



Lisbon conference on "Choice of School versus Social Justice: Dilemma or Mirage?"

"Choice of School versus Social Justice: Dilemma or Mirage?" was the topic of a high level symposium hosted by the Geneva based organisation OIDEL in Lisbon on September 7-8 2007. "Almost everywhere in the world, public authorities are confronted with two challenges: the promotion of diversity recognized as a wealth and as a constitutive element of democratic systems and, at the same time, the guaranteeing of social cohesion which is constantly under threat." Thus begins the description of the symposium's concept. OIDEL (Organisation internationale pour le droit à l'éducation et la liberté d'enseignement) co-hosted the symposium with an impressive list of organisations devoted to similar aims.

Many of these organisations have been meeting yearly in Brussels at the "European Meeting of Independent Education" (EMIE), coordinated by **Carlos Diaz-Muñiz**, the Chairman of ECNAIS (the European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools). The symposium in Lisbon was conceived by the General Director of OIDEL, **Alfred Fernandez**, co-author of "International Declaration and Conventions on the Right to Education and the Freedom of Education", published by EFFE in 1995 in numerous languages. Together with **Jean-Daniel Nordmann and Jean-David Ponci** he has just published the two-volume "Rapport 2007/2008 sur les libertés éducatives dans le monde", in which exactly one hundred countries are rated with respect to six criteria of freedom in education:

1. Right to found independent schools
2. Whether or not public funding of independent schools is obligatory
3. The amount of public financing
4. Right of parents to choose a school freely
5. Possibilities of home schooling
6. School autonomy

In the overall ranking, Denmark gets first place, followed by Finland, Ireland, Belgium, Czech, the UK, Hungary, Sweden, the U.S., the Netherlands and Chile. The last place is occupied by Cuba, preceded by Cambodia, Vietnam, Sudan, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tanzania, Syria, Mauritania, Ethiopia and Afghanistan (cf. diagram). This report had just come off the press and was presented at the end of the symposium.

The conference was opened by **M.J. Barroso de Soares**, the President of Pro-Dignitate and wife of the late former President of Portugal, Mário Soares. She remarked that there was no freedom in education during the 50 years of dictatorship in Portugal and that today her organisation stands for freedom of choice in education.

Fernando Adão da Fonseca of the Fórum Liberdade de Educação gave an exceptionally lucid presentation on the past, the challenging present and possible future of education. He remarked that, in the past, the propensity of the power (political) to control the minds (of citizens) clashed with the statement of education as a basic (personal) right and perverted the state's role as "guardian" of the right, leading gradually to:

- A. The establishment of a state monopoly system;
- B. The control of the educational system by the State;
- C. The discredit and frustration of expectations.

The establishment of a state monopoly system had the merit of assuring:

1. Free (mandatory) education for all;
2. The increase of mandatory education;
3. School syllabus adapted to the needs of the industrial labour market of the 19th and 20th centuries.

However, the increasing control of the State over the educational system had the demerit of

1. Mixing the role of "guardian" of the right to education with the role of "providing" the education;
2. Mixing the role of "judge" of the educational quality with the role of "being accountable for" this quality;
3. Shifting the State's attention from the students' educational needs to the needs of the schools (its "production factors");
4. The Minister of Education became Minister of Management of Schools.
5. Favoring political and bureaucratic "control" over private education;
6. Centralizing and bureaucratizing the management of schools, curricula and teachers; transforming schools into bureaucratic offices.
7. Allowing the schools to be hostage of groups attempting to promote their particular ideology and promote their own interests;
8. Allowing a totalitarian conception: «The Republic educates its citizens»

9. "Favouring" state schools, with State financing almost exclusively directed to its "own" schools;

10. Slowly pushing parents away from the education of their children

He remarked that the last decade of the 20th century already witnessed important reforms in several national systems of education, the common features of these reforms being:

- the weakening of the state monopoly in education;
- the emphasis in more choice for parents and pupils;
- the increase of school autonomy

For the future, he proposes education as a public service that guarantees the freedom to teach with equal opportunities through equal funding to all schools assured by the government, where the funding depends on the number of students and each student's specific needs. Additional funding to support specific requirements (students' cultural background, geographic localization, special programs) should be made available. Other sources of finance could also exist, but not through tuition fees. Schools are free to choose the "educative project", becoming responsible for its results, the school calendar and activities, what and how to adapt curricula and pedagogy to each student's requirements, which teachers to hire and which to keep and for the administrative and financial arrangements. Finally he proposed that schools which do not want to comply with the requirements of the "public service in education" will be able to work as "independent schools", which would be free to charge tuition fees, would not be forced to assure, on a solidarity basis with other schools, enrolment to all students from the neighbourhood and who then would expect to receive the same level of financial support from the government.

Charles Glenn from Boston University pointed out that in the U.S., private schools are more integrated racially than public schools. The reason is the school district, from which public schools draw their students. Private schools, however, draw because of a particular profile. Decades ago, he was the administrator responsible for Boston desegregation, where busing was to solve the problem. It didn't work. What ended up working much better is having parents choose

schools. 21 parent information centres were set up for parents, who were obliged to go to a particular information centre and there given advice by other parents to help with the choice of school. This also helped dissipate the problem of schools that turn into ghettos of children for high needs. The latter need to carry with them more funding, otherwise education will not work. Furthermore, every school should accept children that are hard to educate. Schools must be allowed to preserve their distinctive character. Catholic schools were more effective than state schools with much more money - because the teachers shared a vision.

About one million students attend approximately 4000 charter schools in the U.S., independent schools which are fully funded with taxpayers money. Charter schools are so successful because they have allowed for initiatives at a grassroots level for people with a shared vision of education. A charter can be withdrawn if sufficient standards are not attained, unlike state run schools, which have a tendency to continue in existence permanently. In no single case have charter schools teachers chosen to join the union. The latter operate in the U.S. as "Soviet style military systems", making it very difficult to introduce changes to increase quality and the responsibility of teachers within the state system, as the unions will almost certainly oppose it. The charter schools have allowed the educational system to turn away from the state system, without ever confronting it.

Marc Gaucherand of the Fondation des Maristes de Puylata lectured on "Les écoles privées en France: favorisent-elles la reproduction sociale?", giving a sociological analysis of how school achievement correlates with the social milieu from which the students come. In an open letter signed by about twenty organisations, including OIDEL, Enseignement et Liberté, Fondation des Maristes de Puylata, association Créer son école and Association Education Solidarité and published in "Le Figaro" on January 10 2007, they conclude: "Malgré le collège unique et un effort sans précédent relatif aux moyens (doublement du budget de l'Education Nationale en 20 ans), les enfants de milieux défavorisés ne trouvent plus à l'école l'occasion d'une promotion personnelle et sociale." In spite of comprehensive schools (in the first three years of secondary education) and an unprecedented financial effort (doubling of the budget for schools in 20 years), schools no longer further personal or social mobility for children of disadvantaged social milieus. Citing a study by the sociologist Langouët and Léger, he noted that although less disadvantaged children attended private schools, these succeed better in the private schools under state contract than in the state schools themselves. He gave a striking example of a

Catholic school in the French town of Villeurbanne (near Lyon), Mere Terese, comparing it to a similar local state school. In both schools, only about 60% of the students entering secondary school in September 1995 had passed the mathematics and French tests of the national evaluation, the national average being 68%. Three years later, about 25% of the students of the state run academy had passed the French examination "brevet", as opposed to over 70% of the students at Mere Terese, surpassing the national average of about 50% by far! A year later, the results were comparable (cf. diagram from the presentation of Marc Gaucherand). Furthermore one can note a tendency of an increasing number of students from socially disadvantaged families attending non-state schools. This is, however, hampered by insufficient state aid to non-state schools which would like to settle in disadvantaged areas. He concluded by noting that the administrative formalism of the government educational authorities also impairs schools from acting effectively when children are in difficulty: "Le dirigisme pédagogique et le formalisme administratif de l'Education Nationale empêchent les établissements d'innover au service des enfants en difficulté."

Simon Steen, general director of VBS (Verenigde Bijzondere Scholen) and member of the executive committee of ECNAIS noted that over decades, schools in the Netherlands have succeeded in helping to transform students of lower social background into the middle class.

The Dutch education system constitutionally guarantees the freedom of education, as a guarantor for a free choice of school for parents, equal costs for all schools, and a wide choice for teachers to choose a school which suits them and room for schools to present themselves through their own missions and visions. This has led to a multiform and richly varied list of schools in the Netherlands, which is admired in other European countries. According to the Education Council, this scheme does not lead to an unequal partitioning of the most vulnerable students - foreign students with language difficulties - amongst public and private schools. This is also confirmed by the Blok Commission's research, which evaluated the integration policy in the Netherlands ("Building Bridges") for the Lower Chamber. Research, among which, that of Jaap Dronkers, indicates that the quality of private schools on average is higher than public schools as a result of larger involvement of parents and teachers in the school.

This also applies to the new Islamic minority group in Dutch society. According to research by the education inspectorate, the Islamic schools with a concentration of students with an educa-

tion disadvantage are doing better on average than other general disadvantaged schools. According to the Council for Social Developments, homogenous grouping of the school population can sometimes offer more solace than enforced heterogeneous grouping.

Ingo Krampen, member of the executive committee of EFFE (European Forum for Freedom in Education), presented ten propositions. He very poignantly noted in proposition No. 6: "Inner freedom is a quality that cannot be provided by States, but must be created by the teaching staff. This enables teachers to give students an individual education in their own responsibility that is independent from curricula. By this, schools have the opportunity to develop from strongly regulated institutions to free living spaces."

Christopher Clouder of the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE) noted that education has to do with becoming. You are never there! This is true not only for students, but also for teachers and institutions. Freedom is never a state, but a process, which needs to take into account the changing nature of the human being. Children learn from who we are, towards which there is an open sensitivity. The teacher and the children in the classroom are co-creators of an educational space that can blossom if the teacher works in his profession as does an artist, paying much attention to the life of feeling in the space of dialogue that a classroom can become. This can make teaching and educating a poetic profession. The student has a right to be numerate, to be literate - but also has the right to be free. Instead of being subjugated to a curriculum fixed by some external authority, the freedom of curriculum should increasingly be put in the hands of the individual teacher, because only the one who is with the students can fashion a curriculum according to what lives in each individual classroom, which is unique to every class. This is a continual struggle, but it stops teachers from falling into habits which are not becoming to how children understand and to their emotional and social capabilities. Beyond that, the individual teachers need to work together despite their differences. Imagine Picasso and Matisse trying to create a school together: it would seem impossible. Yet by observing the world through the eyes of another, a spark of newness can arise. This spark is essential to keep the teaching profession alive. The importance of acquiring factual knowledge will in future decrease substantially. What remains is an education that is about relationships and an understanding that, in the end, all education is self-education.

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