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European parents for 21st century careers and competences

One of the most delicate parental tasks is to guide your child or children towards further education and possible successful career pathways, avoiding traps such as trying to fulfil your own unaccomplished dreams in your child or following fashionable trends instead of looking for the right pathways. This is an area where parents, their association, teachers, other professionals and other players, especially the media, have a major responsibility to collaborate and thus try to minimise risks and possible harm. Career guidance literally starts in cradle while skills and competences development should continue until the grave for most in today's and tomorrow's reality. This paper is aiming at exploring current research evidence, policy recommendations and inspiring practice in Europe and beyond. This is analysed from a rights-based perspective, with equal focus on the rights of the child and rights of parents, based on the work of the European Parents' Association.

The apropos of the article is that the European Parents' Association held its annual conference¹ in November 2017 under the auspices of the Estonian Presidency of the European Union on career guidance and suitable individual learning pathways for today's children, with special focus on counterbalancing the bias towards university education by the media, education policy and consequently very often by parents, too. The representatives of parents' associations and students, VET providers, career guidance services and school heads participating at the conference looked at ways of home-school cooperation in career guidance, transversal skills for well-being, future life success and lifelong learning with special focus on entrepreneurship, and the role of parents and parents' associations to improve the image of vocational secondary education and non-university tertiary education to help people understand that for most people it has always been and will always be a first and best choice.

The EU has realised the importance of building a knowledge-based society back in 2000², and in 2010 set the headline target that 40% of the younger generations should have a tertiary degree by 2020³. On the way – while the legal basis has not changed, but the university lobby has become very influential – the European Commission started to interpret tertiary education as higher education⁴, but we must keep the original intention and regulations in mind: parents should aim at supporting all children to finish secondary education and as many of them as possible to obtain a tertiary degree, be it a vocational, post-secondary or higher education one, that can ensure easy access to the labour market.

Meanwhile we should not forget that even if Europe manages to achieve the above goal, still nearly 2/3 of young people will have to successfully start their lives having the right secondary education, cognitive and transversal skills as well as the spirit of initiative. Parents and professional educators have a crucial role – individually and together - in supporting young people in finding their own pathways, be in a secondary vocational education or a PhD, help them to lose the least possible time with useless studies and find their way to a happy life.

This needs a very conscious parental approach to guidance as well as a well-established professional support system available for families. To provide the latter is a basic obligation of all governments in

¹ <http://europeanparents.blogspot.hu/2017/11/suitable-pathways-conference-report.html>

² http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/europe-2020-indicators>

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/europe-2020-strategy_en

Europe, as they are all signees of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that obliges governments to support parents in their parenting duties in ways they need it⁵. In a recent survey about people's opinion about vocational education and training by CEDEFOP, people were asked if they had received professional guidance support before making decisions⁶. While nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of vocational students had received information about their choices of upper secondary pathways before making decisions, less than half of those in general secondary education make this choice being informed.

Parents face a bigger than ever challenge when guiding their children towards their future careers. On the one hand it is aiming at immediate or near future success, namely immediate employment after graduation, there is a need to also think about long-term success. While most successful member of the current parent generation is practically retraining themselves for a new job about every seven year, even if the majority of people do not realise this, they cannot expect a less demanding lifelong learning situation for their children. It is becoming common knowledge, that 65% of children who are at primary school today are likely to end up in jobs that do not exist today⁷, and they are likely to have to transition to yet newer ones throughout their future careers.

School systems established for a very different reality in past centuries do not seem to cater for this need for the masses. In the majority of school systems in Europe academic content focus, teaching centred methodology and general approaches to children's learning are still in place, with more and more focus on standardised testing. This discourse is highly influenced by PISA results. While there is no country that cannot benefit from public debate on education, and PISA seems to be a starting point for mass media to tackle the topic, academics and stakeholder groups alike are pushing for shifting the focus either of PISA or from PISA to highlight skills and competences for the abovementioned future more. One well-known criticism of the system is an open letter by leading academics⁸, published in 2014 emphasises that the most important educational achievements are not measurable by standardised tests like PISA. This is reinforced by reports of surveying employers about skills and competences they are looking for in their young employees. Conscious parents become concerned understanding that it is not or not only academic achievements that are the way to immediate success, but skills that are called transversal or soft or 21st century skills, but generally cover what is high on this list by employers: critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, teamwork among them⁹.

In 2015, celebrating 30 years of being the sole representative of parents in Europe, the European Parents' Association (EPA) reviewed its policy and activities to formulate a list of necessary measures in order to provide our children with an upbringing that ensures that they become responsible 21st century European citizens and reach their full potential for a happy and fulfilling life¹⁰. According to the EPA Manifesto 2015 this requires that the EU and national governments provide equitable (and not equal) and inclusive opportunities in education for children and their parents - the topic EPA dedicates the year 2018 to. The review had been done on the basis of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and calls for measures especially in the fields of creating a 21st century education system, active citizenship and participation, digital literacy, supporting and endorsing parenting and parenting skills, and balancing work and family life.

⁵ Article 18 https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&lang=en

⁶ <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/5562>

⁷ McLeod, Scott and Karl Fisch, "Shift Happens", <https://shifthappens.wikispaces.com>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/may/06/oecd-pisa-tests-damaging-education-academics>

⁹ <http://reports.weforum.org/future-of-jobs-2016/>

¹⁰ <http://europeanparents.blogspot.hu/2015/12/epa-celebrated-30-years-of-being-voice.html>

In Manifesto 2015¹¹, based on the axiom of parents being solely responsible for educating their children, in the format of their choice, to become lifelong learners and active citizens, helping them in their harmonious development physically, morally and intellectually, and that challenges of the 21st century in the field of employability need an aptitude for learning, the ability to embrace change and entrepreneurial/intrapreneurial skills, organised parents demand a number of policy and practice changes, shifting focus towards competence and skills development in formal education among them.

Subsequently, in 2017 organised parents supported the so-called Smart Indicators for Education developed by New Education Forum (NEF)¹², an initiative by the Centre for Innovative Education as fully resonated with the demands parents have formulated recently and address the issues that concern responsible parents all over Europe. Its approach that emphasises the important role the EU and its institutions must play in the major paradigm shift towards an education that can give answers to major demands of the 21st century and help fundamentally reforming outdated education systems resonates with concerned parents all over Europe. Parents claim that the EU is not rich enough to finance the long-term consequences of school systems that do not have solutions, thus creating environmental and health problems, unemployment, lack of participation in society and growth of extremism.

Since there is a general belief among organised parents that decisions are best made as close to the people, children as possible, it is desirable to have subsidiarity in place with focus on municipality level to carry out universally agreed goals involving all major stakeholders - in the case of education first of all children, their parents and professional educators. When designing and implementing new education, policy makers not only need to stick to the principle of 'nothing about them without them' in the case of children, but also to 'nothing about us, parents, and our children without us' acknowledging that the primary responsibility for educating children is with the parents – as stated in the UNCRC¹³.

It is very important to start introducing this topics of sustainability and environment in early childhood education, and starting in formal provisions is too little too late. Education for sustainability should start as early as possible. It is crucial to empower families, especially young parents, in order to introduce environmentally conscious home practices. Early education done by the parents in the first 1-3 life-years is absolutely crucial, so there is a need to focus on this age group, too, making all professionals working with young families (paediatricians, district nurses, social workers, etc.) aware of their role and responsibility in it¹⁴. Even career guidance start at this age segment, often with unconscious gender bias (like the example introduced by the BBC recently¹⁵) and reinforcing gender stereotypes. Family example is and will always be the major driver behind later career choices, and parents need to be aware of this.

Active citizenship starts at home, and it also starts in early childhood with the introduction of participatory parenting practices. For this, parents need support and training. As many parents and teachers come from a different culture, we also need to make kindergarten/school the training ground for participatory democracy, where children, teachers and parents learn this practice together, having responsibilities for their decisions, but in an ultimate safe environment where wrong decisions have no grave consequences, but you experience the downside of opting out.

¹¹ <http://euparents.eu/manifesto-2015/>

¹² <http://ciedu.eu/the-new-education-forum-2017/>

¹³ Article 5 and Article 18 https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&lang=en

¹⁴ <http://euparents.eu/best-interest-young-child/>

¹⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/magazine-40936719/gender-specific-toys-do-you-stereotype-children>

Implementing a whole school approach, highlighted by EC policy messages in 2016¹⁶ is the best to-date to involve stakeholders, helping them to take ownership of the school and of their own learning.

It is extremely important to also provide adequate support to special education needs and disabled students either in the form of accessible and safe environment for them, or by dedicated supporting staff and specialised teachers. This is crucial to provide a really diverse and inclusive education to all and for students to experience the full diversity scale of society. The Education for All¹⁷ initiative by UNESCO highlighted this as a crucial element. It also requires schools to become community learning spaces¹⁸ where the whole local community can learn and also educate nearly 24/7.

Children deserve to get childhood back, and thus playful approaches are very much welcome. It is also the best basis for lifelong learning, playfulness helps it become second nature as it makes learning enjoyable and satisfactory while being more effective than other forms of learning¹⁹. Learning best happens in the state of flow²⁰ research shows, and it happens in the case of the right mix of challenge and joy.

Inclusion in education is necessary for cradle-to-grave lifelong learning to become natural in Europe. A good tool to evaluate the inclusiveness of institutions against another set of indicators is the Indicators of Inclusion²¹ developed this year by NESET.

Education, a joint effort of the home, the community, non-formal providers and formal education, should aim at every child to reach their full potential as described eg. by the Learning for Well-Being Framework²². For this, there is a need to fundamentally reform curricula, to make them mainly focus on skills rather than mostly academic content. It is the joint responsibility of professional educators, policy makers and parents' organisations to help parents understand why it is in the best interest of their children.

There is a need to introduce an equitable²³ approach to education and ensure that every child and also adults have access to provisions best for that individual. Access should never be restricted by financial constraints, so there is a need for adequate funding for all forms of education – be it formal or informal, state, church or private – according to the joint choice of children and parents. This is the only way to provide children with the right education for them – a basic right ensured by the UNCRC.

This also means the need to introduce a holistic approach to education²⁴, ending subject and segregation, for all learning to be endorsed and validated, and for schemes that acknowledge learning outside of school, especially education at home by the parents. This is a trend the 2015 Rethinking Education publication of UNESCO²⁵ that is promoting an approach that considers education a common good. It goes beyond the long-established, but often debated notion of public good, and calls for an approach that supports education for all that is for a common good, regardless its form, way or even financing.

¹⁶ Schools policy – A whole school approach to tackling early school leaving, European Commission 2016

¹⁷ http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/single-view/news/equal_right_equal_opportunity_inclusive_education_for_a/

¹⁸ see Case Study from Latvia in https://issuu.com/epnos/docs/deliverable_3-3_epnosl_case_studies

¹⁹ <http://www.legofoundation.com/it-it/who-we-are/learning-through-play>

²⁰ <https://www.learning-theories.com/flow-csikszentmihalyi.html>

²¹ <http://nesetweb.eu/en/library/structural-indicators-for-inclusive-systems-in-and-around-schools/>

²² <http://l4wb.org/index.html#/en/we-promote/page/a-framework>

²³ <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/equity-education-europe>

²⁴ <http://scholar-base.com/homeschooling-educational-trend/>

²⁵ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002325/232555e.pdf>

For both short and long term reasons, policy makers and educators – both professionals and parents – need to make efforts to change the public opinion²⁶ on vocational education in order to stop seeing it as a second choice and making VET pathways an equal choice²⁷ to academic pathways. This should be the choice of at least 2/3 of the population and they must feel themselves first class citizens.

At the same time all stakeholders are also responsible for ensuring vocational pathways to provide skills development, up-to-date professional knowledge and fosters aptitude for learning throughout life²⁸. Career guidance and vocational education need to promote entrepreneurial spirit and new forms of employment. This is also crucial to ensure current and future parents can balance work and family life better²⁹.

As mentioned before, policy makers, professionals and parents need to work together to move away from a culture of standardised testing and towards a focus on developing skills, especially transversal ones. School leaders should leverage their autonomy (and fight for it if it is not a-given) in order to introduce and maintain an educational offer aiming at the improvement of soft/transversal/life skills, encourage their students to take advantage of it and help parents to understand and endorse their importance.

Embracing and exploiting digital opportunities as well as introducing digital practices as early as possible should be part of it. Children and adults need to learn to safely navigate in the digital world and we should stop believing that it is possible to create some kind of safe parallel digital highway for minors³⁰.

Up-to-date skills also mean there is a need for up-to-date validation, certification and acknowledgement of skills regardless of the settings they had been acquired at – be them formal, non-formal or informal³¹.

Inclusion of ALL parents and ALL children as well as all professionals in reforming education and operating the revamped systems is crucial for success. But it cannot happen without investing in empowering each stakeholder group for this role, and developing skills, especially for democratic participation, taking responsibility and managing challenges. Different stakeholder groups also need to learn to acknowledge and appreciate other stakeholders. This can only happen if we can make sure everybody is included, appreciated and thus participate.

In order to be successful in reforming education and implementing smart and suitable practices for future well-being and life-success we need to set SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely) goals. There are many initiatives on international, European, national, regional and local levels around education that have a balanced approach, having equal focus on the well-being, the active citizenship and the employability aspects, but we are far from a consensus, especially since – as mentioned before – success here is nearly impossible to measure by using simple tools, and nearly impossible to have measurably changes within one parliamentary term, the measurement unit of many politicians. Thus, it is also very important to have companies and academics on board when designing and implementing changes as they do not usually have that kind of time constrain and thus it is easier for them to have more strategic approaches. Parents are their most natural allies, as it often only needs a change of position: most employers, employees, academics and professional educators are or were also parents.

²⁶ <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/it/publications-and-resources/publications/5562>

²⁷ https://www.csreurope.org/sites/default/files/uploads/first_policy_proposal_final.pdf

²⁸ www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5131_en.pdf

²⁹ <http://euparents.eu/balancing-work-and-family-life/>

³⁰ <http://euparents.eu/position-paper-on-cyberbullying-and-social-networks-2/>

³¹ <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>

Organised parents in Europe: The **European Parents' Association** (EPA) gathers the parents associations in Europe and thus reaches out to more than 150 million parents through its network. EPA works in partnership both to represent and give to parents a powerful voice in the development of policies and decisions at European level affecting the lives of parents and their children. In the field of education, EPA promotes and works for the active participation of parents and the recognition of their central role as the primary educators and those responsible of the education of their children.

EPA supports the participation and collaboration of parents in many educational respects by:

- gathering and disseminating information;
- highlighting and supporting innovation in educational partnership;
- promoting parents' ongoing support and training;
- supporting research.

Current and recent education EPA projects are aiming at supporting parental engagement focusing on the following fields:

- 21st century parenting;
- active citizenship and participation;
- rights of the child and rights of parents;
- equity and inclusion - with special focus on migrants, special needs and disabilities;
- multilingualism;
- participatory leadership;
- stakeholder cooperation - focusing on parental engagement, child participation, school head and teacher training;
- safety and confidence in the digital world;
- educational success of children;
- lifelong learning of parents;
- STEM education;
- early childhood development.

More information on the EPA website: euparents.eu