

Centralised school system educates a homogeneous nation

1.5 million employees, life-long teaching career, unified curriculum prepared by the ministry, large classes, high number of lessons, subject-centered teaching, traditional frontal teaching methods – characteristics of the French school system, the basis of present changes of our education system.

I'm making this interview with Nelly Guet, education expert who was a school principal in France for 22 years as well as directing schools in Switzerland and Germany. She was a board member of ESHA for years so she is familiar with European trends and recommendations. I was asking her about French traditions and the results of their school system.

- It's a new development in the Hungarian school system, that the employer of primary and secondary school teachers as well as the financier of professional work is a huge state institution called Klebelsberg School-financing Centre, while the operating framework of school building is mostly provided by local authorities. Is the French system similar to this?

- Yes, but before turning to the characteristics of the French system I want to emphasize that according to European recommendations school autonomy is a basic requirement for all member states. In connection with this the EU is supporting the school leadership model which means that school autonomy is accompanied by shared responsibilities and jobs within the school. I have 10 years of experience with principals in 32 different countries in Europe and through ICP, in the world. I think we need changes everywhere to meet the needs of the 21st century. It is my wide experience that makes me quite critical towards my own country.

In the French system there is very little school autonomy and very little school leadership. We have a very expensive system, since there are people responsible for similar issues at both the central government and local authorities. All French teachers are civil servants being paid by the central government. Teachers in private schools, are also paid by the state, are not civil servants but get contracts for life. A teaching career means life-long employment where promotion is automatic, there is no requirement for personal development or in-service training. Financing of schools is the duty of local authorities, operational costs and costs of the teaching process are provided locally.

This is one of the reasons why it is very problematic that primary schools have no principals, just one teacher in each school who does some co-ordination and also that secondary school principals have a purely administrative role. Since they aren't in a decision-making position, they cannot choose teachers of their schools, they cannot evaluate their work and they don't have a real impact on the school budget provided by local authorities. They have an administrative role in managing the budget.

It is also unique in Europe that teachers are being employed before finishing their training. After finishing their master's degree would-be teacher do a written and a oral exam. Those passing the test become civil servants. After a two-year initial period they can go on teaching for decades without real supervision. There is no compulsory in-service training. There is outside supervision in the form of inspecting one lesson every seven years, but one of my teachers hadn't seen an inspector in her 24-year teaching career. I think about 1/3 of active teachers are well-prepared, competent and committed, but this is a very low rate. Most teachers don't need to revise their

practices, they can use traditional methods, teach ex catedra, mostly standing in front of the class and lecturing them.

- *It is an important part of our present changes that whole-day school is introduced, the number of weekly lessons is increased for both teachers and students. It is also important that there is going to be a PE lesson every day as well as the introduction of religious studies or ethics. For French students Wednesday is a day off.*

- Traditional teaching methods are accompanied by a high number of lessons for students. For teachers the compulsory working week is 18 hours, but some committed colleagues spend as much as 50 hours in the schools. A 6-year-old student has 24 lessons in 4 days, a 15-year-old student between 28 and 32 lessons in five days (*according to the new curricular framework it's 35 lessons in Hungary*).

Apart from Wednesdays off – in primary schools - we have 16 weeks of school holiday every year. As I was a child, in a public school, for decades, most of this free time was filled with extra-curricular activities organized notably by churches, offering opportunities for gather experiences, have a community feeling and trips abroad. But now the present system is keeping churches at bay: Religion became a sensitive issue, but at the same time it takes opportunities away. It is a huge problem for working parents to organize something for these long periods. Since 1905 secularism, separation of religion and state is part of the system. As an answer to problems caused by bullying, and to give the opportunity to develop citizenship, the new government will introduce ethics, but ethics cannot be taught in a classroom. We would need such not traditional teaching framework that develops social competences.

As I've mentioned before the teaching framework of French schools is the traditional classroom setting, according to a pre-set timetable. European experiences show that a more flexible way of organizing teaching, a changing timetable (that might even harmonise with weather changes) is much more effective. In those countries where the schoolday consists of a variety of activities, where it's the students who have the initiative, teaching is more effective. What's more the wide variety of activities include the necessary physical activities. In most schools (and it is very similar in Hungarian schools I've visited in the past years) the architecture doesn't fit open space activities, but enough activity would be provided by a variety of methods used in the classroom.

We need a different viewpoint if we do not want to discipline children, but to improve the life chances of every individual

- *How do you evaluate students' achievement at school?*

- It is characteristic of French schools to have grading instead of evaluating. We are not evaluating the individual development of students, exploring their personal capabilities and developing them. We are giving schoolgrades instead, thus the goal is not a good output and personal development, but to get good grades. Grading is on the level of subjects, totally unsuitable for measuring competences.

The school system is not considering the so-called soft skills that can primarily be obtained by non-formal and informal learning, but inevitable for later work-success (communication, team work, decision making, organizational skills, self-esteem).

It is usual both at schools and in teacher training to have written tests. Even when recruiting principals there is a written-only competitive exam and the best get appointed.

- *What are the roots of the present system and why can't you change it?*

- The system was established in the 1880's when the most important role of the school system was to build a nation. The task of the system it was designed so as in each corner of the country the same material is taught to make people of Corsica or Bretagne the same French as Parisians. The was served by a unified, centralized curriculum. In 1905 secularization by a new law became an important issue, too.

This resulted in the formation of an elite that is absolutely homogeneous, they have the same school experiences and education. There is a narrower group on top of this elite, former students of the "best" public schools that give our politicians, top managers. It is not the interest of middle classes to change the system, they don't want to change the present homogenizing school as long as they don't need to face violence at school and unemployment later for their own children.

Another reason for the system not being altered is that we have very strong teachers' trade unions. They promote the stable and unchanged employment of teachers. Although only about 12% of teachers are members of a trade union – 5% in private schools – or the other, strikes and other forms of protest make changes nearly impossible.

All ministers try reforms but they usually fail. Since 1999, with some French colleagues, we have met all Ministers of Education or their Cabinets, trying to influence their decisions. We were satisfied, as the former conservative government has introduced in 2005 a new Law that would make the system more European. Our present socialist government is more effected by trade unions so the continuation of the changes is questioned. The Sárközy-government gave some possibility to principals to evaluate their teachers and one of the first decisions made by the socialists was to take this right away. Every minister of education introduces a brand new Law that is foolish, it is happening now spending month with debate – they want to replace the present Europe-conform law one called "Rebuilding schools" which, hopefully, doesn't mean going back to the past!

- *According to EU recommendations the development of 8 key competences is necessary to keep Europe's competitiveness, and the success of school systems is measured by not only statistical data but also by measuring these competences. How has the French system included the development of these competences into the curriculum?*

- Competences are officially part of the national curriculum since 2007, but four of the eight key competences are transversal and need co-operation of subject teachers. In the French system they train single subject teachers, the emphasis is on subject matter. So teachers are not really trained to develop competences. The French curriculum neglects maybe the most important of the eight, "learning to learn", the competence inevitable for lifelong learning. It is characteristic of the whole system that is supposed to individualize but is not able to "personalize". When preparing the curriculum they consider the 'average student'. A young colleague and friend of mine, 96-year-old André de Peretti usually tells people that if there was such an average student he/she would be on display in Sévres, at the location of the International Bureau of Weights and Measures. Since such a student does not exist, we cannot

see him/her at the museum. Another key competence, “initiative and entrepreneurship” is modified to initiative and autonomy, the term “entrepreneurship” is taboo. In order to make school suitable for different students, we need professional principals with a vision. There are three different sorts of principalship according to their role: the administrator is doing things, the management-type does the things right and the school leader is doing the right things. Students and parents need the third one! There are no results without a leader who is chosen professionally, because of his/her ability to motivate teachers and students to higher performance and to demonstrate the ethos of lifelong learning.

- *What are the statistical results of the French school system?*

- It is the result of the uniform and not personalized school system that in France the rate of early school leavers is very high: 150.000 per year (about 13%) leave school at the age of 16 without any qualification (*Hungary subscribed to change this rate to 10% by 2020, according to the last official statistical data it was 11% in 2011*) It is also EU requirement that 50% of students go to higher education (master degree). It was 27% in France in 2010 (*in Hungary the rate increased from 25% to 35% in 10 years by 2011*). A third criteria in Europe that French students don't meet is the knowledge of Mathematics, sciences, technology and ICT, so we have very few engineers and technical professionals. Our best students have the opportunity to go abroad – families can pay - , they are not staying in France but others miss competences in foreign languages. The fate of people is decided on early, it is social requirement that you have to be at your best at the age of 22. The world doesn't work like that anymore, we have to learn and develop ourselves till the end of our life.

- *Alert Education, your advisory company is relied on all around Europe in important education issues. What advise would you give Hungarian education policy makers and stakeholders as a European education expert and politician?*

- To be honest I don't really understand why centralisation came in focus. You have rather recently decided to join the EU, a democratic structure promoting democracy. You can only raise citizens of a democracy in a democratic school, where decisions are made together with students and parents who can count on the support of well-prepared professionals, trained in human resources, finance, school ethos, curriculum and evaluation. If you add, ICT and the capacity to develop relationships with business world and international partners, then you can say it is a big challenge!

Teaching professions, as all other professions like engineering, medicine, etc. will all be more challenging in the 21st century. We need the best educators and to promote innovation, we all have to take risks. It is useless to look in the rearview mirror: benchmarking is useful but it begins with identifying your own problems and then learn from the best.