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Small Boats in an Ocean of School Activities: Towards a European Vision on Education

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Abstract

The paper discusses the concept of schools as “multi-purpose learning centres”, proposed by the European Commission in the year 2000 as part of the Lisbon Strategy to improve competitiveness. This concept was arguably the “European vision” for school education and was meant to drive the modernization of school education. However, the concept has been somewhat ignored. The paper proposes a characterization of such “multi-purpose learning centres” based on the European definition, and presents some examples of how the European Commission is implementing these characteristics through European-financed projects in schools. This European vision of school education remains vague, and is only partially implemented through European financed projects that constitute fragile small boats in an ocean of school activities.

Introduction

There seems to be a general agreement at an international policy level that educational systems have to change in order to adapt to the necessities of the new Millennium. Within the context of lifelong learning policies, educational systems have been undertaking considerable reforms in the last two decades or so in Europe and elsewhere. Lifelong learning can be regarded as an educational policy philosophy characterised by an emphasis on learning that occurs all along the life span and that takes place in formal, non-formal and informal settings (see e.g. Rubenson, 2003, Villalba, 2008). School education is only a part of all the learning activities undertaken by individuals during their whole life-span. Schools need to re-evaluate their role in society to take into account other types of learning and other sources of knowledge. Traditional academic subjects might be only partially important in a labour market that increasingly demands non-traditional types of skills, such as learning to learn, entrepreneurship or inter-personal skills. Thus, it is important to question in what way school education should change to adapt to the contemporary demands from our societies.

The present paper presents an exemplification of what the author has characterized as a European vision of school education based on the concept of multi-purpose learning centres. This concept was proposed in the Council Conclusions in the year 2000 as one aspect of education to arrive to the strategic goal that Head of Government and States in the European Union set up in the year 2000: To become the most competitive knowledge based-economy in the world. The paper explores what characteristics should the school system possesses in order to fulfil this ideal type of school. Further, the paper presents some examples of how the European Commission is “realizing” this vision through European Funded projects.

This vision of school education functions is of interest for college educators at least for two reasons. First, school education remains as one of the most important sources to prepare students for further learning in life. Students’ readiness to undertake further learning in college will depend very much on their previous learning experiences. There is, moreover, a general concern that secondary school

graduates often lack the basic knowledge, skills and attitudes toward learning to be successful in college settings. Whether this will result in high attrition rates, the lowering of academic standards or both is a serious problem for college educators. It is therefore important to pay attention to school structures and organization that will affect student's readiness to learn at college. Second, this vision of school education regards college, not only as a continuation of the student's life, but as an opportunity for liaison between colleges and local schools in order to provide advanced knowledge and experiences for secondary school students in anticipation of the demands of further education. Schools as multi-purpose learning centres would have an impact on how education in the community can be organized, at all different levels.

The European perspective taken in this article may be of interest not only to Europeans but to North Americans and others who appreciate the growing importance of understanding lifelong learning, and creating the institutional support to facilitate the emerging phase of personal and professional growth and development.

School for the Future

In 2001, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2001) envisioned six possible scenarios about how educational systems might develop in the future. These scenarios are just ideal types and not explicit predictions, and none of the scenarios will appear in isolation; they constitute some possible ways in which schools might change. The six scenarios are classified into three main categories: (1) status-quo, (2) re-schooling and (3) de-schooling. In the first category, status quo, the scenario "bureaucratic school system continues" emphasises the bureaucratic burden of the school. Schools have intricate organizational relationships senior governments; information and communication technologies (ICT) is used, but has little direct impact on school activities, and teachers remain with a low professional status. In the second category, re-schooling, two main scenarios are described: (a) schools become learning organizations; and, (b) schools as core social centres. These two are characterized by placing the school as an interactive player within the community, creating links and collaboration with its surroundings. The last three scenarios are included within the de-schooling category: (a) radical extension of the market model, (b) learning networks, (c) teacher exodus and system melt-down. In these three, the main characteristic is that the school as we know it today, disappears, becoming just one among many educational providers; individual learners or networks of learners become the central aspect of education.

The European Union (EU) is arguably advocating for a second type of scenario. In the Presidency Conclusions of the Lisbon European Council in 2000, it is proposed the following (Council of the European Communities, 2000, p. 9): Schools and training centres, all linked to the Internet, should be developed into multi-purpose local learning centres accessible to all, using the most appropriate methods to address a wide range of target groups; learning partnerships should be established between schools, training centres, firms and research facilities for their mutual benefit.

To some degree, this constituted a European vision of what schools should look like in the future, since in this meeting, the Council established specific goals in different policy areas, including education, to be achieved by 2010.

In this Council meeting, the Head of State and Government of the Member-States agreed on "a new strategic goal" of becoming "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic

growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (Council of the European Communities, 2000). The process to fulfil this goal is the so-called, Lisbon Programme. One of the main mechanisms to help achieving the goal, was set up in this Council meeting: the Open Method of Coordination (OMC).

The OMC consists of a policy instrument where Member States agreed on specific objectives to be achieved by 2010. It is based on three main pillars: (1) Common definition of objectives; (2) common definition of instruments and monitoring measures; and (3) exchange of best practices, peer review and mutual learning. There are no sanctions associated with the non-fulfilment of the objectives, and thus it is considered "soft law" approach. The OMC was adopted for different policy areas, including education.

In education, the Lisbon Programme established five benchmarks and twenty-nine monitoring indicators. These twenty-nine indicators referred to main policy areas in education and training where Members States agreed to be monitored. The use of indicators and benchmarks is a crucial instrument to carry out the OMC. There were no specific indicators agreed in the Lisbon Programme directed to monitor the transformation referred above of schools into "multipurpose learning centres". Since then, the European Commission has been working in creating a system of indicators for monitoring purposes that ended up in a communication to the Council (European Commission, 2007a) where the Commission proposed twenty core indicators. "Multi-purpose learning centres" was mention as an indicator that should be developed within the European Statistical System (ESS) (European Commission, 2007a, p.10). However, the Council Conclusions discussing the Communication in May 2007 did not adopt, nor even acknowledged, this area of indicators (Council of the European Communities, 2007). This means that the Member States will not be monitored on this issue by the Commission. Or in other words, the transformation of schools is not subject to country comparisons.

A possible reason for this omission is that European Member States have problems in defining and agreeing on what school education should look like now and in the future. In addition, conceptualization of "multipurpose learning centres" has not been well developed (Stang and Hesses, 2006), and it is not clear in what way the transformation from schools to "multi-purpose learning centres" can be implemented or monitored. Moreover, the European Commission does not have regulatory power in educational policies that remain under national or local control. However, under the subsidiary principle, Article 149 of the Treaty states that the Community "shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States". In a similar way, the Barcelona Summit in 2002 set the objective of making education and training systems a world quality reference by 2010 (Council of the European Communities, 2003, p. 18). This means that the European Commission does have a role to play in developing educational policies to be implemented in Member States. As a Commission staff working paper maintains: "The European Commission works closely with the Member States to help them to develop and modernise their education and training policies" (European Commission, 2007b, p.3). The document continues saying that the Commission does this in two main ways: Through the OMC and through the different European financed project within the new Lifelong Learning Programme.

The OMC has become a major policy tool for the Commission to influence policies in Member States (Gornitzka, 2006). In the case of modernization of school education, more specifically on the transformation from schools to "multi-purpose learning centres", there are no monitoring instruments and thus, European policies are likely to have less impact than in other areas. In the case of European funded programmes on education such as Minerva http://www.minervaeurope.org/ or Comenius (http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc84_en.htm), the Commission has a direct impact on school

activities. A look into these programmes might provide evidence on how the Commission is contributing to the transformation of “schools into multipurpose learning centres”. Through different specific programmes (such as the lifelong learning programme) the Commission can provide support to specific school initiatives and, in this way, to “realise its vision” of what schools should become. The present paper presents an illustration of how some schools are implementing the European “vision” of schools as “multipurpose learning centres”. The paper identifies certain characteristics on what constitutes a school as a multi-purpose learning centre based on the definition provided by the Commission and presents specific examples through European funded projects on how these characteristics are being realized. The list is illustrative but cannot be considered as a comprehensive view of European funded projects.

School as a multipurpose learning centre

Stang and Hesses (2006, p. 3) maintain that, in some countries such as the United Kingdom, the discussion about Learning Centres “has been an integral part of agreements about an efficient educational infrastructure”. They connect the development of learning centres with the increasing importance of flexible learning provision and distance learning. The concept of Learning Centre is difficult to define. Buiskool et al. (2005, p. 12), in their study in thirty-one countries, found sixty-one European initiatives on Learning Centres where the term was used “without further description or defining”. The results of this study show an extremely heterogeneous structure of Learning Centres in Europe. Their study is, however, focused on “adult learning centres”.

If the European vision of education implies that all schools should become learning centres, there is need for translating ideas from learning centres conceived and designed for adults to learning centres where schools for compulsory-aged-students can play a central role. The following is an attempt to characterize a general notion of a school as a “multipurpose learning centre”. The paper presents a list of non-exhaustive, but to a certain extent necessary, characteristics that a multi-purpose learning centre should possess. The paper provides examples of each of these characteristics drawn from EU funded projects. The list includes two main features: variety and networking. Variety refers to the fact that schools will have to adapt to a wider range of learners. This necessarily implies a variety of methods to meet the demands of different learners. The networking aspect could be related with the idea of “learning communities” (Cara and Ranson, 1998) or “learning partnerships” (Yarnitt, 2000). In this way, schools will necessarily be part of the community providing specific educational services in cooperation with other institutions.

Variety of Learners

A multi-purpose learning centre is meant to be “accessible to all”… and “… address a wide range of target groups” (Council of the European Communities, 2000, p. 9). Thus, this new type of schooling has to provide learning opportunities to different types of students including students from different ages and students with different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Within the context of lifelong learning, a multipurpose learning centre is a place where all community members can come together to learn - young, adults and elderly. The school becomes a community centre where different generations with common interests join in learning. In this way, it would also serve as a cross-generational meeting place. To some extent, this “vision” of the school would correspond relatively well with what Decker and Richardson Boo (1996, p. 1) called the “little red schoolhouse” in traditional indigenous communities:

The little red schoolhouse of the past was a multipurpose building. Socials, musicals, spelling bees, games, bazaars, festivals, meetings, and other activities drew people of all ages to the school. Residents viewed the schoolhouse as their own, a comfortable and convenient place to gather.

An example of integrating different types of learners, concerning different ages specifically, is the initiatives so-called “intergenerational programmes”. These programs usually refer to the inclusion in schools of retired adults (generally over sixty-five) that provide help in the traditional classroom for youth. Such programs have been introduced as experiments in Japan (Kaplan et al. 1998), the United States and Sweden (Boström, 2003).

A similar project is financed by the European Commission within the eLearning programme. The project, called “Grand Parents & Grand Sons” (G&G) (http://www.geengee.eu/geengee/index.jsp), is based on the involvement of students of upper secondary schools in the role of volunteer “digital educators” for people aged over fifty-five. The main objective of the project is to disseminate this practice of using school students as “teachers” for adults. Young adults learn how to teach while older adults develop digital competencies. The project implies a meet of generations where young adults are required to understand older adult’s needs while older learners need to respect their younger teachers.

A variety of learners also implies that schools have to provide learning opportunities for people with immigrant backgrounds of all ages. If the school develops as a meeting place, it might provide a forum for the discussion and understanding of other’s cultures and ideas, promoting multicultural understanding. In addition, school as multi-purpose learning centre is meant to bring together people from different socio-economic status, providing a way of narrowing the knowledge gap between those more and less educated and more and less wealthy.

Envisioned this way, the school can serve as a centre for seeking counselling in one’s career and learning paths at any stage in life. Counselling was one of the priorities set up by the Commission to make “learning more attractive” within their strategy for “making lifelong learning a reality” (European Commission, 2001).

Variety of Subjects

The constant updating of skills needed in a lifelong learning context also requires that learning centres should be able to provide a variety of skills and knowledge “on-demand”. In order to meet the demands of the various learners, the school needs to provide a wide range of subjects and activities based in particular key competencies. The European Commission defined eight key competencies which constitute a “European reference framework … to facilitate national reforms and exchange of information between Member States” (European Parliament and Council of the European Communities, 2006, p. 394/11). These competencies constitute the necessary equipment for young people to proceed on further learning, they include: (1) communication in the mother tongue, (2) communication in foreign languages, (3) mathematical competence and basic competence in science and technology, (4) digital competence, (5) learning to learn, (6) social and civic competences, (7) sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and (8) cultural awareness and expression. Within these eight competences “learning to learn”, “social and civic competences, “cultural awareness and expression” and “entrepreneurship” are considered “transversal” and are not easily associated with traditional-academic subjects (European Commission, 2007b, p. 5). The recommendation of the Parliament and the Council states that one of the main aims of the framework on key competences is (European Parliament and Council of the European Communities, 2006, p. 394/13):

[To] support Member States' work in ensuring that by the end of initial education and training young people have developed the key competences to a level that equips them for adult life and which forms a basis for further learning and working life.

The School curriculum in a multi-purpose learning centre, thus, should be articulated around these core competences to meet the demands of a European vision of school education.

An eTwining awarded project in 2006 is a good example of how the “non-traditional” subjects can be integrated into the school. The project, called “Young people's search for personal identity”, provides a map for critically thinking about one’s personality and beliefs. Utilizing a wide range of ICT tools through different web applications, students can share ideas and experiences on issues concerning their identity, their role in society, their culture, etc. The website of the project is structured in sets of questions through an “inner journey” and provides different exercises in order to develop critical thinking and reflections about oneself (http://www.highschoolmonaco.eu/etwinning/). For example, the “journey” is divided in four stages: identity, direction, purpose and strategy. Each of the stages is guided by one question respectively: Who am I? Where am I going?, Why am I going there?, and How am I going there? On the question on “who am I?” there are seven steps where there are different presentations, questions, ideas, activities and links about “identity on adolescence”. Through this questions and activities the student thinks about who s/he is as an adolescent and who s/he wants to become.

Variety of Methods

Variety in subject-matter and groups of the learners require appropriate teaching methods adaptable to the needs of those learners and to their previous knowledge level. Rubenson (2003, p. 32) has argued that the present emphasis on learning within the lifelong learning context is associated with a major emphasis on the individualization of learning practices. As Tuijnman and Boström (2002, p. 13) put it “… the realization of lifelong learning depends to a large degree on the capacity and motivation of individuals to take care of their own learning”. Each individual, therefore, has to make choices in terms of what, when and how to learn. The school as “multipurpose learning centre”, accordingly, must individualize teaching methods to match the learner’s demands. Through this diversification of teaching methods, as through the diversification of subjects, the school should be able to attract and engage students who differ in terms of background, socio-economic status, interest and age.

In this context, it is particularly relevant to acknowledge informal learning processes and use them within the school context in a new way. Traditional teaching methods, where a teacher “preaches” the lesson while the students listen, and which still maintain priority of place in many systems, cannot be the only way in which the teaching-learning process takes place. It is necessary to develop methods that engage the student in a cooperative manner with the teacher and that involve other actors external to the class-room environment.

The Permanent European Resource Centre for Informal Learning (PENCIL) could be regarded as a platform to develop these teaching methods. PENCIL aims at identifying informal science activities that can be developed into quality teaching techniques (http://www.xplora.org/ww/en/pub/xplora/nucleus_home/pencil.htm):

Fourteen science centres/museums are creating mini-networks involving schools, pupils, teachers associations, research laboratories, educational authorities, education and science communication specialists to run “pilot projects”

on new ways to conduct science teaching.

For example, a project in the UK involves a National Marine Aquarium that invites students to participate in the testing and evaluation of new activities to be implemented in the exposition on climate change. Before they are open to the public, students from local schools come to the Aquarium to test these activities experimentally. Through the activities, that include interactive computer games and other informal learning practices, students can learn about climate change. At the same time, the aquarium obtains important feedback from students, whose insights can be used to improve the exposition in the future. Science teachers and researchers are also involved in the design of the materials and activities that are offered.

Integrated use of ICT

Learning centres are usually associated with ICT as their main subject or as the main tool for teaching purposes. In a school as a multipurpose learning centre, ICT is meant to be integrated in the daily process of teaching and learning. It cannot only be regarded as an information retrieval system but as a tool used to learn in innovative ways. The Commission (European Commission, 2001, p. 2) puts it this way: “The introduction of information and communication technologies will have to be accompanied by a far-reaching reorganisation of learning structures”. The Commission has already provided a substantial amount of funding and generated several programmes in order to facilitate the use of new technologies in schools. The eEurope action plan was an initiative the European Union launched to strength the use of ICT in all sectors to promote competitiveness and growth. It was followed by the i2010 initiative in 2006. Within these initiatives, and specifically on education, the Commission launched eLearning programme in 2000 (European Commission, 2000). The eLearning programme has four “action lines”: (1) Promoting digital literacy, (2) European Virtual Campuses, (3) e-Twining of schools in Europe and (4) transversal actions. (1) Promoting digital literacy is mainly aim at encouraging the acquisition of ICT skills, especially on those who do not have access to traditional education and learning. (2) Virtual campuses action is directed to university education. (3) eTwining is aimed at developing the networking capacity of the schools. And (4) the transversal actions are mainly directed to promote innovation in teaching methods. In addition, SOCRATES programmes (now under the New lifelong learning programme), such as Comenius or Minerva, have financed many projects related to ICT use in schools. Also the framework programme on Research and Development has had certain priorities connected with the development of eLearning tools, especially in the area of Information Society Technologies (IST) and on Research and Technological Development (RTD).

For example, Lab@future, an IST project, allows teachers and students to interact with real and computer generated objects to carry on experiments. The web page of the project proposes specific activities that can be develop using the Lab@future server and applications (http://www.labfuture.net/showcase/index.php) to teach students specific aspects of science. Another initiative, “Lab of tomorrow”, also funded by IST, developed specific micro-devises that could be embedded in clothes that are checking factors such as speed and acceleration, temperature and pulse rate. The devices can also be incorporated into a football. This information can be used later on for science teaching (http://www.laboftomorrow.org). Another example, the Minerva-funded project, Eudoxos, provides remote access to students to a telescope to teach about mathematics, statistics, chemistry, and physics with real time data (http://www.ea.gr/ep/eudoxos/htm/index.htm).

In addition, the use of ICT will necessarily result in a better digital literacy.

Digital literacy has been one of the focuses in the eLearning programme of the European Commission; with many different initiatives promoting the use of ICT in schools and learning environments. The BENTLI (BENchmarking regional strategies for Technological Literacy) project, for example,

"is aiming to support European Regions on their way to an Information Society … by analysing the impact of a set of regional strategies already in place and extracting best practices from these strategies, and setting up a methodology which allows for continuous benchmarking and learning" (http://www.bentli.net/).

In addition, ICT should be used to provide remote access and distance learning opportunities. In general terms, distance schools are more common for adult learners, but are rapidly developing for compulsory-aged students. e-Hermes was pioneer in distance learning, a project financed through the Socrates programme in 1996, developed a framework of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) applications for secondary schools (Apostolakis et al., 1999).

Finally, in the vision of school as a multi-purpose learning centre, ICT is meant to support the networking capacities of the "schools of tomorrow". Through ICT schools and learners can interact with the surrounding community creating learning partnerships. ICT is, thus, a crucial feature to implement networking. However, just providing Internet connection to all schools in Europe is not enough; it is necessary to implement mechanisms and incentives to foster collaboration.

Networking with the Community

As well as having different types of people participating in school activities, and having different types of subject matters and methods, it is important to understand that the school cannot be the "only player" in the community. It is necessary for the school to connect with other public and private institutions. As the Joint Interim Report of the Council and the Commission (European Council and European Commission, 2004, p. 5) states: "… it is necessary to promote more effective partnership between key actors including business, the social partners and education institutions at all levels". In the definition of schools as "multi-purpose learning centres" this is also clearly stated: "…learning partnerships should be established between schools, training centres, firms and research facilities" (Council of the European Communities, 2000).

An example of networking activities with the community is the project financed under eLearning initiative in 2003: e-Learning for Museum and School Environments (e-MUSE). "This project is concerned with the networking of cultural and educational institutions, specifically museums and schools". Sharing contents and research resources, schools develop common learning materials (http://emuse.cti.gr/default_emuse.asp). The project has developed a series of documents and guides for students and teachers for studying ancient history. Another interesting example is AGROweb, a project financed under the Minerva action. In this project students are involved in the promotion of local agricultural products. AGROweb (www.agroweb.com) involves schools in six different countries where students collaborate with local providers to choose local agricultural products. Students participating in the project sell these agricultural products to the members of the network in other countries using web-based tools to the other participant schools (http://www2.ellinogermaniki.gr/ep/agroweb/htmls/uk/description.html).

Networking with the Global Community

Finally, schools as multipurpose learning centres necessarily have to be

connected with the wider international community. In other words, the school has to connect with other schools, not only in their countries, but in other countries. This should promote the exchange of best practices and ideas between peers. At the same time, contact between students from different countries and cultures should enhance inter-cultural skills and understanding (one of the key competences acknowledged by the Commission).

Several actions at the European level are directed towards promoting networking at a European level. The eLearning action, eTwining, promotes school collaboration in Europe through the use of ICT by providing support, tools and services to make it easy for schools to form partnerships. eTwining was launched in 2004 and after two years it has reached more than 20000 registered schools with around 30% of them involved in some short of collaborative project (http://www.etwinning.net/). In addition, the Comenius program is aimed at promoting cooperation between Schools in Europe through support of school partnerships and individual mobility of students and teachers.

Discussion and Conclusion

The European Commission, through its different channels is to some extent supporting the modernization of school education in the direction described above, transforming schools into multi-purpose learning centres. The transformation of schools into learning centres was an important part of the school modernisation agenda of the Lisbon Programme launched in 2000. The concept, however, has remained relatively ignored and no major policy actions have been taken to promote such transformation.

The paper identified and defined some of the necessary characteristics of schools to fulfil the European vision of schools as multipurpose learning centres. It is argued that the European vision of school as a multipurpose learning centre is articulated through the two main concepts of variety and networking. Variety implies that schools have to accommodate a wide range of activities, learners and demands, and therefore they need to use different teaching-learning methods and processes. Networking implies that schools have to become a player in the local community life, making partnerships with other local organizations. In addition, schools need to promote connectivity with other remote areas and cultures inside and outside their country in order to promote inter-cultural understanding.

Through its different funding structures, the European Commission has several mechanisms for influencing teaching and learning practices at school level. In this way, it can influence and change educational practices, promoting a “European vision” of education characterized by schools as “multipurpose learning centres”. The idea of a learning centre has been exemplified on each of its characteristics by specific European funded projects. The examples presented illustrate briefly how aspects of schools as multi-purpose learning centres are being promoted. However, European projects provide a very fragmented impact on every-day school activities. The projects constitute just “small boats in the ocean of school practices”; small and fragile activities that are not likely to be mainstream in regular educational practices.

Transforming schools into multi-purpose learning centres will imply a strong will on the part of Member States and a radical transformation of schooling in most educational systems in Europe. With the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), launched in Lisbon, the European Union has a mechanism to influence more directly educational policies. However, without specific tools to measure progress and change, the OMC is not useful. At the school level, there are no clear indicators to monitor and capture the transformation of schools into multi-purpose learning

centres; thus the OMC is rather ineffective. The conceptualization of schools as multi-purpose learning centres and its characteristics, as described here, might be a first step to set the basis for a common European policy on school education.

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