EI CONFERENCE FOR MEMBER ORGANISATIONS IN OECD COUNTRIES

"Framing Education for the Public Good"

London, 29-30 January 2013

Opening remarks by Fred van Leeuwen, General Secretary EI

1. First of all, can I congratulate you all for being here. January is not the greatest month for travel, yet today we have a record attendance for an EI OECD Conference. It not only shows a high degree of commitment but also the relevance and importance of our Conference theme; ‘Framing Education for the Public Good’.
2. The Public Good. It is a term which easily leads to misunderstandings. When I heard David Cameron speak in Davos last Thursday about the bold steps his government is taking to accommodate markets, to keep his economy’s triple a rating, to pursue “revolutionary structural reforms” such as free schools, it occurred to me that Cameron’s Public Good is not necessarily ours.
3. We all know that the globalization of our economies, the ability of our nations to successfully compete in the global markets, and the crucial role our school systems play in enhancing that ability, has propelled education to the very top of the international agenda. Sure, there are reasons to be pleased about all the interest shown in our sector, but if investments in our school systems are solely or predominantly driven by the desire to boost our economies and satisfy markets, we need to be cautious. Education is a public good. It is not just an instrument to promote economic growth. Education is not a commodity. The values of public education, are essentially the values that underpin democracy as well as our prosperity. They encompass the principles of equity and equal opportunities, of non-discrimination and social justice. In this regard it is interesting to note that in the past two decades the education agenda has not been set by the organization that was established for that very purpose, UNESCO, but by the World Bank, the largest lender of education loans, and by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.
4. The last time UNESCO developed a key international reference for the conceptualization of education, was in 1996 with the publication of the Delors Report: “Learning, the Treasure Within”. As the global development context has significantly changed since the mid -1990s , this report, framed by the principles of lifelong learning and the four pillars of learning to be, to know, to do and to live together, will be revisited and updated, and EI has been invited to take part in this process.
5. Colleagues, seldom have the circumstances in which we operate be more unfavourable than today, economically and politically. In the industrial economies, in the emerging democracies and in the developing countries,
6. many of our member organizations are engaged in a battle, two battles actually, a political and a professional battle. And this is not about bread and butter issues. It is about the future of public education, it is about the future of our profession, it is about achieving the right of our young people to quality education and training, about giving them a fair chance on the labour market and in life
7. The economic and debt crisis is far from over – for any of us. And as we speak, the public sector is facing the full brunt of it. There is a common thread in the responses to the debt crisis of most OECD member states. Whether governed by the left, the centre or the right, policies focus on austerity, on cutting back public expenditures, including education budgets. Greece, Portugal, Spain, Italy are forced to pursue horrendous austerity measures in exchange for loans from richer EU countries.
8. And we know that the resources are there. To give you an example: Earlier this year we completed a study on corporate taxation in the real economy, showing how and how much global corporations avoid paying taxes by manipulating their prices and balance sheets along their global supply lines. Between 10 and 15 trillion dollars! At the G20 summit last June in Mexico I confronted Christine LaGarde, Head of IMF, with these staggering figures and suggested that IMF should start helping governments close these fiscal loopholes and collect those trillions rather than pressing them to slash education budgets. She promised us to look into this. Well, we’ll see. They have not yet called back. My point is: The resources are there, it takes political will and political courage…
9. Colleagues, we must get back to the basics, get off the defensive, and articulate again why public education has such an important role in each of our societies and why it cannot be outsourced to the private sector. We must make it clear to our political leaders that privatization and commercialization of education are not the answer.
10. Advocates of Charter Schools in the US, the Free Schools in Sweden and more recently the Academies in the UK, argue that applying the free-market principles of choice and competition to the running of schools will drive standards up across the system. Removing schools from state control and transferring public funds to private organisations to run them will see their results improve and compel state schools to work harder to keep up with them, or so the argument goes.
11. ,But can they substantiate that claim? No, they cannot. On the contrary. Let’s have a look at three important findings:
12. One: The United States. A recent national study by the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, covering more than 70% of the students of Charter Schools in 16 States concluded that students in charter schools are not faring as well as students in traditional public schools. Student achievement in 37% of the Charter Schools was lower than in public schools. In 17% it was higher, while in 46% there was no significant difference.
13. Two: Sweden. Research from that country shows that since the introduction of the so called Free Schools, educational attainment across the Swedish system has declined, while segregation on the basis of students’ social
14. background and ethnicity is on the rise. In fact, Sweden lost its leading position on the latest PISA scale as a result of their Free Schools. The Swedish Education Minister even warned the UK government against plans to follow the Swedish model. They did it anyway.
15. Three: Last autumn the OECD put out a study concluding that competitive school markets may lead to greater segregation of students with severe effects on education outcomes. “The highest-performing education systems across the industrialized nations are those that combine quality with equity,” according to the OECD.
16. Colleagues, the simplistic transfer of ideas from the corporate world will not advance the quality of our school systems. The idea that you can somehow improve quality by introducing standardized testing, league tables and performance pay, by ranking schools, by measurement, is wishful thinking. It does not work. What it definitely will do is generating angry teachers, frustrated principals and lots of paper work.
17. Colleagues, it is not so complicated: Boosting education quality nation-wide simply requires a massive investment in the entire teaching profession, in the initial training of teachers, in their professional development, and, yes, also in their pay and employment conditions. There is no way around this reality and there are no short cuts, such as performance pay based on student outcomes. Mind you, there is no evidence whatsoever that individual performance pay raises professional standards. What it does raise is anxiety and turmoil in teachers’ staff rooms.
18. This brings me to the state of our profession. In a market driven, competitive world, school leaders are at risk of being transformed from educational leaders to managers, and teachers work is at risk of being changed radically as they are forced to prioritise high stakes tests in the name of ‘accountability’.
19. We do accept the concept of accountability. We too want quality education. We are committed to keeping up the highest professional standards. And yes, it is natural that there be on-going dialogue between the education unions and the public authorities. But let us be clear! The starting point for that dialogue must be the recognition of the professional role, the expertise of the educator.
20. A couple of words about school leaders. Throughout history their role has been subject of heated debates. In the records of a public grammar school in the Netherlands, governed by the city council of Nijmegen since that school was established in the year 1540, I came across the minutes of a council meeting of January 1703 and I learned that until that year the teachers were carrying swords. Apparently there had been skirmishes at the school, and the Council therefore decided that henceforth “the teacher shall be provided with a gown and a cane to give themselves bearing”, but that they should leave their weapons at home. Obviously, and you will appreciate this, the principal was exempted from this decree. He could keep his sword.
21. Running a place of learning is not the same as running a boarding house, an office, a bank, a clinic or a penitentiary (even if sometimes it appears that it is all of these at the same time). It is very unfortunate that in a number of countries the principal has transformed into an administrator with limited . I am of the opinion that the principal, ideally, is a teacher, the first among equals, who leads the education process and the school community. And let
22. me add that as professional leaders they belong, together with their teachers, in the same education union.
23. Colleagues, friends - A key characteristic of a profession, any profession, is that its standards, principles and objectives are determined by its members. Doctors, architects, lawyers, to give some examples, set their own professional standards, within legal frameworks defined by the public authorities. But we, teachers, educators, seem to be gradually losing our identity as, what Jacques Delors, former Head of the European Commission, once called, the noblest of professions. I put the question to the delegates to our World Congress last July and put that same question to you today: Are we being transformed from a teaching profession into a teaching force directed by strict marching orders?
24. Colleagues, de-professionalization is, I believe, one of the main challenges facing our sector today. [The writing is on the wall). There are seven signs, signals, or perhaps I should say “plagues”, which pose a serious threat to the future of our profession and its capacity to ensure high quality teaching. Number one: the influx of unqualified teachers; number two: the casualization of teaching; ; number three: the growing gap between teachers’ pay and remuneration in other sectors; number four: the restriction of teachers’ autonomy; number five: the rapid spread of standardized testing; number six: (mechanistic forms of) high stake teachers’ evaluation; and number seven: private sector management practices sneaking into our educational institutions.It all points in the same direction, conveying one troublesome message: Education Is Too Important To Leave To Teachers.
25. These ideas, colleagues, and de-professionalization in general, seem once again first and foremost driven by economic, financial and political concerns and not by any understanding of what teaching and education is all about. As Mary Futrell, one of our Founding Presidents put it so well: “When the untapped potential of a child meets the creative imagination of a teacher, a miracle occurs.” Yes, a miracle, and let me tell you, that every single teacher on this planet experiences that Miracle. It is the source, if you will, of our passion. But sure, economists and many politicians are horrified, because miracles cannot be measured.
26. So if at this occasion I were to propose a thesis it would be that teachers must regain control over their profession, and that we, education unions, must reinforce our role as the profession’s guardians.
27. And for those who may have doubts, let me say this: There is no contradiction between our trade union and professional aspirations. They are complementary. Learning conditions and working conditions are inextricably linked.
28. All the evidence is that education is not only vitally important for economic security but for social cohesion. Education International will make the arguments for education as a public service in all forums- in every country and in every global organisation whether it is UNESCO, the International Labour Organisation, the World Bank, the World Economic Forum or indeed in the OECD.
29. Agreement and disagreement are essential to democratic debate about the future of education. That is why we believe that having a two way dialogue
30. with the OECD is vitally important. The OECD’s Education Directorate studies and surveys are anxiously followed by governments. We may have concerns about their impact. Indeed we may welcome their policy conclusions.
31. But whatever our views on the OECD’s policies and research we cannot deny the influence the OECD has on our education systems. And there are two crucial areas where we agree with the OECD.
32. First we both believe that for a country to be socially and economically successful, all its children and young people must receive high quality education. And all of its adult population should be entitled to adult education and training.
33. The second area of agreement is perhaps less obvious. There are some that think that the only way for countries to get out of the economic crisis is by massively deregulating economies- to remove protections and social support and thereby increase inequalities. With its emphasis on the need for transparent economic governance, on high quality education for all and on the importance of consultation with employees, I don’t believe that the OECD is in their camp.
34. Conference, we are at a pivotal time for the future of education. We must not let education slip away as a top priority for governments. It is our job to keep pressing the core message that without properly resourced high quality education for all, society itself will be fundamentally damaged.