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STATEMENTS on ‘Excellence in education’

EUNEC Seminar

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EUNEC

EUNEC is the network of education councils in the European Union. EUNEC brings together the expertise of advisory bodies and of the stakeholders and experts who are involved in the national/regional advisory processes. These advisory bodies give advice to the governments of the different European countries in the field of education and training.

Scope and working method

The spring seminar of EUNEC dealt with the emerging paradigm of excellence in education. The main theme of the seminar was how education deals with excellence i.e. how it stimulates, recognizes and strengthens the development of learners' talents.

Twenty participants, experts and representatives of education councils, from 10 European countries, met in Amsterdam. The first day of the seminar was dedicated to expert presentations, reflection and in depth discussion on the topic. The second day linked theory to practice: participants visited an “excellent school”, the Ignatius Gymnasium, in the city centre of Amsterdam, listened to a project presentation and had the opportunity to discuss the theme with school leaders, teachers and pupils.

The theme of excellence is linked to previous EUNEC seminars and conferences.

* We refer to the statements of the May 2011 seminar in Budapest on the concept of ‘Bildung’. The main thread was a broad understanding of “Bildung” as a fundamental right of all citizens to learn and to enjoy learning. It is pinpointed to all dimensions and talents. Through education everyone should become a responsible citizen. ‘Bildung’is an all-encompassing concept, which starts at birth and never ends. Youngsters (and adults) have to be able to integrate in society supported by a sustainable general education.
* During the conference held in Lisbon in October 2011, EUNEC discussed the modernization of vocational education and training, and the new skills required for new jobs. We explored how education can stimulate the technical and practical talents of youngsters. The current economical and financial challenges emphasize the urgency of this debate.

The seminar in Amsterdam highlighted another aspect of the development of talents. How to stimulate not only the general and common basic skills (Bildung) and the talents needed for a durable employability but also how to scout talents, how to foster and develop them. How do we define innovative talents relevant for our societies in the turmoil of economic and political change ? To what extent is excellence compatible with equity ?

STATEMENTS

# What is excellence about?

Excellence in education focuses on the development and stimulation of diverse talents of children through education and training.

In the future, society will need open minded scientists able to shape sustainable technological innovation, technicians building the infrastructure and machinery of tomorrow, innovative artists using new and creative approaches, philosophers questioning the mainstream approaches, responsible social and intercultural workers. Furthermore, citizens need to be able to question society and culture critically and permanently, and to think outside the box.

Therefore focusing on development of talents and excellence in pupils is far from a functional and reductive emphasis on instant cognition and knowledge. The concept of talent is not limited to abstract and conceptual thinking but also applies to creating, building, doing, acting. Education should value all these types of talents equally.

New educational approaches do not only focus on this broad spectrum of talents, they also emphasize the quality of the learning process and the learner's ability to perform at a high level in unpredictable environments. We quote professor Volman : “*It is not only the achievement that makes you excellent. It is what you do with it and how*”. The perspective of learning outcomes or learning achievements (the “what” question) as such should be enriched by the perspective of the quality of the learning activities and processes. Therefore the learner with his learning needs, abilities, motivation, dedication and learning biography should be central to each debate on rethinking education processes. Quality of learning starts with the learner and his abilities to learn.

# Excellence, a risky ideal or a promising paradigm for innovation?

Excellence could be seen as contradictory to essential characteristics of the education policy of the last decades such as strengthening the perspective of equity or a broad understanding of quality.

This is certainly the case if the focus is only on cognitive and measurable educational achievements. If excellence is identified with “successful” students in terms of academic achievements, other students will consider themselves having failed. They will lose interest and motivation.

International standardized testing and comparative benchmarking (such as PISA) exercises could entice policy makers and educationalists to narrow the scope on measurable achievements and to ignore less visible underlying educational values.

Education councils consider themselves privileged “spokespeople” to keep the broad humanistic and holistic vision of education on the policy agenda. In this sense education councils are instrumental to get control over the long term perspectives of the education policies. Education policies need to take into account the professional judgment of the teachers and of the school team. We quote professor Carmel Borg : “The best schools listen to the learners and promote educational resilience for all”. Educationalists need to develop a language to communicate on this perspective with the other sectors in society.

If well elaborated, the concept of excellence can enrich the debate on equal opportunities and inclusive education systems, as it opens the debate on better learning outcomes and a higher level of learning. The main challenge for education systems in the present crisis of European societies is to combine higher learning performances with better inclusion of vulnerable (groups of) learners.

With regard to learning needs, stimulating a variety of talents is at the very heart of an equal educational chances approach. Scouting and nurturing talents is especially needed for pupils with a low socio economic background, with special needs or with troubled learning pathways. The lack of experiencing success can be countered by putting different talents and gifts in the limelight. Every talent matters and is relevant for others. Howard Gardner formulated the theory of “multiple intelligences”. Talents of youngsters are very diverse, they develop and learn in different styles and at different rhythms. Flexible but demanding learning environments should prevent a culture of mediocrity.

# Enhancing the conditions to raise quality of learning for all

## From the perspective of the learners

Education is all about enhancing the scope of learning, strengthening learning engagement and stimulating learning motivation in all youngsters. Raising performance levels of all learners, requires a better theoretical understanding of the relation between social and cultural capital and learning performance.

Soft skills, learning skills and self management become core competences for each learning process. Talents are also closely linked to soft skills such as cooperation, responsibility, perseverance, communicative skills and dialogue, creativity, meta-cognition, self-esteem, self management and autonomy. The idea of excellence should in the first place be linked to the core curriculum, the basic skills as an entitlement for all learners.

But basic skills are not sufficient. All children have passions, are eager to learn in some domains to which they feel more attracted. Some children have a passion for the world of science and technique, others for culture and art. Some children are challenged by abstract and theoretical thinking; others are ‘shapers’ and learn by doing.

In order to raise the quality of learning processes we need to raise the learning motivation and the learner's engagement in learning. Motivation is not only a point of departure and a condition, but also a desirable result. We refer to Monique Volman reminding us of the psychoanalytical line of thought defending the capacity to engage – in a relationship, in work, in a production – as the most important human capacity to achieve happiness.

The quality of learning processes depends to a high extent on the readiness to learn. Learning motivation involves behavioral, emotional and cognitive aspects because it is the result of an interaction between the learner and the environment. Since the environment can be influenced, learning motivation can also to a certain extent be changed.

The design of pedagogic environments should start from the question why learners want to learn and trigger this motivation to a broad field of interests. Learning environments need to motivate, inspire and stimulate learning. Intrinsic learning motivation should be enhanced by making learning achievements more visible. Learning environments should seduce learners to learn using personal drives and interest domains, trigger them and raising self confidence in their learning and in the outcomes.

We need to establish flexible and tailored pathways, allowing for differentiation, individualization, attending and responding to different gifts and interests.

Creating motivating learning conditions means action at pupil level, at classroom level and at school level.

* Starting from a positive relationship and connectedness between teachers and pupils. Pupils have a right to an empathic, authentic and active teacher listening to their needs. The teacher should be open for a positive budding interest but also be able to deal with negative emotions and resistance, for experiences of injustice and failing. The needs are integral to the learning process. Education is no longer a one way process. Learners and their needs, motivations and experiences should be taken seriously. This means a supportive rather than a controlling attitude. Education has to involve the emotional dimension of learning.
* Offering learners challenging learning experiences that are ambitious and reachable. This approach is not new. In the first years of the 20th century Vygotski developed the theory of zones of proximal development which has been shown very useful.
* Creating a safe learning climate built on understanding and at the same time on boundaries, values and an ambitious perspective. This also calls for rewarding efforts and validating learning results. Education systems develop a pedagogy of care in balance with a pedagogy of excellence. Such schools pay attention towards socio-emotional competence, engagement and (self) confidence in classrooms.
* Using subjects, methods and learning activities triggering the interest and the motivation of the learner. However, education is not only about the “natural” interest of the pupil. Learning environments should broaden the scope of learners , acquainting them with different aspects of learning and of the world.
* Empowering students trough self efficacy, collective and collaborative learning. In this open learning environments educational technology is used critically and integrated in the whole concept.
* Evaluation systems should raise self awareness of pupils about their own motivational drive and the quality of their learning outcomes. This calls for self-evaluation, reflection and monitoring tools.

## From the perspective of the teachers and school teams

Good functioning and competent teachers form a crucial lever. Without excellent teachers, a model of talent development and talent stimulation can never work. Excellent teachers are role models for excellent pupils and for their peers.

Pupils perform better at school if they feel good, if they are challenged and yet experience a sense of safety. These conditions are strongly influenced by their relation with one or several teachers. The quality of the relationship between the pupil and the teachers (team) is a decisive factor for the functioning and the learning of pupils.

Teachers should behave as reflective practitioners, aware of their own learning needs, interests and professional drive. In their behaviour they should reflect the values of excellence and motivation, being aware of their learning needs and learning experiences.

Excellent teachers are teachers with good interpersonal skills, pedagogical competencies and mastery of their subject. They share passion, enthusiasm and learning motivation with their pupils. They act within the organization as responsible team members, open to the outside world. Teachers should behave as agents of change and innovation. The link between classroom practices and practitioner research should be strengthened. The school visit during the seminar showed the merit of mixed assignments for teachers, in secondary education and in research. Teachers should take part in scientific research and networking.

We need to consider teachers professionalization as a continuum starting in initial teacher training but to be continued in a trajectory of lifelong learning for teachers (continuous teacher training, learning on the work floor, collegial coaching and review, …). Teachers cannot become a role model for pupils if they do not integrate lifelong learning and innovation in their daily functioning. Therefore education systems try to raise the level of entry requirements, which has had positive effects in Scandinavian countries (as highlighted by PISA).

Schools experiment with putting excellent teachers in positions where they can make the difference, where they can coach, and advise colleagues. This creates opportunities to share their competences and skills with the whole staff. It is clear that respect for the autonomy and professional expertise of teachers is crucial for educational innovation and pedagogic excellence.

During the seminar EUNEC members also discussed the opportunities and pitfalls offered by evaluation and appraisal of excellence in teacher behavior: give excellent teachers more freedom, more responsibility, more salary; introduce systems of evaluation and appraisal as they are common in industry; stimulate peer assessment, professional bodies and standards.

Another common concern of the education systems throughout Europe is the need for a sufficient amount of good qualified teachers. In that regard we need to develop also retention policies to keep good teachers aboard.

## From the perspective of the school organization

School culture and the school organization are powerful agents of excellence and of raising quality in education. Therefore we need socially inclusive schools and strong early childhood provisions as well as family-schools links involving parents in the learning of their children.

Schools should build a climate characterized by ambitious expectations, a readiness to invest effort. But these schools are also supportive schools with well elaborated counseling and coaching facilities for pupils who (tend to) fall behind. Pedagogies of excellence are characterized by a focus on the learner and learning, task orientation, diversity in all dimensions of the school climate, adequate evaluation procedures. School climate aims at combining meaningful and relevant knowledge with scopes of interest and broadening of the horizon of learners.

Excellence needs to consider models of accountability of schools. Schools with a high level of self-accountability based on clear pedagogic and humanistic objectives, on well defined quality indicators, ongoing collegial debate and reflection provide the best professional environment for higher professional standards of teachers and learning standards for pupils.

# Innovation processes redefined by schools and professional communities. The resilience of the education system in a new perspective

Educational innovation has shown to be extremely efficient if it is oriented bottom-up. Schools are at the centre of the innovation process and should define their own ambitions, shared by school boards and leaders, by school teams and teachers, by the pupils, parents and the wider community surrounding the school. Innovation platforms at a macro level offer support with knowledge, expertise and network but cannot take over. Agreement on ambitions, objectives and measures is required at a macro policy level. A common understanding is also needed on benchmarks and monitoring principles. Exchange of experiences between peers on the contrary is most effective.

Conclusions

Excellence should be looked upon from a holistic and integrated concept on learning, development and education. It needs to take into account a broad range of talents, the quality of the education process, the engagements of learners and teachers.

Excellence is complementary to equal opportunities and inclusion.

In order to reach excellence, there are critical conditions from three perspectives :

* the competence level of the pupil and his attitudes towards learning and developing: motivation, soft skills, learning skills and self management are crucial.
* the perspective of the teacher: he has to be strong from a pedagogic-didactic point of view and an expert in his/her subject
* the perspective of the school: schools have to be supporting and challenging for teachers and pupils; the school climate has to focus on ambitious learning results.