



EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

Report of the seminar of the European Network of Education Councils,

Amsterdam, 21 – 22 May 2012

with the support of the European Commission

DG Education and Culture



Education and Culture DG

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INTRODUCTION

EUNEC is the **European Network of Education Councils**. Its members advise the governments of their countries on education and training. EUNEC aims to discuss the findings and recommendations of all European projects in education and training, to determine standpoints and to formulate statements on these issues. EUNEC wants to disseminate these statements pro-actively towards the European Commission, relevant DGs and other actors at European level, and to promote action by EUNEC's members and participants at national level. EUNEC also has the objective that the councils should put internationalization and mobility high on the national agenda, that they should recommend and support a European policy in education and training towards all relevant stakeholders: ministry of education (and employment), sector and branch organizations, providers and other actors.

From 2008 on EUNEC has been **subsidized** as **European Association acting at European level in the field of education** (Jean Monnet programme). This seminar is organized with the support of the grant.

CENTRAL THEME OF THE SEMINAR

The concept of 'excellence' can be defined in many ways. It has to do with 'eminence' but it is also linked to quality insurance and quality control, to benchmarking of educational institutions or educational systems, to gaining efficiency in education and in learning. The central question of this seminar, however, is of another nature. It deals with the way education can develop, stimulate and intensify 'talents' of children and youngsters.

Excellence, a permanent concern in the work of EUNEC

This seminar builds on the statements approved by EUNEC after the seminar held in May 2011 in Budapest on the concept of 'Bildung'¹. In society, there is a growing need for people that are 'motor of their own development'. Youngsters (and adults) have to be able to integrate in society supported by a sustainable general education.

This seminar is at the same time a follow up of the statements of the conference held in Lisbon in October 2011 on the theme of the modernization of vocational education and training, and on the new skills required for new jobs². EUNEC has explored how education can stimulate the technical and

¹ [EUNEC statements on 'Bildung from a lifelong perspective', May 2012](#)

² [EUNEC statements on 'New skills for new jobs. New challenges for Vocational Education and Training in the 21st century', October 2011](#)

practical talents of youngsters. The current economical and financial challenges are emphasizing the urgency of this debate.

During the seminar in Amsterdam, May 2012, EUNEC continues its work in the same direction, deepening the question.

Central questions during the seminar in Amsterdam

The focus is on the way in which education can discover and stimulate the diverse talents of children.

A first question to be addressed is certainly the question *which talents* we are talking about. In the future, society will need excellent scientists able to shape future societal changes, innovative artists designing new and creative approaches, philosophers with a critical view on the spirit of society, and technicians who build the infrastructure for a sustainable economy. At the same time, society will need people that feel responsible for society, and act according to that responsibility. Excellence not only has to do with cognition and learning outcomes, but also with soft skills such as cooperation, responsibility, communicative skills and dialogue, creativity, meta cognition.. Furthermore, citizens need to be able to question critically and permanently society and culture, and to think out of the box. The seminar will focus on cognitive aspects of training as well as on other aspects of the large concept of *Bildung*.

The objective is not only to discover which competences are important for an innovative and sustainable society, but also to look for ways to enhance the performance levels of pupils. How can education enhance the learning outcomes? How can the outcome of the learning process become more effective? Pupils, especially in their adolescence, tend to adapt to the average level. They feel the pressure of the group not to try to excel.

Another important subtheme of the seminar has to do with the question how education can stimulate youngsters to enhance their learning outcomes. How can education *discover their talents*, how can education *stimulate* the learning outcomes of pupils in several domains? The pupil, with his/her diverse talents, has to be the starting point. Talents of youngsters are very diverse; they develop and learn in different styles and at a different rhythm. 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 rather 'shapers' and learn by doing. It is important to hold the debate with a focus on the enhancement of the learning motivation and the preparedness to learn of the children. The learning process will be in the picture, rather than the structures. In this respect, recent insights from brain research can have an impact on education.

This approach is not in contradiction with an *equal opportunities approach*. PISA results show that good education stimulates the talents of all youngsters. To put it in the words of diverse PISA reports: excellence and

equity are two sides of the same coin. Offering equal opportunities starts from an emancipatory perspective and is based on high and challenging objectives for all pupils. During this seminar, EUNEC thus also pays attention to the learning outcomes of those who have more difficulties at school. How to stimulate those pupils to obtain good results in several learning domains?

Next to the perspective of the pupils, we want to identify the *critical conditions* to realize those objectives.

A first crucial lever is to have good functioning and competent teachers. Without excellent teachers, a model of talent development and talent stimulation can never work. Pupils do 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.

A second lever is the school culture and the school organization. How can a school build the pedagogical context in which pupils are challenged to learn and to develop, to be ambitious?

PROGRAMME

Monday 21 May

- 9.30 – 9.45 h** Welcome by **Adrie Van der Rest**, president of EUNEC and secretary director of the Dutch Education Council
- 9.45 – 10.45 h** Key note by professor **Monique Volman**, University of Amsterdam
- 10.45 – 12.15 h** **Give pupils the opportunity to excel.** How to create the conditions to motivate, inspire, stimulate pupils?
- Presentation of the review of the VLOR (Flemish Education Council) on how to stimulate, motivate and inspire pupils, by **Vincent Donche**, University of Antwerp
- Reaction and introduction to the debate by **Roos Herpelinck**, director at the Flemish Education Council
- Debate

- 14.00 – 15.30 h** **Teachers make the difference.** Which professional frameworks (in the field of professional development and in the field of school environment and school organization) are required to give excellent teachers the chances to grow?
- Presentation by professor **Frank van der Duyn Schouten**, vice-president of the Dutch Education Council.
- Reaction and introduction to the debate by **Elena Hadjikakou**, Cyprus Education Council.
- Debate
- 15.30 – 17.00 h** **School, laboratory for life.** Which are the organizational conditions for schools to give maximum development opportunities to pupils and teachers?
- Presentation by professor **Carmel Borg**, university of Malta
- Reaction and introduction to the debate by Manuel Miguéns, secretary general of the CNE (Portuguese Education Council)
- Debate
- 19.30 h** Conference dinner at restaurant Halvemaan

Tuesday 22 May 2012

- 08.30 – 09.00 h** Bike ride to the school
- 09.00 – 12.00 h** The link with the work floor: **school visit.** Participants will visit the St Ignatius Gymnasium in Amsterdam and will be welcomed by the rector, Ms Anita Swenneker. Exchange with teachers and pupils, and with representatives of the Bèta Techniek Platform and Bèta Partners.
- 12.00 – 14.00 h** Bike ride and lunch

Opening Session

WELCOME

Adrie Van der Rest

Adrie Van der Rest is secretary director of the Dutch Education Council and president of EUNEC

Mr Van der Rest welcomes and acknowledges the speakers and guests, and extends a special welcome to those who are attending a EUNEC event for the first time, the new faces within the network of education councils in Europe.



This seminar looks at the subject of 'excellence in education'.

Many of us are doubtlessly aware of the fact that we live in a globalising world. We live in a society in which we have to compete with the rest of the world. Most economies in Europe are knowledge-based: they are powered by knowledge. If we want to compete on the global stage, we have to mobilise all human resources, ensure that everyone's talents are developed, and ensure that everyone excels according to his abilities.

Excellence is a broad concept, as was made clear in the first announcement of this seminar. Terms used included eminence, quality assurance, benchmarking, learning outcomes, equity. Given this variety, it will be necessary to focus on the most important topics.

The central question is: how can we ensure that education recognizes, encourages and helps to achieve maximum development of children's talents? The three perspectives that will be explored during this seminar are:

- Pupils: how can we inspire them to excel?
- Teachers: to achieve excellent learning outcomes we need excellent teachers.
- Schools: the natural habitat of pupils and teachers. How can they foster excellence?

Let us look at the first perspective: pupils. We already know that cognitive learning achievements in the basic subjects of language and arithmetic are important, but the school curriculum is broader and pupils' talents are more varied. Just think of sports, creativity, citizenship, for instance. Excellence is not just about cognition and learning outcomes, but also about the ability to work together with others, communication skills, meta cognition. It is also about curiosity and a critical approach. It is about thinking outside the box. But apart from discovering pupils' talents, it is also about the question of how we can provide a stimulus for pupils to develop their talents further and, more particularly, at a higher level. Why is there a gap between the potential learning outcomes of children and the often lower actual outcomes? And how can we bridge this gap?

Moving on from the pupils' perspective, let us now look at the teachers' perspective. As we all know, teachers play a pivotal role in the educational learning process. Teachers can make the difference between average, good and excellent results. How do we identify good teachers? What makes a teacher an excellent teacher? How might excellent teachers act as role models for their colleagues? We will examine these questions more in depth right after lunch.

This takes us to the third perspective on excellence, namely the school organization. What do pupils and teachers need to improve their results? What are the best ways to provide them with a stimulus? In brief, what characterizes excellent schools? And how can we attain these characteristics? The second half of this afternoon's session will focus on this perspective.

EUNEC is a network of education councils. As such, we act as advisory bodies, not as academic institutes. Our key task is to provide advice. However, our advice should be founded on academic knowledge as far as possible. A number of renowned academic specialists will provide us with this knowledge during our seminar. Various education councils will no doubt respond to their views in due course. But I hope that for us here it starts a dialogue that inspires us to further elaborate the theme of excellence in the work we do within our own councils in forming advice to our national governments.

Excellence in education: a question of talent and engagement

Monique Volman, University of Amsterdam

Monique Volman is a full professor of education. She is the programme leader of the Educational Sciences Research Programme at the Research Institute of Child Development and Education at the University of Amsterdam.

The main areas in her research are learning environments for meaningful learning, diversity and the use of ICT in education, issues which she approaches from a socio-cultural theoretical perspective. In her work she aims to build bridges between educational theory and practice by applying and further developing methodologies for collaborative design research, in which teachers and researchers



collaboratively develop and evaluate theoretically-informed innovations.

Introduction

The theme of this seminar is an important theme. It is widely agreed that excellence in education, an optimal development of young people's talents is necessary to solve the problems our societies are facing at this moment. It is therefore very relevant to discuss what we mean by excellence and how it can be achieved in our schools.

Professor Volman focuses on the student level. And in particular she will make a plea to conceptualize 'excellence' at this level in a broad way and to include an element of 'engagement' in its definition.

As a first step, professor Volman takes us - imaginarily - into some of the schools that she has been working with during the past few years, and shows how they are working on their students' talents.

Then she will argue that in the Netherlands' educational policy there has been a growing emphasis on excellence and talent in terms of individual achievement over the past few years. She will argue that this emphasis on individual achievement is a limited and even risky ideal and she will discuss the undesirable sides of it.

She will then advocate another challenge to education than increasing achievement levels. When we strive for excellence, not only the level of achievement is important but also its quality, and the quality that she will address is related to engagement. Educational theory has provided a lot of knowledge about engaging students with school and learning. She will briefly discuss what is known about students' engagement and how it can be stimulated. What we know, however, is mainly about 'engagement as a quality of learning *processes*'; much less attention is paid to 'engagement as a quality of learning *results*'. She will explain why she thinks attention to engagement as a quality of learning results is important in terms of excellence, and how schools can work on this quality with their students.

Excellence - Talent

It seems self-evident that 'developing talent' is a main concern for schools. However, this is not always how schools perceive their core task. Too many teachers consider talent as a more or less fixed characteristic of students which determines how far they will get in their educational career.

It is widely agreed that the concept of 'talent' refers to an aptitude or disposition of a person. Usually such an aptitude is linked to a specific domain; one can be talented in finding creative solutions, one can be socially talented, etc. Talent cannot be learned. However, being talented is not enough for reaching excellence, talent needs to be developed. If a stimulating environment and other personal attributes like perseverance are lacking, talents may not flourish.

Last year professor Volman co-authored a volume in which were described eleven projects in secondary schools aimed at 'developing talent'. In the projects in this volume, researchers and secondary schools had been collaborating for three years. They developed, implemented and evaluated innovations in these schools: for example special attention to gifted students, offering a curriculum that stimulated creative talents, or the development of a whole school concept aimed at an optimal development for all students.

All schools made efforts to support their students in making their talents visible and develop them. There are – roughly - three types of developing talent:

- achieving according to one's abilities

→ developing diverse talents

→ discovering one's talents

In the first interpretation of developing talent – achieving according to one's abilities – the emphasis was on the cognitive domain, and the focus was on improving the achievements of students with a risk of underachievement. There could be many reasons for this: social background, language, a learning disorder but also a lack of challenge at school for example for gifted students.

One of the schools investigated how a school concept centred on thematic learning could benefit students at all levels. Another school developed a learning biography as a tool for teachers and mentors to better understand and stimulate their students to optimal achievements.

In the second case – developing diverse talents - the idea was that school should contribute to the development of a broad range of talents, in the cognitive domain but also social, creative and sportive talents. One of the schools explicitly worked on societal goals, another school organized the curriculum around art and cultural heritage.

The third interpretation focused on helping students to discover their talents; those schools offered activities that enabled students to discover what they were able to and what fitted them. These schools also tried to enhance their students' insight in their strong and weak points. One of the schools made students work with portfolios, another school organized more choice in the curriculum.

Many schools combined these interpretations. And many schools managed to realize what they intended: a higher educational level for students than they initially thought they were able to, but also self-confidence, collaborative and communicative skills, autonomy, planning and organisation skills, self knowledge. The researchers supported the schools in making these achievements visible. However, the development of talent in the non-cognitive domain – a central goal in many of the projects - remained difficult to prove and to measure.

Higher achievement levels: a limited and risky ideal

What these schools do is increasingly under pressure. Since the start of this project, the educational discourse in The Netherlands has changed very fast. 'We' dropped out of the PISA-top, there were concerns about the language and arithmetic skills of teachers in primary education, and in the media 'education bashing' was very popular for a while.

As a result, better achievement levels, higher learning outcomes (in a narrow meaning) are currently seen by many people as *the* challenge to education. During the past few years professor Volman has come to feel a bit

uncomfortable about the way education is trying to maximize achievement levels. One sees eleven year old children attending homework institutes to prepare for the final test at primary school and youngsters of 17 following cramming courses for their school-leaving examination. (And then go on holiday and wash it all out again with a lot of alcohol). And one wonders if this is the way to work towards excellence.

Striving for higher achievement levels is in itself a respectable ideal, but it is a limited ideal, and even maybe a risky one. Striving for higher achievement levels is a limited ideal because realizing learning achievements is only the exterior of what education is for and what schools do. Education is not just about knowing a lot but also about being able to do something with that knowledge and skills, and feeling responsible for that. The schools think these are important educational goals. As we just saw they consider the development of talent as more than just producing good grades. It is also the development of self-confidence, creativity, perseverance, independence and curiosity. They work on respect, a feeling of responsibility and a willingness to engage in dialogue. However, these learning results are not expressed in the marks achieved in standardized tests. And some of these schools have a hard time explaining the Inspectorate what they are doing.

So, the ideal of higher achievement is limited. But it can also be risky. One risk is a direct consequence of the limitation that has been explained before - a one-sided emphasis on achievement level and marks detracts attention from what cannot be measured by standardized tests and cannot directly be expressed in marks but is nevertheless important.

A second risk is that the aspiration for higher achievements mainly tends to apply here to the core subjects Dutch, English and Mathematics. This picture



is chosen because a philosopher recently warned that with the one-sided emphasis on subjects that are considered economically useful, education does not lead to excellence but creates 'contented cows', uncritical citizens. He argues that the school instead should be a place where young people come into contact with culture

and history, because these subjects foster independent minds that do not blindly follow the masses without questioning. The American philosopher Martha Nussbaum last year made a similar plea for the humanities.³

³ Martha Nussbaum, Not for profit, Princeton University Press, 2010

The third problem with the ideal of higher achievements is associated with the way it is being promoted. It is often thought that measuring, monitoring and accounting for learning achievements invokes the desired behaviour – striving for excellence - in schools, teachers and students. That is partly the case. Taking a critical look at language test results has, for example, made some schools realize that they underestimate their students. But putting pressure on schools also encourages tactical behaviour in students, parents and teachers, such as training for the final test at primary school and the school-leaving examination, as we do see a lot in the Netherlands. But also excluding primary school students from the test, or allocating students to a lower type of secondary education to be on the safe side. This tactical behaviour of course limits the value of the tests; the danger is that they do not measure the results of education but of training for the test. We all know that test training is not a good teaching strategy because students learn tricks and meaningless knowledge, which they have often forgotten when they need it in real life. Test training is also pedagogically undesirable, as we are implicitly saying to students that the marks are important, rather than their effort, or their command of knowledge and skills.



Professor Volman especially wants to discuss an effect that the ideal of high achievement levels can have on students. While thinking that we are working towards a place in the top five knowledge economies, we run the risk of creating a generation of young people with a lack of engagement with society. At the top of the hierarchy, we may create students who have learnt to focus mainly on their own success; at the other end of the spectrum, frustrated students who are unable to keep up with the aim of high achievements. Because it is difficult for students who do not achieve high marks to perceive their time at school as meaningful. The following question is applicable to both groups: how do we keep them engaged?

Engagement as a quality of learning processes

A lot of educational research focuses on the question of how to foster the engagement of young people with learning and school. Three forms or aspects of engagement are differentiated in the literature.

→ Behavioural engagement

Firstly there is *behavioural engagement*. This can vary from simply being present at school to students concentrating on their work. You can see behavioural engagement - a student paying attention in the lesson or actively participating in a discussion.

→ Emotional engagement

Secondly we differentiate *emotional engagement*. Do students feel a bond with the school? Do they feel comfortable in the class and do they enjoy their work? This form of engagement is not always immediately apparent. But you can deduce it from students' behaviour - do they attend school cheerfully, do they express curiosity or obvious boredom?

→ Cognitive engagement

Thirdly there is *cognitive engagement*. Are students prepared to make a mental effort to master the subject matter?

These three forms of engagement cannot be separated. For example, if a student feels comfortable at school (emotional engagement), he or she is less likely to play truant (behavioural engagement). Further, it is important that engagement is not a personal characteristic but the result of interaction between an individual and her or his environment. That means that engagement can be influenced by changing the environment.



Professor Volman briefly discusses two research traditions that focus on the engagement of youngsters with school and learning: the research on engagement with the school as an institution and the research on engagement with school tasks, the learning motivation research.

Engagement with school

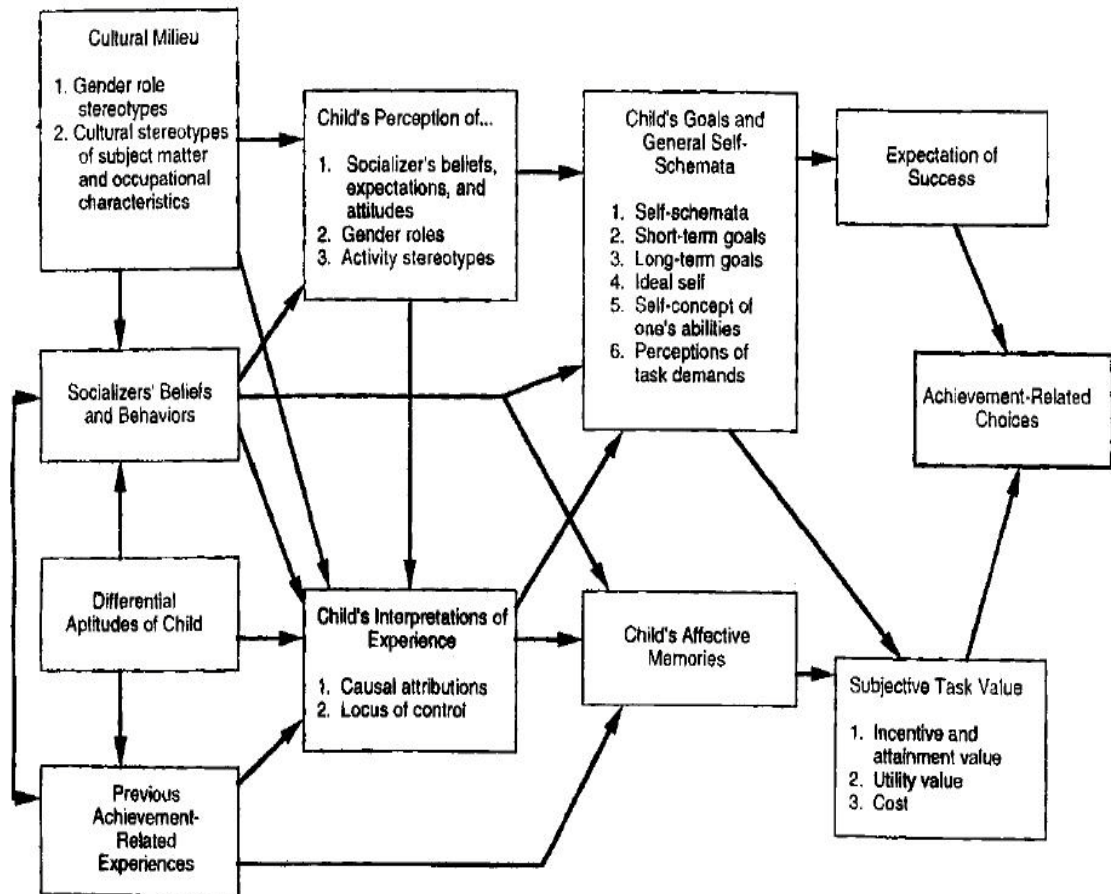
We know from research that engagement with school is very important. Students who feel a bond with the school and see themselves as a member of the school community display less risk behaviour, use less drugs, display less aggressive behaviour and have less chance of dropping out of school. Students who have a good relationship with teachers feel more involved with school and relationships with fellow students are likewise important, sometimes even more important than those with the teacher. Lastly, the perceived relevance of the subject matter has also been found to contribute to engagement with school. According to some researchers emotional engagement also furthers educational achievement but this relationship is more equivocal. Some youngsters do not do well even though they think school is very important, and some youngsters who do achieve do not feel engaged.



Motivation theories on engagement with school tasks

The second research tradition is the research on learning motivation. Researchers of learning motivation are interested in the question how motivated behaviour, for example doing your best to achieve, comes about.

This is the famous model of Jacquelynne Eccles. She developed a theoretical model on learning motivation based on the psychological model that explains people's behaviour in relation to their values and expectations.



In this model motivated behaviour (referred to here as 'achievement-oriented choices') is determined by the value students attach to a task and their expectations of whether they can successfully complete the task. The value of the task and students' expectations are in turn influenced by goals and self-image which are based on earlier experiences, such as experiences of success or failure at school, but also experiences with what is important to people in their environment.

In recent years motivation has increasingly been seen as the result of the interaction between students and the learning environment and thus as something that can be influenced. Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory shows, for example, that students' valuation of tasks can be furthered by giving students more autonomy. This is possible by offering them choices, such as between subjects and assignments. The goal theory shows that it is good to assess and reward effort and results separately at school, as this stimulates students to pursue task goals rather than ego goals. Theories about intrinsic motivation suggest that it is good to attune to students' personal interests.

Engagement as a quality of learning results

The research discussed so far shows that engagement with the school is an important and complex phenomenon. It also indicates what we can do to further the effort students put into school tasks. But we have to go further. The motivation model that has just been described is restricted to individual achievements. Both traditions - the research on engagement with school and the learning motivation research - do not address engagement with meaningful knowledge. The findings seem to be directed at improving students' willingness to attend school and to work on tasks created by adults because this is important for your future. As well as stimulating students to engage with learning processes, we should strive for engagement as a quality of learning results. This can be explained in four steps and an intermezzo.

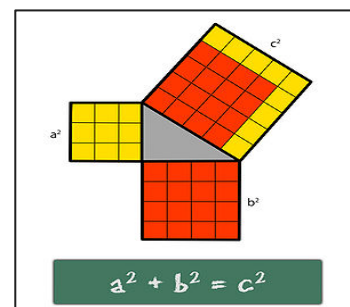
– *Step 1: Knowledge and skills as means of dealing with questions*

The objective of education is to provide a new generation with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to take over from the previous generation. Education instils youngsters with the knowledge and skills which are the solutions to problems faced by earlier generations and helps them see how earlier generations dealt with questions and problems. Some teachers are very competent at giving lessons of this quality.

An example is the English teacher at a high school in Harlem, New York. She discusses the different types of love that feature in Shakespeare's play King Lear - love between father and child, man and woman, egotistical love and jealous love - and thus she helps her students realize that people then, just like them today, wrestled with friendship, loyalty and love.



But this quality can also apply to mathematics. Pythagoras had a problem that he wanted to solve and so he developed his famous theory. As a teacher you can involve students in these dilemmas and questions. This does happen and many teachers do let students experience that what is taught at school is a solution to or a perspective on a question or problem.



But often it does not happen and in any case the 'achievements jargon' is far removed from this perspective of education.

- *Step 2: Engagement with subject matter: contributing to answering questions and solving problems*

It is even more seldom that youngsters at school are invited to think about old and current questions and problems together and work together on solutions: how to tackle global warming, how do you make a beautiful wood joint or how do you make the last years of an elderly person's life comfortable? We must try to make young people experience more often that being able to tackle such questions and solve this kind of problem is the ultimate purpose of going to school; this is what all those knowledge and skills are meant for. In addition to engagement with the school, task or achievement, we should therefore invite students to engage with the subject matter content. Subject knowledge and skills are meaningful because they are instruments to achieve something of value for you and/or for others. Engagement is then not only a quality of going to school and the learning process but also of the learning results achieved. It is about being able to do something and knowing something, having a perspective on the related possibilities for action, and the willingness to use the knowledge and skills acquired.

A PhD student worked for two years on a project with teachers in two pre-vocational education departments for care and welfare. With the teachers she developed projects in which students were given the responsibility for devising and implementing a 'care activity'. They organized for example a coffee morning for elderly people and a games day at a primary school. All kinds of professional skills and theory were learned during the preparation of these activities. What are children of five actually capable of? How do you transport someone in a wheelchair? How do you introduce yourself to an older person? In interviews afterwards students said how exciting they had found this. What they had learned had a real effect, they had real responsibility, and it could have gone wrong. They were intensely engaged with the learning process and what they had learned, the learning result, had acquired personal meaning for them.

- *Intermezzo: socio-cultural theory - practices, activities and motives*

The educational approach in the project just described is based on socio-cultural theory. This theory defines 'learning' in a way that supports the effects that have just been described. Learning is mostly seen as the individual acquisition of knowledge and skills. Socio-cultural theories see learning differently; from this perspective learning is not about merely acquiring knowledge and skills but about improving one's ability to participate in social practices. Social practices are for example the shop, the laboratory and the football match. In such social practices people organize human activities that are essential within a society, because through these activities people pursue important motives together, they are done to meet certain

needs, such as the activities represented in these pictures: trade, research or sport (with earning money, acquiring knowledge and relaxation as motives).

The socio cultural scholars Lave and Wenger describe learning as the development from being a peripheral participant in a social-cultural practice to a central participant. An example from the own experience of professor Volman: At the beginning of her daughter's work experience placement in a florist's shop, she was only allowed to change the water and clean up, but at the end she worked on the till and made bouquets. During such a transition from peripheral to central participation, not only your knowledge and skills change, but also your identity. You become a different person through what you can do and that results in you wanting to learn new things. In this sort of learning process the meaning of learning and knowledge acquisition is not questioned; the reason for learning is inherent in the activity itself. From this perspective you look at engagement differently than in the research traditions discussed. While the question in those traditions is a. how can we ensure that students feel a bond with school and b. how can we motivate them to do their school work, in this perspective you try to bring children and youngsters into contact with activities that are important in society and with the motives on which they are founded. In this way you provide motives that can become part of their identity.

→ *Step 3: Participation in social practices as a way of learning*

This theoretical perspective has consequences for curricula and educational methods. It means that you can motivate students to learn by introducing them to concrete social practices in which they then experience that knowledge and skills are necessary to participate in a competent way. This can be achieved by organizing opportunities at school for legitimate peripheral participation, but this is difficult. Most social practices in our society are not suitable for peripheral participants, and that is precisely why education as we know it originated. You cannot learn the knowledge and skills needed in many practices by simply imitating and taking part; they are too complex for this. We are all glad that the surgeon does not learn in this way: just by participating in real surgery. It therefore involves organizing students' participation in social practices in such a way that things do not go wrong and that students can learn something.

Part of the research of professor Volman and of that of her PhD students comprises finding ways, in cooperation with schools and teachers, of 'learning by participating in social practices' and analysing whether this is a successful way of not only realizing good educational achievements in the narrow sense but also engagement as a quality of the learning process and the learning result. Schools try to achieve this by making their own versions of social-cultural practices (for example, a restaurant in a pre-vocational secondary education department), by working with ICT simulations, and by involving students in meaningful out-of-school activities and then reflecting in school on the experiences they have gained.

To avoid misunderstanding, in all these examples the objective is not to make education more pleasant. It is about education that tries to achieve better, more meaningful learning results.

→ *Step 4: You can matter!*

Does the availability of well-simulated social practice or social practice that has been adapted for learning mean that students spontaneously want to participate competently in those practices? No, unfortunately. Youngsters do not find adult social practices really attractive and are rather inclined to absorb themselves in their own world – conducted via social media – where stars and glamour are the benchmark. Many adult social practices are partly unattractive and uninteresting to youngsters because what might be interesting to them is not visible. As pointed out earlier, it is therefore so important not only to emphasize ‘what you must know’ but also to show where the problems, questions and differences of opinion lie, and – in addition – to challenge students to formulate their own questions. But many adult practices do not appeal to youngsters because what is visible invokes a feeling of powerlessness rather than one of ‘hey, I want to be part of that’: fraud, violence and crisis.

The engagement whereby youngsters develop skills in the context of games has prompted several educational researchers to think about what these



games have that school tasks do not. James Gee listed a number of the characteristics of these games. After making a mistake in a game, you can get a new life, thereby keeping the frustration within limits and you can adapt the game to your own pace and wishes. Games

also have characteristics such as an interesting character with whom you can identify, there is something at stake and the player's actions have an effect.

The latter indicates that it is important to pay more attention in schools not only to the fact that knowledge and skills are worthwhile, but also to let students experience that what they do with those knowledge and skills matters. That they themselves can and do matter, and that is something that students seldom experience at school. Sociologists and educationalists have pointed out for some time that the development of an identity for youngsters

in our individualized society today is not easy. How do you want to live, who do you want to be? All this is no longer determined by the family into which you happened to be born. This means that more than ever young people have to think for themselves how they want to make a meaningful contribution. Education should and can help them doing so.

Engagement at the top and bottom of the ladder

The emphasis on excellence in terms of high achievements means that children are considered in the perspective of the marks they achieve and look at themselves in the same way. We witness that children of 11 know the test scores of the whole class. Those with a high score are proud and rightly so. Good students, brilliant scientists and clever administrators in the making deserve to be nurtured and it is important that students with this ability have the opportunity to develop it to the full. **But these students should also be made aware that it is not only educational achievement that makes you excellent; it is above all what you do with that achievement.** Are you a responsible scientist, an honest administrator?

The group that does not achieve well is not proud. The greater the emphasis is on achievement, the more difficult it is for this group to find something from which they can derive self-respect. In a recent PhD thesis it was shown that youngsters in pre-vocational secondary education are very aware that they are at the bottom of the ladder; they develop strategies to live with this. They say that they do not work so hard and give themselves another chance to progress further in the future. But they can scarcely name anything which they themselves think they are good at. Other studies have shown that some of these youngsters cannot live with this and develop more destructive strategies. They undermine the course of events at school, thereby ultimately undermining their own opportunities.

While the students in pre-university education in the research that was mentioned saw themselves as people who will contribute to society, the students in pre-vocational secondary education did not. Why don't we let these youngsters experience that what they can do is also a contribution and is appreciated. You can mean something but that does require that you know things and can do things. You can become the assistant in the computer shop whose customers leave the shop happy, or the roofer who thinks of a good solution for draining the rain water, or the carer who brightens the last years of elderly people's lives. Contributions to society can be solutions to technical questions and social problems but also contributions to pleasure, beauty and



comfort. **Not all students can attain high educational achievements. But the experience of being significant, of being meaningful to others, is within the reach of all students whether they are being educated to be craftsmen or academics.**

Summary

To summarize, in the last few years increasing attention has been paid to the question how we can stimulate excellence in education, but in doing so we sometimes tend to focus on a narrow range of talents. Excellence asks for valuing and developing a broad range of talents, and asks for doing this with the quality of engagement. We want children and young people to develop their talents and to acquire the knowledge, skills and understanding that will equip them to find their place in society and contribute to that society. Engagement as a quality of learning processes and learning results is necessary for this. Knowledge and skills must not only be a means for students to achieve high marks but also to orient them in the world, to understand it and want to function in it.

‘Engaging youngsters with society’ is a task of schools along with developing talent.

Therefore excellence in education is a question of talent and engagement.

EXCELLENCE AT THE LEVEL OF THE PUPIL

Give pupils the opportunity to excel

Vincent Donche, University of Antwerp

Vincent Donche is assistant professor and member of the research group EduBRON of the Institute of Education and Information Sciences of the University of Antwerp, Belgium. He is passionate about motivation and about why and how pupils learn.

Vincent Donche presents the main conclusions of the review for the Flemish Education Council on learning motivation.⁴

The main question that will be addressed in this presentation is how we can put forward more evidence about what works in terms of motivation of pupils.



⁴ 'Leerbaarheid van leerlingen aanwakkeren. Principes die motiveren, inspireren én werken' (to be published 2012)

How to create the conditions to motivate, inspire, stimulate pupils?

Three main questions are addressed in this session:

- Why do pupils want to learn? There is a clear link with the notion of engagement from the presentation of professor Volman.
- Which are the prevalent conditions that motivate, inspire and stimulate learning?
- How to evaluate these conditions?

Why pupils want to learn

The basic core question is why pupils want to learn. This question can be approached from many perspectives. Pupils might want to learn because this is an innate habit of the homo sapiens, in order to survive. They might want to learn, because, from birth, there is an eagerness to learn. They might want to know, to achieve, to gain pleasure. They might be interested in the content. Or they might know that they are good in learning and are rewarded for that.

Literature shows that not all pupils are that eager to learn. Longitudinal research that follows pupils during the six years in secondary education shows fluctuations and a significant decrease in pupil's motivation. This decrease is particularly important at the transition from primary to secondary education; there is an increase at the transition from secondary to higher education, when pupils can choose their topic.

Three main strands of motivation research focus on why pupils want to learn:

- Research on study motivation
- Research on study interest
- Research of self-efficacy of learning

These three strands offer a partly overlapping and complementary framework to better understand why pupils want to learn.

Research on study motivation

Pintrich & Schunk did research on intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation (2002); Deci & Ryan published their self-determination theory (2002); Ames published the achievement goal theory (1999).

The figure shows dimensions of motivation according to the **self-determination theory**:

Figure 1: Dimensions of motivation according to Self-determination theory

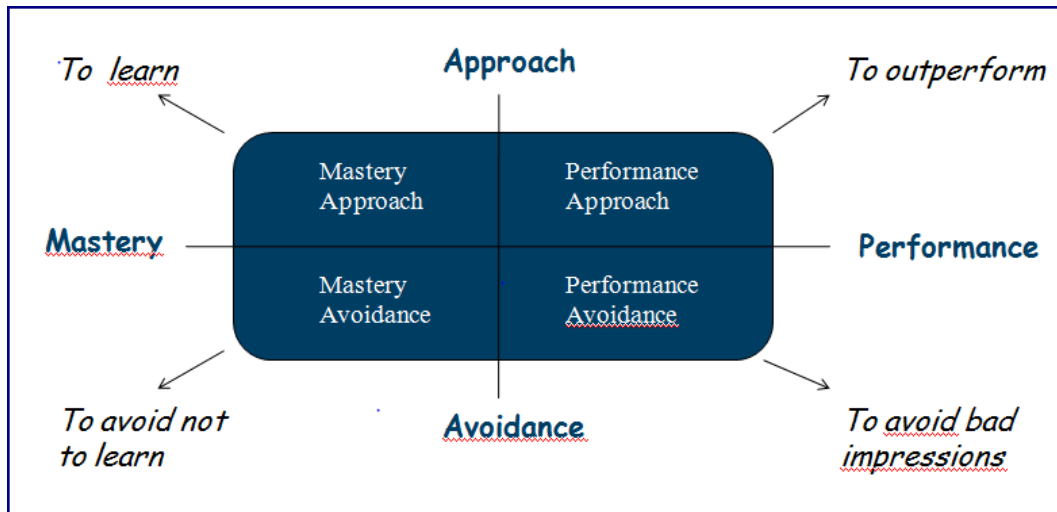
	<i>Amotivation</i>	<i>External regulation</i>	<i>Introjected regulation</i>	<i>Identified regulation</i>	<i>Intrinsic regulation</i>
<i>Motivational quality</i>	Low	High	High	High	High
<i>Motivational Force</i>	Discouragement Helplessness	Reward, punishment	Guilt, shame, pride	Personal value and relevance	Enjoyment and interest
<i>Internalization</i>	No	No	Partial	Almost full	Not required
<i>Underlying emotions</i>	Apathy	Stress	Stress	Volition and freedom	Volition and freedom
<i>Type of Motivation</i>	Amotivation	Extrinsic	Extrinsic	Extrinsic	Intrinsic

If pupils are confronted with a task, they can be intrinsically motivated, or extrinsically: they see it as a means to achieve something. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can be combined in one person.

The self-determination theory distinguishes autonomous motivation and controlled motivation; it is all about psychological freedom. In the case of autonomous motivation, the pupil has intrinsic and extrinsic goals interacting; in the case of controlled motivation, learning is externally regulated and guided. As far as the conditions are available, a learner can evolve from controlled motivation towards autonomous motivation. This gradual shift can be achieved.

This theory offers a framework for practitioners wanting to increase the autonomous motivation.

Another theory that can enhance the understanding of differences in motivation between pupils is the achievement goal theory.

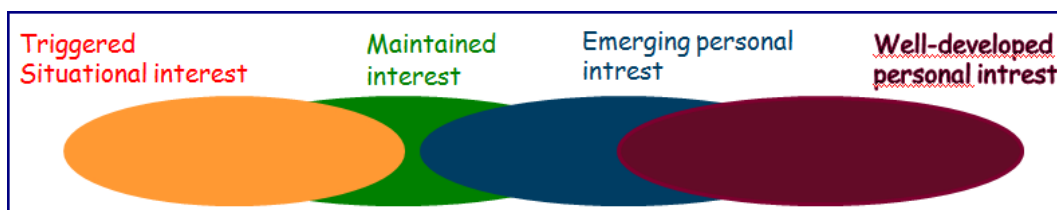


This theory makes a distinction between the mastery approach (pupils wanting to learn) and the performance approach (pupils wanting to outperform). The question is whether, as a practitioner, you want pupils to excel at this mastery level, or at this performance level.

Research on study interest

Another way of looking at why pupils want to learn has to do with study interest. Interest and motivation are highly correlated.

Research (Hidi 2006; Schiefele 1991; Hidi & Reniger 2006) offers again a good framework for enhancing interest from very specific to general:

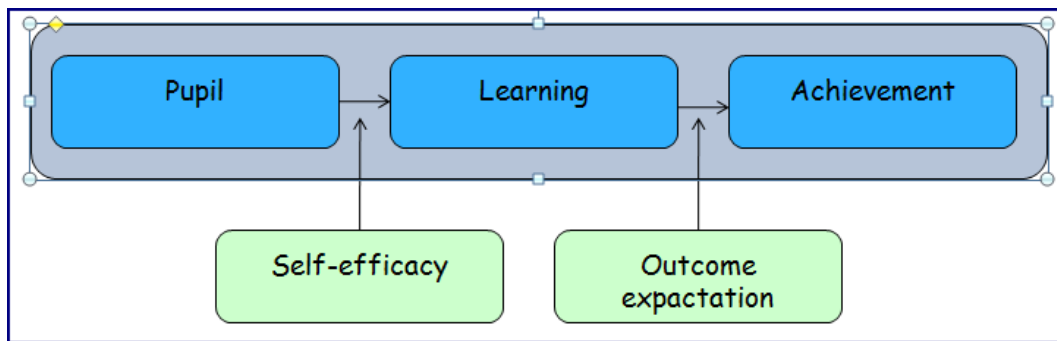


Teachers can stimulate triggered situational interest; if they do this for a longer time, successfully, the interest can become maintained interest and personal interest can emerge and evolve towards well-developed personal interest.

Research on self-efficacy

In the search to look how pupils learn one can look at motivation and at interest, but another motor, another influencing factor is self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy can be defined as one's belief of being capable

of performing a behavior taking into account the expected benefits and costs of that behavior (outcome expectations). In the context of a classroom this can be difficult, both can be in conflict. A pupil, for instance, can do good learning, but only be awarded if he proves that he learned by heart.



Conclusion

Motivation research provides three main answers to the question why pupils want to learn:

- Because of their stimulating personal drives and goals to be achieved
- Because they are triggered or personally interested in the contents
- Because they feel confident about the quality of their learning outcomes

Conditions that motivate , inspire and stimulate learning

In order to list these conditions, the research team went through a systematic literature study of educational research data bases. They contacted experts and went on with 40 review studies and selected handbooks, based on scientific criteria (systematicallity, reliability, validity, transparency).

The conditions can be described at three levels:

- The level of the pupil (his socio-cultural background, his social skills and wellbeing)
- The level of the classroom
 - Good interpersonal relationship between the teacher and the pupil
 - A safe classroom and learning climate (connectedness and cooperation)
 - Transparency and nature of the learning goals

- Teaching approach directed to autonomy support
 - Provision of clear goal setting and structure within learning environments
 - Triggering and developing interest of pupils
 - Differentiation and scaffolding learners
 - Use of feedback and rewards
 - Awareness of conceptions of learning, conceptions of pupils and one self
- The level of the school
- Influences of school context (school size and safety)
 - Influences of school culture (school team and shared goal setting)

The review focused on the second level, as the main objective was to provide the practitioner with principles on how the teacher can make a difference.

Ten evidence based teacher principles have been selected.

- Keep working on a positive relationship with your pupils

This principle is underlined in almost all studies. It is a competence teachers need to develop, through empathy, authenticity and active listening

- Create a safe learning climate

Structure is important; the learning climate has to be challenging, but not overchallenging). This means that the teacher looks at the learners needs and adapts the learning, by setting boundaries and creating connectedness with the everyday situation (cf. reference to Pythagoras by professor Volman).

- Choose subjects, methods and activities that can trigger as much as possible the interest of pupils

Connect with present interests of pupils and trigger interest of the subject

- Help pupils to get connected with learning subjects

This is especially important when spontaneous interest is lacking

- Listen in an authentic way to pupils and be open to resistance and negative emotions of pupils

Use strategies to cope with resistance, reward efforts and be open for experiences of injustice, through empathy, authenticity and active listening

- Choose autonomy supportive rather than controlling language

Avoid shame inducing language, as the language that the teacher uses can be very influencing.

- Structure your lessons and clarify learning goals

Use of study guides and open learning materials and increase of autonomy and self-regulation

- Offer challenging learning tasks that are reachable (Zone of 'proximal development' (Vygotsky))

Increase the experiences of study success and take learners seriously

- Give feedback on what pupils do and how they can reach the learning goals

Avoid negative feedback, use positive feedback and appreciation

- Self-awareness of your own needs, interests and professional drive

Reflect on the values you find important when teaching and be aware of your own motivational drive; be flexible in your own teaching approach; be supportive for other colleagues and stay involved with the school team; stay informed about new perspectives.

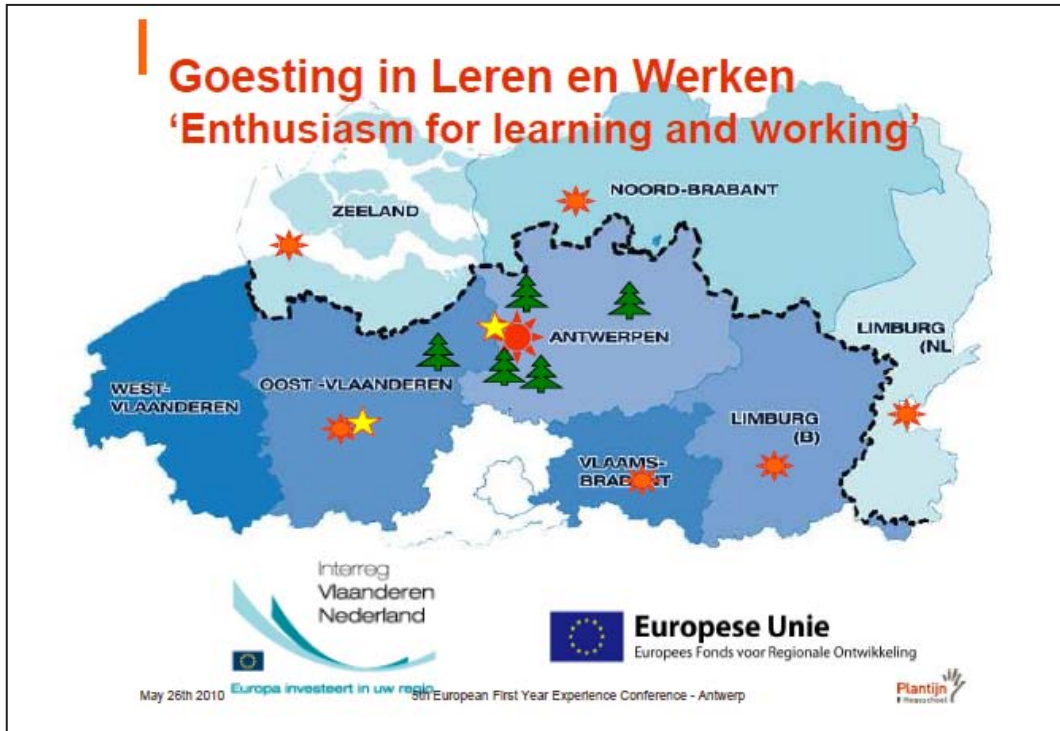
How to evaluate these conditions?

These ten practice oriented principles can make a difference, but have to be implemented from a critical point of view. They are not always transferable and have to be explored and evaluated from a threefold perspective.

- Academic achievement is important, but one also has to look at motivation, interest and self-efficacy as an outcome indicator. Self-awareness has to be raised among pupils about their own motivational drive and learning quality through self-evaluation or monitoring tools.
- Classroom practices should be evaluated through practitioner research and the use of feedback of pupils.
- There is need for scientific research and networking.

The research group EduBRon is related to secondary schools and to higher education and has set up EU projects directed to giving feedback. The project 'Goesting in leren en werken'⁵ (= Enthusiasm for learning and working) is an example of a practitioner research project: how to develop feedback instruments to monitor motivation? The project involves 7 provinces in Flanders and the Netherlands.

⁵ www.goleweb.eu



65 secondary schools are participating, 45000 respondents filled in the on-line self-report and feedback form. This clearly demonstrates that there is a need, that schools and teachers take motivation seriously as a way to enhance learning outcomes.

Excellence and education: taboo, paradox or new educational paradigm?

Roos Herpelinck

Roos Herpelinck is member of the EUNEC executive committee and director at the Flemish Education Council (Vlor). She reflects on the conference presented by Vincent Donche.



Excellence in education : Reflections on the theme from a pupil's point of view

Roos Herpelinck admits right away that the topic of this conference makes her feel a bit uncomfortable. It is for the Vlor an ambivalent theme. It is not a theme that has been discussed explicitly a lot of times. Quality, yes, equal opportunities, yes, care and guidance, yes, reform of the education structures, too many times, accountability, yes. But excellence as a central paradigm as it is put on the agenda today, no.

The theme also raises some questions and some discomfort because it does not fit into the current Flemish education policy discourse. It questions the implicit assumptions we use in our work and advice. But for all these reasons it is a good theme for a seminar where education councils can proactively explore new ideas and paradigms. It makes of EUNEC a platform for mutual learning and exchange of new educational policy perspectives. And that is certainly the main reason for development of the network.

The Vlor has been asked to reflect from the perspective of the pupils, from what is called in Flanders a "frog perspective", a Lilliputian perspective, a perspective from below, from the one who has to undergo the change. It is important to try to imagine how a 10 year old would listen to our discussions. What would be the concerns for a 16 years old? To which extent does a

concept of excellence fit with the school concept where pupils feel well, with the school they would like to have?

Ms Herpelinck has no intention to present polished opinions, a clear and finished story. She rather formulates some impressions, some first thoughts, provocative dilemmas, offering an impetus for a fierce and rich debate.

Excellent education is more than education aiming at high levels of performance and knowledge. Excellent education has to take competences as a starting point.

There is a strong representation of learners and students in the Flemish education council. At the beginning of this school year they wrote an open letter to different education stakeholders, amongst others to the Vlor. At that moment there was a controversy in the press about the fact that students today "know nothing", that "teachers" are convinced that the level falls constantly. The students felt touched and even a little hurt by this debate. Therefore, the open letter. They formulated a number of pertinent concerns which are relevant to today's debate. "We come every day to the school to learn, that's for sure. We don't ask any 'fun' content, as some claim. Teach us relevant issues we will need for future jobs or to study successfully in higher education [...] Please challenge us, please put the bar we have to jump over, high enough. Low expectations result in low results." They referred in this context to the tension between traditional knowledge based frames of reference and competencies such as digital literacy, social skills and innovative competences to survive in tomorrow's society. They pulled the attention to the fact that some things they do not learn at school but in an informal way.

In this respect they pointed at some weaknesses of the Flemish education system: the very strong orientation to reproduction of knowledge and the emphasis on standards and performance levels. Flemish students score very high on the PISA tests for math and reading skills. They do especially fine in reproduction of knowledge. But if they have to find creative solutions to new problems, they are not so good. The students ask in their open letter: "Can we count on you, not only assessing what we know but also what we can do, the progress that we have made during the school year? We want to become more than quiz winners. [...] Make the content of lessons relevant, adapted to the needs of our time and challenging [...] We also require a better alignment of the curriculum because too often we only repeat the same issues".

There is a lot of research at our disposal on vocational education and the conditions that optimize professional education. Students in vocational education are not always less eager to learn than other students. But they do learn differently: they learn by doing, they prefer to learn in a more informal

and more practical setting. It would be unfortunate if the debate on excellence in education would be limited to general and flow-oriented education. Practical learning and internships, learning in a social reality are part of an excellent learning environment.

There is a link with another actual discussion: In Flanders as in many other industrialized countries, there is a very strong pressure to enlarge the number of students opting for scientific and beta study careers. Especially these beta scientists are needed at the labour market in order to innovate the economy. If we talk about excellence and raising standards, we mostly look at these youngsters. At least we think of youngsters who are able to succeed in higher education.

But Swedish research shows that about a quarter of the pupils has absolutely no affinity with these issues. The good news is that three quarters can be motivated, but the pedagogic approach and the motivators used should be adapted to different areas of interest. Still remains that other quarter: some pupils indicate they want to care for other people. They are do-ers. They are not so theoretical oriented. Some are very empathic. Some are very creative, always thinking out of the classical boxes. They do not use the shortest way to a practical solution. They think in images, not in mathematical or logical models; they want to work with their hands.

It is essential that excellent education is responsive to the wide range of talents of children and young people and develops them in various domains.

This leads us to a first clue to the debate: we need to think about the details of an excellent curriculum.

High ambitions for pupils, high standards should extend to more than knowledge and theoretical thinking. The starting point to define these standards is an integration of knowledge, attitudes and skills. In short: this kind of education and curriculum standards should be **competence based**.

Excellent education is also based on a **broad scale of talents**. We do not only need excellent engineers but also excellent social workers, teachers, nurses, artists, craftsmen, shop keepers, ...

Excellence is in this sense rooted in innovation and creativity, in openness for new societal needs and in finding new solutions for present and unknown challenges.

Excellence and equal opportunities go hand in hand

Another dilemma is linked to the excellence paradigm. Matching high standards with improving wellbeing is one of main challenges of the Flemish education system.

The PISA survey shows that Flanders faces a wide gap between the best performing students and students who underperform. This disparity in performance is strongly determined by socio-economic and cultural-ethnic differences. High standards and equity are at odds in the education system. A lot of Flemish students are not able to perform in the mainstream education system. At the age of twelve, one of every ten boys (!) has an experience with special needs support. The amount of pupils oriented towards special needs education is growing every year. Despite of strengthening support and guidance systems, we do not succeed in diminishing the phenomenon.

Moreover, the wellbeing of pupils in schools rather low. Flemish 15 years old can read and count very well but they have very little pleasure in reading and maths. The excellent performance is also due to high standards for pupils and a highly performance oriented and competitive education system.

Therefore, the research and projects which were presented by Vincent Donche today are important. The study provides strategies and determines how a school team can encourage the motivation and learning readiness of students.

This is a second clue in the debate:

Excellence in education cannot ignore the learning motivation and the different learning styles and differences in the tempo of learning. Excellence in education may not be seen as contradictory to an equal chances and inclusive education policy.

Why do we want excellence in education? Is this a societal need or a need of pupils?

This third point has to do with the relationships between students and excellent teaching. To what extent should students be allowed to formulate their own searching for identity and their growing to adulthood into the education system?

The impression, the perception exists that the debate on excellence in education has an economic more than a pedagogic background. It was put on the policy agenda as a result of what we sometimes pompously call the "war for talent". The demand of the economy and the labor market for highly educated, creative and innovative workers. Workers who are highly competitive. When googling the words "excellent schools", one is oriented to a You Tube movie on the website of the presidential campaign of Barack Obama⁶. His main education policy line calls for excellence in education, especially in public schools. It is called the "race to the top." By the way, the education policy of his predecessor Bush is called, as you might know: "No

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAdWbOtJYX4&feature=r-vrec>

child left behind". Conservatism and left wing politics are not predictable anymore!

Obama explains very clearly the link between improving educational achievement, high expectations for students, high performance standards for schools and education systems and the economic position of the United States. The European Union is seeking exactly the same thing in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy (but they have fewer policy instruments to encourage this).

Does this mean that excellent education is not a good concept? No, but next to the macro perspective we need to embed the perspective and the unfinished and searching path of the students. Brain research shows that there exists something like an "adolescent brain". Recent imaging of brain cells tells us that the brains of a fourteen year old are more similar to those of a child than those of an adult. Between fourteen and sixteen years, the brain has to develop for more than 30%. Starting from this knowledge, the child psychiatry can better explain the group of unmotivated youngsters at risk of drug use, at risk of school leaving, at risk of school phobia, etc. Teens have behavioral problems related to the nature of their brains. If we want excellent teaching, we have to take into account the development of youngsters, what they can do and what they cannot do.

If excellent teaching is not responsive to what young people cope with, to their needs, educational innovations will stay without effect.

Last week, during a seminar at the Vlor, representatives of schools from an Islamic education project explained their approach and their project. The audience heard about trial and error, about pitfalls and opportunities. A lot of our members had many doubts and many criticisms.

But what impressed most was the striving of these migrant groups to work for their emancipation. It was surprising they referred to the emancipation processes of the autochthonous middle class in western European countries. They told that their communities choose to invest in higher education for their children, that they wanted to educate an "elite".

These school projects were impressive by their combination of very high aspirations for pupils. Their students are obliged to participate in all Olympiads, science initiatives, debate clubs etc. at national level. They attend performances in Flemish cultural centers and theaters. But there is also a highly developed guidance and support system. Students are stimulated to assume high responsibility for their future, for the society. There are mandatory homework classes in the first years of their school career. Remedial courses are obliged during holidays and on Sundays. Almost every holiday the schools organize courses in Dutch, French and English...

This leads us to a third discussion proposition:

Excellent education takes the developmental processes, the needs and the wellbeing of pupils into account in the design and the evaluation of pedagogic processes.

This is not contradictory with absolute freedom of choice. It is not the same as abdicate as educator. Educators should also set high expectations, high standards. Those insights urge us to recognise also the limits in the life and aspirations of youngsters. Education has to set high performance standards, has to be demanding for the pupils, but always has to start from the development needs of the pupils.

EXCELLENCE AT THE LEVEL OF THE TEACHER

Excellence in a flat country

Frank van der Duyn Schouten

Professor F.A. van der Duyn Schouten is vice-president of the Dutch Education Council (Onderwijsraad). He is also general director of Netspar (Network for Studies on Pensions, Aging and Retirement). From July 1999 until November 2008 professor van der Duyn Schouten has been rector magnificus of the University of Tilburgh.



As far as the Dutch Education Council is concerned, the topic of excellence in education is chosen properly. The theme is being debated for some time in the Netherlands. In the mid eighties an evaluation system has been set up for higher education, involving all universities. The evaluation showed that in certain disciplines, especially in economic and social sciences, the performance was low. This evaluation had a big impact on the way in which universities look at themselves. Before, for instance, they used to hire PhD's and provide them with a contract for ten years. Now, new staff members are given a temporary appointment for six years, with an evaluation after five years. This new approach has an impact on the research position of Dutch universities.

Professor van der Duyn Schouten agrees that excellence and equity are two sides of the same coin. However, the focus on equity or rather on excellence depends on the period, on the momentum. In the Netherlands, the 'equity' side of the coin has been up since the late sixties. Recently, in 2011, the Dutch education council published a report on excellence: 'Excellent teachers

as inspiring role models', and this title was considered to be provocative. Professor van der Duyn Schouten discusses the background of this report during this conference.

A flat country

The Netherlands are a flat country. We don't like inequalities. The Prime Minister should earn no more than a well fixed salary; there are limited top salaries for civil servants. Those who earn more in the financial or private sector are usually not considered as highly respected by the public.

In primary and secondary education, teachers use to say 'We are all just as good as each other'. Teachers do all their best, and don't like people to be considered as role models. There is little appreciation for excellence. 'Act normal' is the device.

So, to some extent, the Netherlands are a society where there are no or little incentives to excel.

Employers are not interested in high marks

If you talk to a student, the majority is satisfied with a 6, the turning point between passing and non passing. This is supported by the fact that employers are not asking for the mark list. So we live in a 'six culture'. Why strive for more? This attitude, this culture has been for many Dutch universities a main driver to start internationalization. Foreign students, from South America, China, Vietnam.., are strongly motivated and want to excel. The aim was to provide role models for the Dutch students, and this has indeed changed the atmosphere for the last 10-15 years.

Career in education solely possible via management

Another aspect showing that there are no incentives to excel is the fact that, in the Dutch education system, a career in education is solely possible via management. There are no ways to get up in your educational career that are based on your excellence. This leads to an enormous drawback: the best teachers were driven into management, spending less or no time in education itself.

School leaders are reluctant to differentiate

In the preparation of the report on excellent teachers, the Dutch education council spoke to school leaders. They confirm that they know which teachers are the best, but that they hesitate to designate them. This would oblige them to explain to the other why they are not the best..

Young teachers have no role models

Young teachers are working next to older colleagues, and they don't know who the best are. They have to find out their selves which role models to chose.

Careerists are not appreciated in education

Careerists are not appreciated by their colleagues, especially not in primary and secondary education.

Excellent teachers as role models

The last paragraph more or less describes the environment in which the Dutch Education Council decided to come up with a report on excellence. In this report, the Education Council argues that excellent teachers in schools should serve as inspiring examples, as role models. There are two reasons why this is important for education. Firstly, it will allow pupils to put their talents to the best use. If excellent teachers are able to further develop their own skills, and, similarly, encourage their colleagues to do the same, this will benefit the quality of teaching and hence also the performance of pupils. Secondly, it will make teaching a more appealing employment option. If excellence in teaching is recognized and acknowledged, the best teachers will be more inclined to stay in teaching, and others will be more likely to be attracted to the profession.

Colleagues know who the best are

The Education Council found out that colleagues know who the best teachers are, but that they don't like to say it in public. If one asks at random a list of the five best teachers, the lists have a lot in common. If you ask 30 persons to fill in the list, you get no more than 10 names.

School leaders should know who the best are

The Education Council thinks that school leaders should know who the best teachers are. Usually they do know, but they are reluctant to say it, and even more reluctant to reward those teachers. This knowledge is usually based on a kind of professional feeling.

Young colleagues should benefit from the best

It is important for young teachers that enter the profession that they know who the role models are. Now, they have to found out themselves.

How to identify excellence?

In order to be able to identify the best teachers in a group, it is necessary to make explicit the implicit knowledge. This can be done in several ways:

- Peer review (teachers are best placed to identify the good ones in the peer group)
- Student evaluation
- Alumni

In order to identify the excellent teachers, a range of competences to define excellence have to be identified. These competences are of different natures:

- Interpersonal. How does the teacher get along with the students?
- Pedagogical. An example from the field of mathematics: At the moment that the maths teacher deals with the topic of the circle. The teacher has to explain that the perimeter = π * diameter. One teacher took his class to the bicycle cellar of the school and asked the pupils to measure the perimeters of ten wheels, and then the diameter. Back in the classroom he asked them to calculate the result of all perimeters divided by the diameter. Then comes a revelation for the pupils: the quotient is the same every time, and is equal to π . From a pedagogical point of view this is an excellent approach: pupils see the revelation themselves. This kind of approaches makes the difference between an average or a good teacher and an excellent teacher.
- Master in his subject. This aspect has somewhat been underestimated in the Netherlands during the last few decades.
- Organisational.
- Team cooperation. This competence is becoming increasingly important.
- Open to the outside world.
- Reflective and innovative.

Identifying excellent teachers, and differentiating by performance, asks for the introduction of an assessment system. However, introducing hierarchy in the schools remains difficult.

The Dutch Education Council recommends that all schools should nominate one in every twenty teachers as an excellent teacher. Excellence is defined here in relative terms rather than as absolute standard, as the aim is for the best to inspire the other teachers. The nomination would be valid for a limited period of time.

How to use excellent teachers?

Once the excellent teachers are identified, how can school use them for the best? The Education Council formulates three recommendations:

- Put them on positions where they can make the difference.

Students with special needs, who need more attention, will benefit from the approach of an excellent teacher.

- Use them for coaching purposes

Release them from their regular duties during a number of hours, and give them time to coach e.g. those new to the profession.

- Use them for advice

The teachers will appreciate this. Most of the excellent teachers don't like to quit education to be part of the management. So asking for their advice is the best way to show them that they are considered to be worthwhile. The school management has an important role in allowing excellence to flourish.

How to honor excellent teachers?

This is a rather delicate question. Excellent teachers can be honoured by giving them more freedom, more responsibility, more credits. They can be rewarded by raising their salary. This is a tricky point, because it means putting the better teachers on the stage in a school. A financial award without anyone knowing it is not seen as a good solution. The raise of salary can be modest (suggestion: about 5 %), it is important because it gives a signal. This raise of salary is best given for a limited period.

How to change mentality?

In order to create a climate where excellent teachers can be identified, used and awarded, a change of mentality is needed. In this respect, the Education Council formulates three recommendations.

- Raise the entry requirements for professional education

In the Netherlands, university for teachers is not highly valued amongst students. In fact, only the students that are not good in maths, in economy, go to teacher education. Going into education should become something to strive for: in order to become an economy teacher, you don't just have to be good in economy, but you have to have pedagogical skills as well.

- Increase the self-awareness of the profession
- Stimulate professional organizations⁷

So far people working in education are mainly represented by the labour unions. There are no professional organizations. This has a major drawback: the focus is on financial working conditions, not on striving for excellence. A solution could be a professional teacher organization as an alternative group in society for the government to deal with, so that the debate is no longer monopolized by trade unions.

How was this advice received?

In general, the advice was not well received by the different stakeholders.

Teachers reacted: 'This does not work in education'

Labour unions reacted: 'This will create inequality'

School leaders reacted: 'This will cause headaches'

The only positive reaction came from the students and the young teachers: 'This is what can make a career in education attractive'.

⁷ In Wales, in 2000, the GTCW (General Teaching Council for Wales) was set up by the government. All teachers have to be registered and have to respond to minimum standards. Its main role is about maintaining the standards of the profession.

Teachers make the difference

Elena Hadjidakou

Dr. Elena Hadjidakou is member of the EUNEC executive committee and works at the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute in the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture.

She reflects on the conference presented by Frank van der Duyn Schouten.



The topic is closely related to the professional work field of Ms. Hadjidakou: one of the tasks of the Pedagogical Institute is to design and to provide in service training for teachers. She reflects on the topic of excellence for teachers at three levels:

- The level of the profession of the teacher
- The level of the relation with the pupils' learning
- The continuous professional development of teachers

Teachers' profession

A literature review since the seventies describes the teacher profession as 'lonely' and 'isolated' (Lortie, 1975; Goodlad, 1984; Hargreaves, 1999). Yet, teaching is a very important task to be carried out by a person alone.

In Europe, 6.25 millions of persons are working as teachers. Teachers in Europe are quite old: 30% of the teachers are above 50 years. Two millions of teachers are expected to be replaced in the next 15 years.⁸

In Canada, 15-20% of the newly qualified teachers leave the profession during the first 5 years of service.⁹ In the USA, up to 40 % of the newly qualified teachers leave the profession during the first five years of service.¹⁰

⁸ 3.8.2007, COM(2007) 392 final, Study on Mobility of Teachers and Trainers, undertaken on behalf of DG EAC, 2006.

<http://ec.europa.eu/education/doc/reports/doc/mobility.pdf>

⁹ National Graduates Survey, Statistics Canada, 2000.

¹⁰ Berg, Donaldson & Johnson, 2005.

This trend of young teachers leaving the profession seems to exist also in Europe. In Cyprus, however, this is not the case: the profession of the teacher is highly estimated.

Why do teachers decide to leave? Working conditions are often difficult. It is difficult to manage a classroom. School infrastructure and teaching aids are insufficient. There is lack of support by colleagues, parents and the local community. Finally, teachers feel a lack of professional autonomy.

At the same time, the European Union wants to set some general principles for teacher education¹¹:

- The teaching profession is a graduate profession. (This is the case in Cyprus)
- It is a profession placed within the context of lifelong learning.
- It is a mobile profession. (This is not the case in Cyprus, teachers don't travel professionally)
- It is a profession based on partnerships.

The European Commission also agreed on a set of competences a teacher should have, and defines those competences broadly¹²:

- Work with knowledge, technology and information.
- Work with fellow human beings.
- Work with and in society.

In the report that follows (in 2010), teachers' professional values and competences are described more in detail¹³. A teacher should be:

- a subject(s) specialist
- a pedagogue
- a teacher of transversal competences
- digitally literate
- a leader
- a manager of linguistic and/or cultural diversity
- able to respond to individual needs
- a reflective practitioner
- an innovator
- a researcher
- a school developer
- a co-worker (with colleagues, parents, ...)
- an autonomous learner
- a lifelong learner
- a mobile learner.

¹¹ Common European Principles for Teacher Competences, March 2005

¹² Ibidem

¹³ Common European Principles for Teacher Competences, March 2010

This shows that the profession is becoming more and more demanding, more and more complex, in a more complex society. And yet, we know that the quality of the teacher is the most important factor that influences pupils' performances. This brings us to the next point.

Teachers and pupils' performance

Teacher quality is the most important factor within school that influences pupils' performance. It has got bigger influence than school organization, school management or financial resources¹⁴. The quality of an educational system is related to the quality of its teachers¹⁵. There is also a positive relationship between the teachers' in-service training and the pupils' performance¹⁶.

The 2010 PISA results show that school systems considered successful tend to prioritize teachers' pay over smaller classes. Schools with better disciplinary climates, more positive behaviour among teachers and better teacher-student relations tend to achieve higher scores.

Students' performance seems to be affected by teacher 'intelligence', by teacher quality and by teacher education.

As we see that the profession of the teacher is becoming more and more complex, and, at the same time, that is extremely important for pupils' performances, we have to conclude that continuous professional development of teachers is crucial.

Continuous Professional Development of teachers

The European Commission proposes four stages in the professional development of teachers:

- Initial training
- Appointment
- Induction
- Continuous Professional Development

At the same time, there is a need for measures improving the quality and the quantity of teachers CPD: an analysis of the needs and quality insurance. CPD has to have various forms and can be presented as school based support, can be locally organized, can be organized on IT platforms. Participation in CPD has to be stimulated and enhanced.

¹⁴ Fivkin, Hanushek and Kain, 2005.

¹⁵ Barber and Mourshed, 2007.

¹⁶ Angrist and Lavy, 2001; Bressoux, 1996.

According to OECD, effective professional development includes training, practice and feedback and provides adequate time and follow-up support. Successful programmes involve teachers in learning activities that are similar to the ones they use with their students and encourage the development of teachers' learning communities. There is growing interest in developing schools as learning organizations.

According to the TALIS results (2009), the most important topics on which teachers need more support are

- Teaching special learning students
- ICT teaching skills
- Student discipline and behavior.

Given the importance of the teachers as a crucial factor for the performance of the pupils, and given the importance thus of teachers' professional development, the following questions remain crucial in a debate on excellence in education:

- How do we define excellent teachers? What makes an excellent teacher?
- How do we make sure that we have good functioning and excellent teachers?
- How can the teachers promote excellence in the classroom?

EXCELLENCE AT THE LEVEL OF THE SCHOOL

School, Laboratory for Life

Carmel Borg

Professor Carmel Borg lectures in Curriculum Studies, Critical Pedagogy and Community and Adult Education within the Faculty of Education, University of Malta. Professor Borg promotes education as a liberating experience and challenges technologies of oppression within education systems. He has a long-standing involvement in curriculum development at all levels of the education process, locally and internationally. Professor Borg is the Editor of the Malta Review of Education Research (MRER) and is associate editor of several other peer-reviewed international journals.



Introduction

With 25 years of experience in teaching and in teacher formation, Professor Borg is setting composite standards from over this period of 25 years.

When talking about excellence, it is important to see who is defining excellence, and in which context excellence is being defined. In order to illustrate this, Professor Borg reads an article sent in by a reader and published in The Guardian very recently (18 May 2012) (see next page). It is written by an Englishman living in China, and writing about his experience with the education system in China. It talks about the pressure on children in primary school to perform high marks on their tests, and on the consequences when they 'fail'. Shanghai is ranked number one in PISA, this article shows what this takes. The article illustrates how excellence is defined in an area that strives to be the best, economically spoken.

The article in *The Guardian Weekly*, 18.05.12, page 25

Pampering and failure

I read Naomi Wolf's *Pampering children into failure* (30 March) with fascination, as it brought back contrasting memories with my own rigid, fairly uninteresting - but free - grammar school education in England in the 50s. But even more it contrasted dramatically with the current situation in China.

A Chinese friend described a recent event: she was called to her daughter's primary school at lunch break because her nine-year-old had "failed" a weekly test (scoring 89/100 where the pass mark was 90/100). There she and the other parents of the unfortunate "failures" were harangued in public outside the school gates by the teacher as to their child's failings and their own lack of parental support. They were then directed to prepare a signed statement that said their offspring would "try harder" in the future and they would ensure that this type of misdemeanour would not occur again.

When I commented that I assumed that she did not write anything, I was forcefully told that she and her daughter had spent two hours the previous evening composing a suitable letter concurring with the teacher's requests and it was faithfully delivered as requested. An interesting footnote to this is that to get your child into this free government primary school, you have to pay a premium of \$4,750 when the child enters the six-year course.

Jeremy Groome

Xi'an, China

We witness a slow shift towards an international definition of excellence. Excellence used to be defined in a local context, in a specific school context even. Now we see that this definition is being taken over remotely by PISA and other international tests: they are defining what excellence means or should mean in each and every school, in each and every context.

The moment that we shift the definition of excellence from the local to the international level, that is the moment that we make the shift from education in a broad sense to education as narrow training to the test, to the industrial model of education that sees, describes and values children as products.

This brings us to the essential question: what are we educating for? These international tests are becoming the new Olympics; countries seem to be prepared to inject their pupils with testosterone in order to make them perform.

Another problem is the fact that teachers are caught between autonomy and prescription. Teachers are supposed to be autonomous but on the other hand the education system is prescribing more and more what has to be achieved. Professor Borg states that, the more we prescribe, the more we deskill the teacher. The whole language of 'accountability' is not a language of education. It is borrowed without any criticism from the world of industry and of economy.

General principles of excellent schools

Excellent schools are schools who uphold the value of equity: excellence and equity go hand in hand.

The best schools are those who twin the needs to raise standards for all with the urgency of **quality access to educational opportunities for the most vulnerable members of society**. The best school organisations are inspired by visions of equity and are less quick to blame families and communities for children's perceived educational failure. It is true that some of the pupils come from dysfunctional families, but part of the failure is structural. Some of the structures in our schools provoke failure. Achieving well is not a question of finger pointing, but of collective responsibility.

The best school organizations are **well equipped theoretically** to understand the intersection between social and cultural capital and academic achievement. There is a general allergy towards theory and reflection in a lot of schools. The best schools embrace the most recent theories, not only on learning, but including philosophy, psychology... Unfortunately, we produce more and more teachers who learn by doing; we have fewer teachers really equipped to engage and apply those theories.

The best schools **listen to the learners** and promote educational resilience for all.

Quality school organizations interrogate structural barriers to quality access, **combat covert or overt discriminatory behaviour** of teachers and school leaders, and resist school-induced 'failures'. In other words: an excellent school is a school which includes ongoing reflection as a central theme in school life. Understanding social, cultural and academic exclusion is crucial to achieving inclusion.

Education is not a panacea to eliminating inequality. However, it can help reduce the effect of inequality on social exclusion by providing all children with the capabilities that many children regard as normal (NESSE, 2010). In other words: social injustice does not start in the schools, but we have to believe that schools can make a difference. If we don't, education becomes cynical, hopeless. The cynical teacher is counterproductive.

Excellent schools are **socially inclusive**. By preventing concentrations of socially disadvantaged children, socially inclusive schools prevent adverse effects such as social isolation, stigma and lowering of learning standards (NESSE, 2010). Needs-oriented funding ensures proper resourcing of schools committed to equity in education.

A **social justice oriented early childhood provision** combines universal, holistic development of children with social return on investment. This is extremely important, as we know that in the first three years the gap between the disadvantaged and the privileged children in terms of literacy and school readiness is one year. Early provision is aimed at addressing the specific needs of disadvantaged children through a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach. Flexible pedagogical approaches, early identification of learning difficulties, continuous monitoring of children's progress and regular contact with parents and/or guardians feature prominently in successful early childhood education programmes.

The best provisions are those who address the issues with **parental involvement**, to assure the continuity with home. Research repeatedly shows that when parents are involved children benefit holistically. The most effective school initiatives in parental involvement are those which engage parents in working directly with their children on learning activities at home. It's the quality time spent with the children which makes the difference. The best school organizations adopt parental involvement models which promote genuine collaboration, eliminate roadblocks to involvement and are strong on parental education programmes.

Excellent schools set **high expectations for all** and transmit such expectations with passion and enthusiasm to all stakeholders.

Excellent schools guarantee **a core curriculum as basic entitlement**. Successful school communities are aware of the importance of the basic skills

in guaranteeing a solid foundation for educational development and are strongly committed, starting from early childhood, to providing curricular experiences that help students to master the basics.

Systems that show high performance and an equitable distribution of learning outcomes **avoid early tracking** and streaming and require teachers and schools to embrace diverse student populations through personalized educational pathways (OECD, 2010). Early tracking is counterproductive and devastating for children: it labels children from an early stage, and unfortunately little mobility is offered from one track to another.

The **school climate** is important. Schools where students work in a climate characterized by expectations of high performance and a readiness to invest effort, good teacher-student relations, and high teacher morale tend to achieve better results. Such schools emphasize positive teacher-pupil and peer relationships rather than fear and punishment. There is a clear link between the cognitive growth and the emotional development. Stakeholders have to feel that they belong to the school, that they are appreciated. An excellent school is a school that is able to create a climate conducive to growth.

Excellent schools are **supportive**. Successful schools are well resourced and sufficiently funded to provide high-quality, specialized and 'across the board' support to students who fall behind. Differentiation involves a lot of resources in terms of highly specialized teachers. Support is also provided to teachers and parents. Under certain conditions, supportive schools are generally small, with smaller classrooms. Teachers in these schools receive specialized training to address the needs of disadvantaged children. Teacher retention is given due importance in such context. Ongoing support and career structure to retain high quality teachers are crucial.

Successful schools invest in **high-quality teachers**, train them regularly, recognize and reward their efforts, respect them, and support them emotionally. Successful schools treat their teachers as experts and intellectuals. This links up with the allergy for theory mentioned before: teachers are rather recognized as technicians than as intellectuals, they are reduced into classroom technicians. Good schools trust and enable teachers. Relative autonomy is essential for teachers to exercise their role as experts in educational matters. This is what we are losing with the tendency to prescription: teachers have to reclaim their craft back. It is essential to evolve towards a shared responsibility.

Well functioning schools are **led by engaging educational leaders** who believe that their educational community can make a difference, who are allergic to mediocrity, and who have the stamina, passion, vision and interpersonal skills to lead and empower communities of learning.

Schools with **a high level of self-accountability**, based on clear objectives, well-defined quality indicators, collaborative mentoring, peer tutoring and

ongoing reflection, provide the best emotional and professional environment for genuine growth in teaching and learning. A school has to be clear on its objectives and have mechanisms for reflection.

Excellent schools are **schools that listen**. Inclusive schools are fully aware that children use different mental processes to understand and produce knowledge and, therefore, allow for different intelligences, learning styles and learning patterns to inform the teaching-learning process.

In the field of education, the issue of how the human mind functions translates into a single question, "How do we learn?" As deceptively simple as this question may first appear, it requires a very sophisticated response. First and foremost, we no longer subscribe to a linear depiction of learning as a "spoon-it-in, pack-it-down, move-to-the-next-level" cumulative process. Learning according to all we know occurs because of the continuous interaction of our four Learning Processes (Sequence, Precision, Technical Reasoning, and Confluence) and the three mental processes which operate within each Learning Process (Cognition, Conation, and Affectation).¹⁷ Unfortunately, pupils who are confluent and technical are often marginalized by the sequential teacher.

Schools that listen to the voice of the learners label less and refer less to special services. They also ask fewer children to repeat grades.

Classrooms are known to have the greatest impact on learning. **Pedagogies of excellence**

- are learning and learner focused
- maximize time-on-task
- affirm diversity in all its dimensions
- differentiate learning
- promote integration of meaningful and relevant knowledge
- adopt progressive assessment procedures
- empower students through self-efficacy
- motivate, stimulate and energize students
- promote collective learning and peer tutoring
- promote student engagement and stimulate curiosity and passion for learning
- embrace technology critically
- promote the emotional dimension as much as the cognitive aspect of learning.

Caring relationships in the classroom are at the heart of teaching and learning. Pupils learn more and achieve more in a school and classroom culture informed by love, care, mutual respect, safety, connection and belonging. It is a pity that concepts such as love and care have slipped the educational language for such a long time.

¹⁷ www.letmelearn.org

Excellent schools have a symbiotic, **two-way relationship with the community**. They are multi-service schools that work with the community services in promoting well-being and in addressing cycles of disadvantage.

Excellent schools are **research-oriented**. They embrace and produce action-oriented, participatory research which maximizes learning. Such schools promote data-information systems for diagnostic and remedial action.

A **curriculum for excellence** allows for new ways of recognizing and validating excellence and for in-depth and challenging study within the core curriculum framework. It turns the extra activities into inter-curricular activities. It also allows for excellence in vocational education.

Excellent schools are **guiding schools**: they provide comprehensive educational counselling and career guidance through multi-professional teams.

Manuel Miguéns

Manuel Miguéns is member of the EUNEC executive committee and secretary general of the CNE, the Portuguese Education Council. He reflects on the presentation of Professor Borg.



Manuel Miguéns reacts on the view on how schools may deliver their educational mission and activities with excellence, by Professor Borg, and had a look at the literature in order to try to pick up elements that might be complementary to Professor Borg's vision.

Mr Miguéns follows the McKinsey Report saying that the quality of an education system cannot be higher than the quality of its teachers. Thus to have an excellent school we need to have very good teachers working there. When we look at characteristics of excellence of schools, quality teachers come frequently in the picture.

Teachers

What are excellent teachers?

- Teachers who are committed, available and dedicated.
- Teachers who show expertise in their subject knowledge and in how learning takes place.

- Teachers who know their students well: their individual interests, learning styles, motivation and background.
- Teachers who foster high expectations for all and that differentiate.
- Teachers who provide instruction that addresses different learning styles and needs.
- Teachers who care and foster each one of their pupils.
- Teachers who tend to be vibrant, enthusiastic and inventive.
- Teachers who's top priority is teaching.
- Teachers who work collaboratively as a team and who share good practices.

Teachers and teaching quality are a key factor when we intend to raise the quality of learning and the quality and equity of school education.

School leadership

It appears that principals, head teachers, rectors play an essential role in building up an organizational vision, a school ethos, a home climate that leads to quality, effectiveness, achievement and performance.

What are excellent school leaders?

- School leaders who attract the good teachers and keep them motivated and committed. As professor Van der Duyn Schouten stated earlier: the school leaders should know who the best teachers are.
- School leaders who devise a vision and make it shared by the school community.
- School leaders who motivate staff and pupils.
- School leaders who organize a system of collecting data to make sure that the performances of all involved are continuously analyzed for improvement.
- School leaders who keep the face and the focus towards achieving the defined goals with the involvement of all staff and pupils.
- School leaders who are the first guards of the school ethos, with high expectations, hard work, the genuine spirit of working together.
- School leaders who involve parents, the community and the students in school life.
- School leaders who promote partnerships with the outside world.
- School leaders who develop amongst the pupils a sense of belonging and pride to be part of the community.

School climate

The focus has to be on the learning quality for all students, and on values such as collaboration, cooperation, discipline. The vision, a common

understanding about achievable education outcomes, has to be shared by learners, governors, parents, pupils.

An excellent school is a school that is not effective unless all students have the opportunity to develop the key competences for living in the world of today. It is a school that values students as individuals, recognizes the needs of each individual pupil, and that combines equity and quality. This school provides additional time and support to make sure that students master the content and develop the skills to become competent.

It is a school that does not leave any child behind because high expectations have to go hand in hand with equity and offer opportunities for all to succeed. It is a school that provides support to those struggling with learning difficulties and also to those struggling to reach the top, pushing the best to become even better.

Trying to reach outstanding results means a differentiated approach, a way of organizing teaching and learning that is close to the personalized, individual approaches.

Assessment then becomes really important. Assessment, and other data collection, will be used in order to identify students' needs of extra intervention and support, to identify teachers' needs for additional professional development.

An excellent school is a school that believes that all students can achieve under the right conditions. It is a school that insists on mastery of basic skills such as numeracy, literacy and at the same time encourages high levels of critical thinking, creativity, problem solving and collaborative work. It is a school that enables all to benefit and value everyone's achievements whilst promoting ambition and raising aspiration. It is a school that recognizes and celebrates successful learning and high achievement.

In an excellent school, it is not sufficient to deliver the curriculum aligned with the agreed standards. An excellent school provides a wide range of other activities and opportunities including for instance career guidance, sports, arts, workshops, laboratory work, visits of an artist's atelier, conferences, contacts with different professions, psychological support, counseling.. This way, pupils will have the opportunity to follow their interests, to develop their talents, to choose different routes, to have diverse experiences and to do the things that they are good at.

Concluding reflections

We have tried to define excellent, outstanding schools that need to bring together a series of features that are not easy to accomplish. It is clear that it will be extremely difficult to bring together all these features in just one school.

Policy makers, governments, education authorities, researchers, academies and teacher educations sometimes push teachers and principals in different directions simultaneously. That is not good.

Mr Miguéns ends his presentation with a quote of Ron Glatter (UK), in his speech during the conference 'Schools facing up to new challenges', in Lisbon, 2007, under the Portuguese Presidency of the EU. Glatter there quoted Charles Handy from his book 'Empty Raincoat: Making sense of the future': The author Charles Handy concludes the book beautifully by urging everybody to be themselves in order to live a more meaningful life. He recommends a proactive way of thinking, instead of a reactive way of dealing with situations. One should try to foresee the future and prepare oneself to the best possible. Do not wait for opportunities to knock at your door, go out and create those opportunities for yourself. Light your own small fires in the darkness!!

SCHOOL VISIT

Participants had the opportunity to visit, by bike, the St Ignatius Gymnasium in the city center of Amsterdam. They were welcomed by the rector, Ms Anita Swenneker and had the opportunity to discuss in small groups with teachers and pupils. They assisted at a presentation of the programme 'School aan zet' by representatives of the Bèta Techniek Platform.

The group discussions showed how all – pupils, teachers and school leaders – work on fostering excellence among pupils on a day-to-day basis. The information heard from the world of academia during the first day of the seminar, combined with the impressions gained from this school visit, enabled the education councils united in EUNEC to further develop the theme of excellence in education, and to produce recommendations.



"The St. - Ignatius Gymnasium offers "challenging, inspiring and meaningful education for students with talent and ambition". Our training focuses on the development of enterprising individuals, but also on the formation of social global citizens who are optimally equipped for scientific education and for the knowledge intensive society of today. The 70 minutes grid having 4 or 5 classes per day will provide space for the preparation of these objectives. Courses of 70 minutes offer the possibility to not only transfer knowledge, but

also to offer a meaningful context by means of the Smart board, in the form of a practicum or a debate. There is sufficient time to actively get started with a (collaborative) project, a research task or a presentation. This way it becomes possible to learn in different ways. The science subjects work together with JetNet and Universe, organizations that support schools in developing meaningful science education and provide an opportunity to get acquainted with job opportunities in the field of science subjects. Besides knowledge we highly value skills: collaborating, presenting, doing research, organizing etc. Those skills have an important place in many lessons and pupils are also given many responsibilities in the organization of activities outside the classroom.”¹⁸



¹⁸ Translated from the website of the school www.ig.nl

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

The St Ignatius Gymnasium is a big school, with about 800 students and 80 employees (60 teachers). It is an old school, founded in 1895 by the Fathers of the Catholic Church as a small school. In 2000 the school moved to the actual spot, in a smaller building. As from September 2011, the school has a beautiful new building at the Jan van Eijk street in Amsterdam. Under the supervision of architect Juriaan van Stigt and with the support of the city of Amsterdam, both the original building and a new building have been integrated to become a splendid new school. The school is very pleased that they have had the possibility to stay in this neighbourhood, where they feel at home and have a societal function.



School aan zet



History: the National Platform of Science and Technology (2004 – 2010)

The National Platform of Science and Technology has been commissioned by the government, education and business sectors to ensure sufficient availability of people who have a background in scientific or technical education. There was a shortage on the labour market, so it was important to raise the number of students. Some had the potential, but did not choose a scientific or technical strand because the image of that strand was poor. The aim was to achieve a structural increase of 15% more pupils and students in scientific and technical education (2004-2010).

The approach of the innovation was immediately bottom up. School is central and defines its own ambitions. The national target is 15%, but each school defines its own target, which can be 5%, or 20 %, for instance. The Platform worked with about 1/3 of all schools in primary education, and with about half of all schools in secondary education. In fact, in order to reach 15%, you need a lot of schools, but not all schools. Some schools were simply not interested or not ambitious in the field of science and technology. Amongst the schools that participated, some were already performing very well in science and technology; others had rather bad results in this field.

The schools that participated have the support of the national platform, with knowledge, expertise and network. There is a strong link with industry. Results have been closely monitored. Teachers are very important in the strategy: it is they who attract pupils to the subject and keep them interested. The chain approach was important, as pupils seem to lose their interest from primary to secondary and from secondary to higher education. It is important to closely tie the gaps.

Change of context: 2011 – 2015

The Ministry of Education presents a new 'Action plan' for education: "Better performance: results-oriented and ambitious". This government does not think that it is good that schools have been working with different programmes. It was too fragmented. The approach now becomes more holistic. Now all the money is put in one separate budget entry, in one 'achievement box'. All schools can have access to the money, per student, and contribute to the achievement of the national goals. This new approach gives more autonomy to schools.

The Ministry and the Sector signed an agreement on ambitions, objectives and measures focusing on five priorities:

- Results-oriented approach
- Quality of teaching
- HRM policy, ambitious culture
- Excellence and highly gifted students
- Science and technology

All these themes are of course interconnected. This is also a reason for the government to put the budget for the different themes together. Schools enjoy the autonomy to translate national priorities into their own school policy.

"School aan zet": translate national priorities to school policy

"School aan zet" is a programme that has been mandated and is financed by the Ministry of Education as a support organization for all five priorities. It runs from 2012 until 2015. "School aan zet" works with schools and their boards to achieve better performances. The ambition of the programme is to stimulate and support schools defining their own ambitions. They develop new expertise and knowledge and share with peers. They monitor, reflect and get insight on national developments.

The target of participating schools 2012-2015 is

- 3000 elementary schools, out of 7000
- 450 vocational/high schools, out of 800
- 150 special needs education schools

During the application trance (starting spring 2012), schools can come to the platform wanting to work in the programme.

- 1099 elementary schools
- 338 vocational/high schools

→ 74 special needs education schools

The government tries to put pressure on the schools, setting a national benchmark and providing money; 'School aan zet' tries to offer the support, and sees that the money is well spent.

The programme takes three years and involves experts. An expert is a critical friend who supports schools and their boards to translate national priorities to school policy. He shares his knowledge, expertise and experience and he monitors and reflects on school performances.

The experts are teachers, academics, principals, educational consultants, or come from business. It is not a full time job. 520 persons applied for the vacancy.

Excellence and highly gifted

For the subtheme of 'excellence and highly gifted', the **national objective** is quite narrow: the performances of the 20% best students in pre-university schools should increase with 0.2 points (i.e. GPA 3.9 to GPA 4.1 central exams results).

This national objective is translated into a '**School aan zet**' objective: each participating school should be able to define its 20% best students, be able to provide them with challenging education that fits their needs, and should be able to monitor the effects.

Every school adds its own context and can translate the 'School aan zet' objective into an individual school objective. The school remains owner of the goal it wants to reach, taking into account the specific context and performances.

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” that 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 economical 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 domain, to trigger them and to raise 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 through self efficacy, collective and collaborative learning. In these 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 behavior 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 engagement 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.

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