

If Society has an Itch, Schools get Scratched.

Signs for a change in society and pedagogy.

by Mag. Axel Zahlut
Deputy Secretary General
European Network of Innovative Schools Austria (ENIS, Austria)
axelzahlut@gmail.com
twitter.com/zahlut

Abstract:

This essay does not claim to be scientific and describes various trends on different levels of our society when talking about changes in pedagogy. A number of stakeholders on both, the European and the national level, seek to improve on the situation in schools for the sake of our children and our future. The European Network of Innovative Schools Austria (ENIS Austria) tries to contribute to any changes in schools by collaborating with a large number of partners transnationally bringing experiences made in the classroom of our 68 schools¹. In additions to managing and executing European projects for the Austrian Ministry of Education, trends and signs of disaffection can be observed. This paper aims to summarize the most important trend and encourage a process of solution by thinking way out of the box and taking the concept of citizenship seriously not waiting for political actors to take measures.

Key words:

Collaboration, industry, labour market, new technology, teachers, public funded projects, long term investments, responsible citizenship

¹ <http://www.enis.at> 30.10.204

Introduction

First things first. This essay is mainly descriptive and collects experiences made in various EU funded projects over the period of the last five years collaborating with numerous stakeholders at all levels. Being an executive partner of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, ENIS Austria has been privileged to manage a large number of EU-funded projects - 50 in the last 10 years² - on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Education not being as restricted as a political player may be and highly productive overlooking a network of nearly 70 very innovative schools at all levels of education. This paper aims to describe tendencies that one can see when it comes to defining the future path of education. To be more brief, I am going to point out the main tendencies and lessons learned in the last five years bearing in mind that under the Horizon 2020 programme, less money is going to be invested in schools but more in research. This will tackle universities more than schools, which allows us to look back.

Having contributed to all previous EduVision Conferences in Ljubljana, it is very challenging to come up with new ways of looking at the same problem. The society we live in changed, professions, materials, means of transport and, most importantly, the levels of communication and sources of information. It all can be found on various levels and the main challenge for students finishing and leaving schools is to safely navigate through those levels. Strangely enough, the school system, and therefore the pedagogy, has not changed to the extend our society has changed. If one takes out a surgeon in the 50s, freezes him and sets him back in an operation room nowadays, it would end up in a disaster. If one takes out a teacher from the 50s, freezes him and put him back in class today, after a little bit of adjusting to new materials, he would succeed. Consequently, one could argue that the school system is very slow to adapt and this may have understandable reasons. From a politician's view, with a change in the school system, elections cannot be won because effects of any change within the school system surface after a number of years. Two, succesful people of today have been educated by that very system and therefore do not see a need for change in the short term. Three, when it comes to the education of their children, parents often choose the familiar without being proactive, at least in the past decades. But the question came up, if there is a need for change in the recent years and this paper will demonstrate why.

² http://www.enis.at/tl_files/themes/standard/content/images/vorstand/10_jahre_enis.pdf

5 Trends can be observed

Five trends can be observed in collaborations between various stakeholders in projects like inGenious³, eSkills4Jobs⁴, iTEC⁵ and PriSciNet⁶. Number one, one can observe a drift between the industries - and therefore the labour market - and schools in general. Industry corporations like Volvo, Telefonica, Nokia, Philips and Infineon observe a drift between what they think they need to fill job openings and what „material“ leaves school. On top of that, big companies are not longer willing to educate new employees like they used to 20 years ago during the first year of contract to complete the school education in a way. Consequently, they expect students to leave school already equipped with the right competences and therefore the pressure on students increases continuously demanding a task from schools and teachers that cannot be fulfilled normally.

Number two, being involved in the labour market, parents experience that very phenomenon on a daily basis and feel that schools fail to prepare their children for life after school. Therefore they search for alternatives, given the right financial background, which can be emphasized in an increase of the percentage share of students in private schools in Austria⁷, over 10 %, the trend in Europe might be similar. This suggests a growing disaffection with public schools, at least in Austria.

Number three, the society itself is confronted with the usage of new devices every day. Schools in general fail to adapt to this trend. On the one hand due to the financial situation of schools in general, on the other hand because it is very challenging to keep up with the fast developments in that area. More importantly, teacher training facilities fail to offer an appropriate training to use those devices the right way pedagogically, which often leaves the teachers to initiatives taken on their own increasing the quality gap among teachers, which consequently students are suffering from because they largely depend on the level of initiatives taken by their respective teacher. European projects like PriSciNet⁸ aim to overcome this trend simply by introducing inquiry based learning in primary schools, providing teachers a set of techniques independent from the technical infrastructure in school.

³ <http://www.ingenious-science.eu> 29.10.2014

⁴ <http://eskills-week.ec.europa.eu> 29.10.2014

⁵ <http://itec.eun.org> 29.10.2014

⁶ <http://www.prisci.net> 29.10.2014

⁷ <http://oesv1.orf.at/stories/252905> 29.10.2014

⁸ <http://www.prisci.net> 29.10.2014

Number four, associations like the chamber of commerce⁹, the Federation of Austrian Industries¹⁰, the European Round Table of Industrialists¹¹ (the ERT launched the project inGenious¹², which focuses on the collaboration between schools and industry) and a number of parents are willing to invest a large amount of money to overcome this situation and create something new, just waiting for one person or a group to make the first step, which I experienced myself. They know that we need a paradigm shift in education and to build something completely new rather than improving the given situation seems to be the only option that promises success. A radical shift to a strictly student centered approach rather than a teacher centered approach encouraging largely self dependent learning and inquiry based learning might be a reasonable start.

Number five, there has been a large number of public funded projects on a national and European level to create educational resources, provide collaborations between member states of the European Union and provide strategic concepts for the future of education. Projects like the LearningResourceExchange¹³, Scientix¹⁴, eTwinning¹⁵ and ODS¹⁶ tried and try to gather as much educational resources as possible and offer a relevant databank for resources and projects providing as much collaboration as possible and in the case of Scientix an on demand translation service for educational resources. Missing the last spin off to interaction in class, these projects seem like dinosaurs looking at the Horizon2020 programme which focuses on research and university level cooperation. So the question remains: Despite investing a large and significant amount of money, why did not the paradigm shift in schools take place? What can we as responsible citizens do to contribute to solving this dilemma? The next section of the paper will offer a few explanations and approaches to a solution.

What could be done

Answering that very question, one has to look at the different stakeholders' perspectives. Bearing in mind that the educational policy is determined by national policy and is not part of the European

⁹ https://www.wko.at/Content.Node/wir/Austrian_Economic_Chambers_Home.html 29.10.2014

¹⁰ <http://www.iv-net.at/bm50> 29.10.2014

¹¹ <http://www.ert.eu> 29.10.2014

¹² <http://www.ingenious-science.eu> 29.10.2014

¹³ <http://reforschools.eun.org/> 29.10.2014

¹⁴ <http://www.scientix.eu> 29.10.2014

¹⁵ <http://www.etwinning.net> 29.10.2014

¹⁶ <http://opendiscoveryspace.eu> 29.10.2014

jurisdiction, at the end it comes down to the sustainability actions done by the respective member states meaning that every European action taken, by a large number of different projects for instance, is going to depend on the political will among the member states concerning the sustainability. Looking at the stakeholders on a national level, one has to start with the political leadership. Considering that no elections can be won with educational policy because of the missing short term effects, the educational policy is not a major priority. On the next level we have to look at the teachers working in class. Knowing about various EU-funded projects, great transnational content and developed concepts, often they are discouraged by the sheer support they get from their school principal or the local school authorities when it comes to infrastructural issues leaving the teachers with administrative work. As for the Industry, especially local industry companies, they experience a shortage of qualified workforce entering the labour market and - true or false - blame it on the educational system. Being part of the labour market and experiencing these tensions on a daily basis, parents feel powerless in providing their children the best education possible. Last but not least, students feel a level of resignation resulting in silence which leads to passive aggression not being able to understand the teachers.

First of all, on the European level, actions must be taken to invest in primary schools and early child education. Investments on the university level might be very easy to organize because companies sponsoring hope to see a short term return on invest, but pedagogically speaking, that is far too late. Second of all, teachers could be involved in the design of a paradigm shift in pedagogy. The only problem that might occur is that only 20 per cent of the teachers are able or free to think „out of the box“. Third of all, companies should take measures to educate and train their employees not expecting students to leave school already fully qualified. In addition to a decent salary, the short term costs will increase but the long term returns on invest when it comes to expertise, spending capacity, research and development in Europe and social aspects are enormous. the fourth point is that stakeholders involved should stop waiting for the other party to take actions. Parents are able to organize happenings, industries involved can add pressure to the political leaders, teachers could do a major part of innovation by themselves and students could get involved a lot more in extracurricular activities.

Being aware that the last paragraph might be wishful thinking and approaching the dilemma from an idealistic point of view, the actions described would not wait for the political leaders to take any actions. So part of the problem might be solved by a bottom up action plan that involves responsible citizenship.