

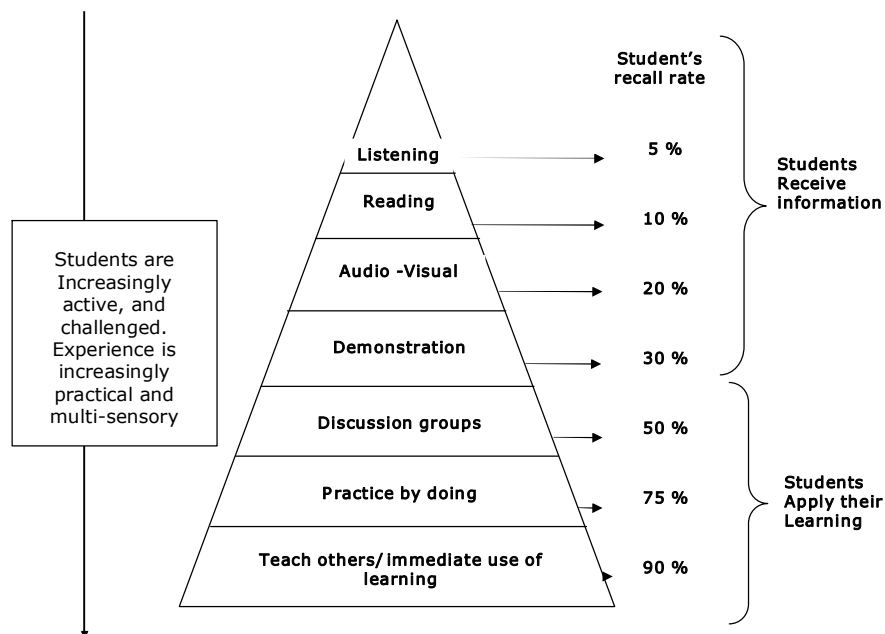
## Towards a more active role for the student An ECNAIS-pizza from Vienna

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Through the centuries, Vienna has been the centre of the established power. Nethertheless it was there, of all places, that active student participation in modern education was discussed. This occurred during the 2006 annual meeting of ECNAIS (European Council of National Associations of Independent school). For this purpose examples were put forward from several countries. The theme was introduced through questions by Cedric Bousché, formerly employed by the VBS and now an independent education advisor.

### Transform or conform

Bousché started with the example of an Austrian professor whom in his college room had made two arrangements of chairs: one based on a classical arrangement and one on a circle arrangement. Students chose invariably for the first arrangement, business people for the second. It just indicates how engraved the patterns are in education. This is emphasised even more by searching for student participation with Google. There are hardly any hits. While it is commonly known that the more involved students feel in a subject, the more this stays in the students' heads. The following pyramid demonstrates this clearly.



The question which should be asked by education, according to Bousché, is whether learning in the classroom is still the correct method, or should we let students get out more. But even more important is the answer to the question of what students are interested in now; because they are always interested. Is active student participation the answer then?

Bousché answered this question with the help of a number of propositions. Student participation is more a ritual or not (the opinions appear divided), it is a hype or a serious matter (yes, it is a really serious matter), my school does more to student participation than

the school around the corner (this led to very animated discussions concerning usefulness and need).

How is active student participation in proportion to the emphasis which is laid on for example PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment; this OESO-programme tests the knowledge and skills of fifteen year olds in the subjects Mathematics, Reading and Science)? You could ask yourself, according to Bousché, if the emphasis does not lie too much on the measuring and whether it is not deadly for the process of active student participation in European *independent* education. It is a task for ECNAIS to plead for a European PIZZA, where the thin base contains only minimum governmental requirements and the schools themselves can vary with their own broad and thick filling.

In any case, Cedric Bousché closed his argument, schools should first answer the question whether they want to transform or conform their students. If the first option is chosen, then the choice is automatically made for an entirely adapted school environment.

### **Danish legislation**

In Denmark legislation at present is being endeavoured to work for such an adapted environment. The how and why was explained at the conference by Ole Juhl, director of the Danish centre for *educational environment*. It is not only about the fact that students can enforce their participation in education backed by law. There is also a clear social importance involved. A stimulating teaching environment and an active student input contribute, according to the argument, to a democratic society, to which everyone can contribute with respect for each other. And schools are pre-eminently suitable to play a preparatory role here; teaching practical democracy is central to this notion. And as said, the law makes it possible. Performing this role through education goes hand in hand with (also legally specified) working towards a good physical and aesthetic environment. On both the educational and the physical environment in a school has to be reported at least every three years. Students have the right to work at this with the school heads. Together with, among others, a safe social climate this must lead to a situation in which students can perform better on all fronts. The Danish law became effective in August 2001, the first results are now being analysed. In the meantime in Poland it appears that an active student input has in any case lead to successes on *learning* output.

### **Polish democracy from the bottom**

Gymnasium number 1 from Warsaw has made a start on a radical form of democracy in school, immediately after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. A parliament, an executive council and a court were formed. The parliament (composed of ten students, ten employees in the broadest sense of the word and ten parents) determines the policy. The council executes and the court settles disputes by looking for a compromise. Members (everyone, irrespective of age, are eligible) are chosen for the period of one year. Candidates who are not chosen, can get executive tasks without the associated final responsibility. And the school head? He keeps the democratic process running and motivates people and in this way is comparable to a constitutional monarch. The initial apprehension that a constant difference of opinion would incur between, students on the one hand and teachers and parents on the other, has not emerged up until now.

This large involvement of students has improved the study results enormously. The gymnasium number 1 became the ideal operating base for a successful university career. This resulted in, apart from an enormous multitude of students, a prevention that the school did not seem to be too much of a learning factory. Another tendency is that increasingly more candidates take part in the annual elections who wish to exchange the system of delegation for

direct democracy, so that everything can always be discussed with everyone. And what must be discussed? The work has already been done (parliament, council and court), the school functions and students have their individual syllabus. The subjects that remain over are regularly sought after. All in all the correct balance between formal and informal discussion still has to be found. But most importantly, the formal system of democracy must continue to exist in case it is actually needed. The real crisis has until now not yet occurred.

### **Pupils' panel**

How do European students themselves think about their participation in education? The ECNAIS conference was concluded on the third day with a *pupils' panel*, composed from eight students from the Netherlands (LAKS board members, Mark Brakel and Chiel Verhoeff), Austria, Poland and Spain. The panel made a distinction between formal participation, such as a council of students and an participation council, and informal student participation, such as discussions with teachers concerning the free work choice, organising activities and managing the canteen (that ideally should be open for both students and teachers). Other examples of participation which were named: joint decision of the curriculum, mediation, tutoring, the school newspaper and organising lessons to be taught by outsiders.

Students are more aware that they are the consumers of the company 'school'. It is for this reason important that they can put in a word, since they are directly interested parties. And the fact that it is also a good learning process for their own individual development is all the better. However, all is not as positive as it may seem. Because it also appears that the interest to participate decreases when it concerns less power. For this reason the LAKS hammer on, that even filling in, for example, a teacher appraisal form is a form of participation. But this also applies, according to the panel, that an important, if not the most important, condition must be met. If the school management does not actively get involved, then nothing will become of the active student participation in education. In this way they agreed with the conclusions of the earlier speakers from the Netherlands, Denmark and Poland. ECNAIS has shown in Vienna that it can be done differently. And it has to be different, should we want to make serious work of active student participation.

QUOTES from this article:

- Transform or conform students?
- Student participation is also a social importance