

Simon Steen

THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN SCHOOLS' DEVELOPMENT

In the article the author analyzes activity of European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools (ECNAIS), pays special attention to the quality and evaluation of independent schools, stresses on the freedom of choice as the best precondition for education of high quality. The role of independent schools and diversity in education are also described in it.

Background of European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools (ECNAIS)

Peter Mason MBE a former headmaster of a private school in the United Kingdom visited in 1982 a series of Associations of Independent Schools in Europe. The visits revealed how very little contact or knowledge national associations of independent schools of various types had of their counterparts in other countries, of their philosophies, their relations of the national systems and the legal controls or subsidies involved. Consequently Peter Mason initiated the founding of the European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools in 1988. Among the founders were national associations representing Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Membership 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. It means that the school is not governed or

owned by the state. It is about schools which are strongly connected to the civil society.

ECNAIS is open for membership 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.

It is also open to other national or international bodies or associations, as associate or corresponding members.

The management of ECNAIS is done by the Management Committee, which consists of one representative from each national association.

Nowadays ECNAIS has a growing number of member associations from the eastern European countries. The associations of private schools in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland were the first which joined ECNAIS from East Europe later followed by associations from Hungary, Rumenia, Bulgaria, Lithuania and the Ukraine.

ECNAIS unifies 25 National Associations from more than 20 countries all over Europe.

Vision of ECNAIS

In the Strategic plan 2008 – 2012 there is the following vision statement of ECNAIS:

The human right to offer educational alternatives to the 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.

The Independent Schools are perceived as:

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

Mission of ECNAIS

ECNAIS acts as a network for sharing of information and learning between national associations. In the ECNAIS' strategic plan you will find as mission statement:

ECNAIS Supports and pursues the values embedded in a democratic approach to pluralism in the national educational systems, and the respect of the parental choice.

PROMOTES the interests of all kinds of Independent education, 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 organizations, on matters of common concern, based on an agreed programme.

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

The activities of ECNAIS

On our website (www.ecnais.org) and in our monthly electronic newsletter we offer access to all kind of resources which could be of help for national associations to strengthen the position of private schools in their own country.

Quality and evaluation of independent schools

In our annual conference in spring and in our annual seminar in the autumn we offer possibilities to meet and to discuss an actual theme which is important for the development of private schools in the different European countries but also on the level of the European Council of ministers of education in the EU.

We discussed on the ECNAIS Conference in Helsinki in April 2010 *Quality and evaluation of independent schools*.

That year's conference was a follow up to the conference on «Benchmarks and Values» held in Sofia in April 2009, which concluded that it is of utmost importance for the independent sector, as well as for the individual schools, that the following topics are clarified that:

- the individual independent school is based on its own values.
- the values are clear and are visible in the everyday life of the school.
- the values are communicated to internal parties and external stakeholders
- 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.

That year we focussed on *values* and *quality* as an addition to the ECNAIS Seminar “Values and Evaluation” held in Rome in November 2009. The conference did took as its starting point the idea that independent schools are based on their own values. It touched upon and debated the thesis that the focus may be shifting from the value based part of the everyday life of schools 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 stimulated much discussion and debate on the future for independent schools, their social responsibilities, the sector's opportunities in the future and perhaps, last but not least, ethical questions.

The independent schools in Europe today and the role the national associations are playing

We discussed in the ECNAIS Seminar in Berlin in November 2010 the role which the national associations are playing in strengthening the position of the private school in their own countries. We realized once again the importance that private schools are subsidized by the government to make it possible that children of all social backgrounds can visit a private school. But we also became more aware of the struggle for life which many private schools have to deal with nowadays because of the budgetary cuts by the governments. This is mainly caused by the economical crisis or by a demographic decline and sometimes by a changing political attitude towards private schools.

The participants of this seminar had the general idea that:

A. The independent schools in Europe are under pressure due to demographic decline, economical crisis, ideological framing by the politicians, the lack of a clear vision on the anthropological and intrinsic vision on education as public service.

B. Therefore it was stated that there is a need for:

➤ An overview of the variety of arguments to state the added value and the 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 site to international reports that prove the added value of Independent Schools in a plural society.

➤ Examples that Independent Schools offer room for innovative teaching.

➤ Examples that Independent Schools offer pupils an enriched learning environment.

➤ A pro active attitude of the national associations of Independent Schools towards their own government showing the social responsibility of Independent Schools and their positive way of dealing with the growing diversity in society.

➤ A clear vision on the democratic right for freedom of education and the 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 form of private schools in national legislation of different European countries.

Diversity in education: Struggle for life or Creating the future

As follow up of the Seminar in Berlin in November 2010 the theme for the ECNAIS conference in Madrid in May 2011 is *Diversity in education: Struggle for life or Creating the future*.

We want to learn on the one hand how the different national associations react on the threats for the private schools in their own country and especially about the initiatives they have taken to overcome those difficulties. On the other hand we also want to inspire each other to find new ways of making use of the freedom of education and the freedom of parental choice of a school for their own children. We are within ECNAIS strong believers in those essential values of a democratic and pluralistic society. The independent or private school subsidized by the state is reflecting the diversity which is present in each society. By doing so it is also a very influential way of strengthening the civil society and the social cohesion of the society as a whole.

The economical and financial crises we are facing in Europe highlight some important trends that are addressed in the everyday life of schools from a number of aspects: globalization, complexity, creativity and imagination. Throughout 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 recognize 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 available resources both for public as well as for independent education. Education is a complex activity. There are an important number of intangible aspects that are difficult to test and to measure. We want to identify some tensions as: educational results versus educational process, soft skills versus hard skills, competences versus knowledge, test training versus holistic approaches. We want to clarify good practices that enable independent schools to gain good results by giving room for creativity, innovation, eagerness to learn and autonomy.

European meeting of independent education (EMIE)

Already for more than 10 years ECNAIS' representatives meet each year in Brussels on the last day of May the representatives of another 15 European organizations. Those organizations strongly support the idea of the freedom of education together with the freedom of parental choice and the right to establish a school on religious, philosophical or pedagogical convictions which can be subsidized by the national state.

As a NGO we lobby and advocate on a European level for room for plurality and pluriformity in the establishment of schools (religious, philosophical and pedagogical) in the different national education systems in Europe.

In the last year we have focused in our conferences (Sofia 2009; Helsinki/Stockholm 2010) and seminar (Rome, 2009) on the importance of values of the school itself. The awareness of their own values is an essential part of a stimulating culture of self-evaluation and quality development for independent schools.

There is a strong tendency in the policy of the EU (again!) to see education merely as an instrument of labour market policy in the perspective of strengthening a European knowledge based economy that can compete with worldwide operating economical markets in America, Asia and China.

European benchmarks for education can reduce the focus of schools to quality measurement for short term goals especially for language and mathematic teaching.

We have to be more aware that this process of «neutralization» of education is going on and that the EU policy is part of it. As a result of that process independent schools can feel themselves more and more forced to minimize their own value based orientation. Because first of all they have to respond to the growing demands of the government as if they are privatized public schools. We need to improve the visibility of the social capital, broader outcome and long-term results of independent schools. We also have to show how public schools can benefit from the added value of independent schools within the national school system.

It is necessary that the different European organizations – which are all in favor of the independent schools – develop a new common strategy and actions to clarify the modern role of independent schools as a vital part of the civil society. By doing so we can avoid that we are acting from a defensive position.

ECNAIS wants to cooperate with our EMIE colleagues to publish a new EMIE declaration about the contribution of independent schools to a plural and democratic European society in the coming decade. We have to educate and prepare our students for Europe 2020. If we can learn something of the worldwide economic crisis it is that the future of Europe is *not* all about economy but first of all about virtues.

Freedom of choice as the best precondition for education of high quality

The importance of a variety of choices

Every European education scheme allows room for self-management and self-organisation of schools, even though the mutual differences are large.

What binds these ‘independent schools’ is that they have been set up from a private initiative, often groups of citizens or animated educationalists, and have been frequently based on a religious, philosophical or pedagogical movement. All these schools have one thing in common and that is that the initiators find upbringing and

education so closely connected, that they consider value orientation equally important to education in a more cognitive sense. Emphasizing value orientation in education is also the most important objective of ECNAIS, as a European Group of associations of independent schools, in addition to the guarantee of freedom of choice for parents. This can only take shape if there is enough room for variety of choice in the national education system.

There is always the danger of a too unilateral approach by the national governments. Naturally, cognitive subjects like language and mathematics are important, but the emphasis on language and mathematics leads schools to pay attention specifically to test results on measurable outcome. That is short term thinking. A knowledge-based economy is also availed by lifelong learning, by the fact that people want to continue their personal development. It is therefore necessary that children become balanced individuals, with self-esteem and self-respect, and with room to develop their creativity and skills to be able to cooperate and to take entrepreneurial initiatives. Then you enter the field of giving meaning, of identity and personal development and therefore value orientation. Attention to this eventually leads to qualitatively better results.

Only in this way children can develop with pleasure in lifelong learning.

Pedagogical entrepreneurship

One must have an eye for the broader results of education. This is very important for the social capital of Europe, which is an indispensable pillar for a peaceful and prosperous Europe. The development towards uniformity also goes beyond the fact that an independent school is not purely an object of government targeting, as if it is a privatized public-authority school. The independent school is first of all an expression of a vision of citizens on education and the fact that these citizens want to carry responsibility for education. Independent schools should therefore continue to make the broader results of independent education visible. Independent education is not an everlasting acquired right and has to be earned and

socially embedded continually. Therefore independent education must continue to show how it contributes to the solution of the contemporary questions of society.

In countries where there is room for pedagogical entrepreneurship subsidized by the state it is proved by research of the OECD and the Worldbank that the quality of education for all children (in public and private schools) is higher comparing with countries where there is no room for an alternative approach in education as offered by the subsidized independent/ private schools.

The Dutch freedom of education as export article

Other European countries look at the Dutch situation with admiration because of the equal financing of private and public schools by the government and the fact that almost 70% of all Dutch primary and secondary schools are subsidized private schools. They do so from the point of view of freedom of choice for parents, the possibilities of doing justice for the differences between children, but also from the perspective of teachers, who have a freedom of choice too and as a result they feel in charge of the education in the school for which they can choose. The Dutch situation generates a larger social involvement in education. It is astonishing that independent education in the Netherlands is frequently forced into the defensive nowadays by politicians who don't realize the treasure within of our constitutional educational system. The circumstances in other European countries for independent schools are much less ideal.

Due to the unique Dutch situation, a former minister of education, Maria van der Hoeven, promoted the Dutch freedom of education as an export article to her fellow ministers of education in Europe in 2004, when the Netherlands was the president of the European Union. She referred especially to research that shows how much the Dutch system of freedom of education promotes the quality of education. In the Dutch system there is a strong competition between schools. Quality increases even further according to how equal the funding of public and private schools is. If this equal funding does not exist, then the private schools become more dependent on higher parental contributions and are therefore no longer broadly accessible. That is

not something the private schools chose for themselves, but the direct consequence of a lack of political courage of a government to subsidize private schools in their country to the same extent as the public schools.

Strong cooperation within ECNAIS between eastern and western Europe

ECNAIS got a positive reply on her application for a grant according the EU Life long learning programme. The project is about the improvement of the diversity in education. An essential part of the project plan is the strengthening of the cooperation between the national associations of independent schools in Eastern and Western European countries. The experience in ECNAIS is that this cooperation is really of mutual interest. We have learned a lot of the results that the Czech, the Slovak and Polish associations for private schools have reached in merely two decades. This helps ECNAIS in their support of the new associations of private schools in countries as Lithuania, Bulgaria, Rumania and the Ukraine.

Simon Steen is Chairman of the European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools (ECNAIS) (<http://www.ecnais.org/>)

The author is also CEO of the Dutch Association of Private Schools VBS, one of the founders of ECNAIS (www.vbsinternational.eu).

СІМОН СТІІН

Роль неурядових організацій у розбудові шкіл

У статті автор аналізує діяльність Європейської ради національних асоціацій незалежних шкіл, особливу увагу приділяє якості та оцінюванню незалежних шкіл, наголошує на свободі вибору як на кращій передумові високої якості освіти. У статті також описано роль незалежних шкіл та різноманітність в освіті.

СИМОН СТИИН

Роль неправительственных организаций в развитии школ

В статье автор раскрывает деятельность Европейского совета национальных ассоциаций независимых школ, особенно внимание уделяет качеству и оцениванию независимых школ, акцентирует внимание на свободе выбора как лучшей предпосылке высокого качества образования. В статье также описана роль независимых школ и многообразие образования.