktail party just before dinner you will be informed about the details of this part of the program and in your conference folder you find information about the schools.

Two Dutch speakers reflect in the Friday afternoon program on the developments of the Dutch system of freedom of education by expressing the way they make use of this freedom for their own schools.

We will focus on the theme of the conference *Schools as reservoirs of hope* from different points of view and from different parts of the world.

It has been said that the future is what children make of it and for that reason it is of utmost importance that children can experience school as a reservoir of hope.

The economical crises is putting our welfare states under pressure and the message in the public debate is all the time that the next generation will have less prosperity than their parents. But children need to be encouraged and should feel themselves challenged by a hopeful perspective on the future.

We are very happy that dr. Alan Flintham from Great Britain and dr. Geoff Newcombe from Australia accepted the invitation to be speaker on this ECNAIS conference.

Unfortunately dr. Sylvia Eyzaguirre from Chile informed us just a week ago that she could not come to The Hague because of severe political problems for her minister of Education in Chile.

She had sent her presentation already and you can find it in your conference folder.

The President of the Education Council in The Netherlands will give her presentation today at the end of the afternoon instead of tomorrow. The Friday afternoon session will now be closed with a panel discussion with schools representatives.

I am looking forward to the presentations of the speakers and to the dialog we will have together. I wish you an inspiring conference and a nice stay in The Hague and maybe some more days in The Netherlands.

I thank you for your attention.