

RESPONSE
12.9.2007

RESPONSE OF OAJ, THE TRADE UNION OF EDUCATION IN FINLAND

EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S CONSULTATION "SCHOOLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY"

The Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ) is responding to the Commission's consultation both from the national perspective and that of the European Union. The starting point for national comments is the organisation's experience of the Finnish education system and its functionality. The response is not in any way suggesting how to approach matters in Finland, but rather, on the basis of our experience, how matters should generally be approached. Although in Finland most of the issues are already a reality, there is still room for development. Proposals for EU measures can be found at the end.

It is our experience that teacher education is the key as regards most of the issues; its quality and duration are investments worth pursuing. High-quality education would attract suitable applicants.

1. How can schools be organised in such a way as to provide all students with the full range of key competences?

Key competences should be recorded in the national curriculum, partly as subjects or topics, partly using the permeation principle. The basic principles should apply equally to both public and private sectors.

Key competences should be included in initial and continuous teacher education. School environment should be appropriate and resources sufficient with regard to key competence teaching. Pupils should have access to teaching in their own language when needed.

2. How can schools equip young people with the competences and motivation to make learning a lifelong activity?

Schools should teach a positive attitude towards lifelong learning and encourage pupils to understand its importance. It should be possible for pupils to realise the long-term benefits of lifelong learning.

Teaching should employ student-centred, individualised methods. Pupils should feel that learning under the guidance of the teacher is meaningful. Teaching and the evaluation of learning results should be encouraging, rewarding. Requirement levels should be sufficiently challenging considering the age and aptitude of the pupil. Trust should be established between the pupil and the teacher. The learning climate of the school needs to be positive. Pupil support services should be available.

The home should learn to understand its responsibility in lifelong learning through cooperation between home and school. Society needs to appreciate the value of schools.

3. How can school systems contribute to supporting long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe?

Schools should teach and allow independence, accord responsibility, give instruction in cooperation skills, enterprise and entrepreneurship, guide towards innovation and lifelong learning. Teaching should be encouraging. Learning objectives should be sufficiently demanding. Schools should teach understanding of economic causalities. Broad-based education expands horizons.

The system should allow everyone to study as long as they wish, irrespective of their financial circumstances. Common and equal schools produce cohesion and improve overall results and diversity in relationships. Schools should have high and uniform quality. Schools should provide a solid basis for lifelong learning.

Schools should have an interface with factors contributing to economic growth; a school is not an island.

Teacher training should be of high quality. Teachers need to learn to understand the cohesion perspective. Teachers should keep abreast of the times and take part in continuous training. Sufficient resources should be invested in teacher education.

4. How can school systems best respond to the need to promote equity, to respond to cultural diversity and to reduce early school leaving?

Education should be available to everyone throughout the country. The best way to ensure this is through public financing and systems (State, municipalities). Adequate financing should be provided. The school should be comprehensive in structure. Education should be compulsory and also the right of all the children of the same age.

Immigrants need to be integrated, with due consideration paid to special needs (language, culture, religion). Social policy should be supportive. Concentration in housing should be avoided with regard to under-privileged and minority groups. Immigrants should be encouraged to make use of domestication services. Schools should have free support services (meal service, health care, possible transport, assistants, social services, student counselling). Schools should have teaching in tolerance and ethics (not necessarily religious instruction). The positive development of equity should be strengthened through cooperation between home and school.

Student counselling should be increased to prevent early school leaving. High-risk groups should have a stable system of flexible, individualised basic education, enabling them to complete their schooling. Consideration should be given to individuals and different types of learners. Individual and flexible paths to upper secondary level vocational education should be promoted for those in need of special support.

5. If schools are to respond to each pupil's individual learning needs, what can be done as regards curricula, school organisation and the roles of teachers?

Teaching groups should be small enough to allow individual pupils' needs to be taken into consideration. Teachers should receive training in taking individual pupils' needs into consideration. To be able to have individualised approach schools need to have appropriate material prerequisites (facilities, equipment).

The national curriculum should have common principles allowing local and individual latitude. Teachers need to be trained for curriculum work. The curriculum should

allow the accommodation of each pupil's ability. The teacher should have pedagogical autonomy.

Achieving balance between individualism and collectivism supports individuals, and teaches membership of the community.

The teacher's tasks should be specified; some tasks could be delegated to other occupational groups.

6. How can school communities help to prepare young people to be responsible citizens, in line with fundamental values such as peace and tolerance of diversity?

Pupils should be familiarised with collectivism (cf. above). Educating social skills is a fundamental task of the school. The school is a microcosm, whose everyday life is a place for learning and assimilating models. Teaching social skills separately does not provide results, if not supported by the everyday environment. Schools should educate active and ethical citizenship. Pupils need to be included in decision-making where circumstances are appropriate.

Cooperation between home and school should promote the basic values referred to in the question. Social policy should support educational decisions, for example, avoiding the categorising of pupils.

7. How can school staff be trained and supported to meet the challenges they face?

Teachers should receive adequate initial education, updated by sufficient continuous training to meet ever-changing challenges (educational policy etc.). Teacher education should form a continuum. In-service training should be systematic, not haphazard. Each teacher should have an individual development plan, implemented systematically.

Teachers should be accorded respect and provided with proper working conditions. The profession needs to be made attractive. Retaining in profession needs to be secured.

The occupational safety and well-being of teachers needs to be guaranteed. Teachers should have influence over their work and the running of the school. They should have a feeling of having control of their work. Schools need to have skilled management, supporting the work of teachers.

8. How can school communities best receive the leadership and motivation they need to succeed? How can they be empowered to develop in response to changing needs and demands?

Schools should have autonomy. Moreover, they should be able to cooperate locally and with other schools within the national unity. Equity should be guaranteed. Schools should have the freedom to develop new ideas and teaching methods.

Leaders should be competent, with pedagogical, financial and personnel training, schooled in recruitment and management, and skilled in pedagogical leadership. They should have a background in teaching and required teacher qualification. Each unit should have its own responsible principal. In-service training should be available for principals. They should receive various forms of support (also from their superiors), as they work under conflicting pressures. The pay should be attractive (demanding tasks, often in a mediating role).

Evaluation should be used as a tool for development, not for apportioning blame. It should support management. Self-evaluation should be favoured.

Proposals for EU-level measures

The EU, through its educational programmes, should even more forcefully promote participation in European educational provision, and the dissemination of mutual learning to teachers and teacher educators. EU cooperation between teachers and teacher trainers should be increased (mobility, familiarisation, mutual learning). Suitable topics would include, for example, teaching methods, increasing the openness of school culture towards a culture of cooperation.

EU-level benchmarks and indicators should be developed for monitoring of progress in the key issues relating to the questions.

Contact person Marjatta Melto