

**Contribution of Simon Steen, Chairman of ECNAIS, at the opening of the ECNAIS Hearing in the European Parliament in Brussels 26 January 2016.**

Welcome all of you and especially the members of the European Parliament and the education advisor of the EU Commissioner for Education, Culture and Sport, who are present at this Hearing.

As chairman of ECNAIS I want to start with expressing our gratitude to Mr. Nuno Melo and Mr. Andrew Lewer for hosting the ECNAIS **Hearing on the right to education: freedom of parental choice**. *Preventing radicalization through education, practices from schools' daily lives.*

This is the second time ECNAIS is present in the European Parliament with a presentation about the right to education and the freedom of parental school choice.

A year ago we mentioned during our first Round Table in the EP the so called 'economization' of education as one of our major concerns.

We kindly asked the European Parliament to promote freedom of school choice throughout the European Union as a way to anchor democracy and social cohesion in Europe.

The Hearing of today, 26 January 2016 is promoted by an informal community of organizations: EMIE - European Meeting of Independent Education. Linked in a network, those organizations represent the independent education sector in Europe.

Although Education is not a matter of 'the treaties' but of each Member State, it is a fundamental right stated in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and it is directly linked to the religious, philosophical and pedagogical freedom, and to the choice of parents to ensure children's education according to their own convictions.

The diversity of educational systems in all the Member States and the plurality of forms of private and independent education challenged us to bring into the European Parliament voices that could make this diversity and plurality visible to the Members of Parliament.

The recent Joint Declarations from Ministers responsible for Education (March 2015) and the Commissioner for Education (November 2015) gave us the motto for the Hearing: how the independent sector has for long been providing valuable and smart answers to the key issue of radicalization raised in these declarations.

Central concepts like values, autonomy, diversity, dialogue, empathy, critical thinking, inclusion, involvement and integration, among others, are put in place and in practice every day by European Independent Schools, in what the Norwegian professor Olga Dysthe mentions the 'poly-phonic' or 'multi-vocal' classroom.

You will hear more facts and figures about the independent school sector from Mrs. Sofia Reis, Secretary General of ECNAIS.

Mr. Ignacio Grau from Oidel will give a short presentation on the outcome of their freedom of education index.

The section with the schools' presentations will be moderated by Per Kristensen, member of the Executive Committee of ECNAIS.

Five independent schools from different European countries will tell about their value based approach of education and how they integrate already for a long time the formation of the student in their daily activities.

Inspired by different profiles, these schools are strongly motivated to strengthen the student self-knowledge and self-confidence, together with the development of empathic skills, which are crucial for living a peaceful life with respect for others people choices.

I want to quote the Israeli author Amoz Os, who has said that the new threat full gap in society is not all about the economical one between the rich and the poor, but first of all between the fanatic and tolerant people. He says that what we need the most at this time is more curiosity and interest in what drives the other.

I want to close my contribution to this Hearing with referring to an inspiring blog *Joining the battle against extremism* of Mr. Andreas Schleicher, director OECD Directorate for Education and Skills from Friday, 22 January 2016 and I quote

‘.....one has to strike a balance between common values in societies, such as respect and tolerance, that cannot be compromised, and appreciating the diversity of our societies and the plurality of values that diversity engenders. Leaning too far in either direction is risky: enforcing an artificial uniformity of values is detrimental to people’s capacity to acknowledge different perspectives; and overemphasizing diversity can lead to cultural relativism that questions the legitimacy of any core values’.

Mr. Schleicher also says in his blog that one of the most powerful responses to extremism and radicalization seems to be the ability to read and understand diversity, while recognizing that the core liberal values of our societies, such as tolerance, are the foundations on which this capacity rests.

Wise words which will hopefully inspire not only politicians but teachers as well.

I thank you for your attention and I’m sure you will enjoy the schools’ presentations about their value based education in the second part of this Hearing.