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Interview with MEP Sabine Verheyen

By Simona Mihalca

1. Let us get really into the subject. What would you say are the most worrying problems of the European educational system?

The EU has only very limited competences in the area of education policy. In the educational sector, the European Union institutions only play a supporting role. The EU is contributing to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States, by promoting the mobility of citizens, designing joint study programmes, establishing networks and exchanging best practices as well as information the European Union.

In most Member States, education and training are facing a difficult situation (missing plans for structural reforms, insufficient financing, etc.) at the moment. Even at EU-level, the importance given to education and training is not really reflected in the budget priorities of the Union. Nevertheless, for the period of 2014-2020 a budget of 14.8 billion has been assigned to the programme Erasmus+. The budget was significantly increased compared to the previous programme period of 2007-2013.

The Commission's task will be to make sure that these funds have real impact on the education and training systems in Europe. However, this is only possible with the help of the Member States that have to design a strategy for education with clear, concrete and measureable targets, milestones for each educational level and age-group as well as specific time-frames for implementation with tools for monitoring progress.

Also other challenges such as demographic changes, new forces in the global competition and sustainable development do affect the educational systems and need to be considered. Europe has to deal with extremely high youth unemployment, a new age structure, a reduction in the working age population and a higher share of people at retirement age. To overcome the social and econo-

mic consequences of these evolutions is a key challenge for European politics and not least for the educational systems.

Personally, I am committed to the German dual training system and believe it is a recipe of success. Dual training can surely contribute to tackle youth unemployment, to counteract skills shortage and is essential for the technical and handicraft positions as well as for Europe's future. Further, I believe that Master craftsman training contributes to the stability of the European labour market. That Germany has the lowest unemployment rate among young people (only 8%) is due to these systems.

2. If you could instantly change education laws and platforms across Europe, what would you do first?

The most urgent task for the coming years would be to close the gap between political demands and the amount of resources made available, if Europe is seriously trying to maintain global leadership in the field of education and training.

In addition to this major challenge, a number of other issues need to be addressed, including

- ensuring a high quality of education and training at all levels and the reduction of regional differences with the clear goal to achieve excellence;
- ensuring a contemporary teacher training, for example by placing greater value on the education of teachers and the acquisition of new skills;
- the promotion of modern curricula and teaching methods with a clear emphasis on skills development and independent thinking rather than pure knowledge transfer;
- the reduction of discrepancy between available skills and the needs of the labour market, for example by intensifying the dialogue between politics, educational institutions and economy, without, however, aligning the education exclusively to the needs of the economy;
- the internationalization of European (university) education, and not only through the improvement of trans-European and international mobility of students and university staff, but also by other possible measures (developing and promoting open-access teaching and learning materials, distance learning, more joint degrees etc.);
- better and close cooperation between schools and companies, foster entrepreneurship and close the gap between theory and practice.

3. How do you think that teachers should prepare in order to assume that post?

Teachers do need high-quality education and an adequate and eligible university degree in order to be prepared for their position. Teacher education should be an ongoing process, from initial teacher training over early career support and continuous professional development. This continuum of teacher education helps teachers confront challenges in their classrooms, at school and system level. Furthermore, with high-quality education I am not exclusively referring to academic education, I also advocate entrepreneurial and social competences. Creativity, dealing with unforeseen events, being able to plan and working independently are abilities which do belong to entrepreneurial spirit. Those skills, as well as knowledge about corporate activities are essential nowadays and need hence to be transmitted to our teachers in order for them to be able to teach it to the next generation. Teacher training is high on the political agenda in many countries and reforms are generally both targeted to meet the challenges encountered and in line with the recommendations made in the EU documentation.

4. What is your opinion on the lifelong learning initiative (LLL)? At this point in age, what can we do in order to eradicate illiteracy?

The term „Lifelong learning“ comprises all the different kinds of learning that a person might experience during his or her lifetime. Everything that builds knowledge and creates new qualifications and competences are included here. The learning might take place in your personal life, in civic endeavours, in your social commitments and in the workplace. Adult education and lifelong learning are not only important for the personal development of people and their social and civic participation, but also for keeping their employability high in a world of constant change. For this reason, the EPP supports the renewed European Agenda for Adult Education, which was passed in 2011 by the Council of Ministers for Education. The agenda drafts guidelines for cooperation up to and including 2020. The central concern in the agenda is the issue of raising participation in adult education to at least 15 percent, until 2020. At present, only 9.3 percent of all adults in the EU participate in adult education. In comparison, the participation rate for further education in Germany is 49 percent. Next to the agenda, the EPP strongly supports the new EU programme Erasmus+. The budget for the programme, currently at 14.8 billion Euros, will also support transnational measures in adult education until 2020. This includes mobility projects – in order to enable experience exchanges for adult education staff.

Lifelong learning is a key driver for growth and employment. This educational ideology is based on the conviction throughout society that everybody has a democratic right to learn, educate and develop him or herself. This conforms to some extent with the European view on learning competence. That education is a very good way to move forward if you are redundant or between jobs is self-evident. We are aware that if we fail to invest in human resources and adopt a lifelong learning approach in order to be competitive and cohesive, there will be no sustainable, long-lasting development. It is essential that we ensure that the skills required for new jobs, not just in the IT sector but also for creativity, active citizenship and entrepreneurship education, are continually updated and that university, research and business, knowledge partnerships' are encouraged.

Illiteracy is a complex problem and it needs to be addressed with a holistic approach. First of all, it is known that enlightenment regarding this problem is lacking and that the fact that social follow-up costs are very high is often overlooked. It is hence essential that more attention and alert will be given to that subject matter.

A very important measure is prevention: e.g. reducing the number of early school leavers, since it can be assumed that a large proportion of people without any school-leaving qualification have significant deficiencies in the literacy and numeracy skills.

I believe we need further actions that could help Member States to perform better in this area in the future. The different policy responses taken by EU countries to address early school leavers are informed by many values and perspectives, as well as being influenced by the history and traditions of the Member State concerned. Furthermore, each individual early school leaver has a unique history and finds him/herself in a specific context (leaving school early is typically caused by a cumulative process of disengagement as a result of personal, social, economic, geographical, education or family-related reasons). Responses to early school leaving therefore need to be tuned and tailored. For these reasons there is no single response to early school leaving and a kaleidoscope of policies, programmes, projects and approaches have been found across the Member States. Thus, preventive measures, aiming to tackle early school leaving, are typically more cost-effective than reintegration measures. We need policies and measures providing support in particular to young

people who are at risk by identifying individuals, groups of individuals, schools or neighbourhoods with a higher risk of drop-out.

In order to fight already existing illiteracy among Europe the principle of lifelong learning is a key driver.

We need to encourage people of all ages to consider educational offers. As already mentioned before, the renewed European Agenda for adult education is focused exactly on the issue of raising participation. Also, an advanced course catalogue with inexpensive offers for different age groups and specially trained teachers to help properly with reading and writing difficulties are essential among educational institutions in Europe. Therefore more resources need to be allocated since funds are currently insufficient.

Sabine Verheyen

has been a MEP for the German Christian Democrats (CDU) since 2009. She is coordinator for the EPP in the European Parliament's culture and education committee and a substitute member in the internal market and consumer protection committee. She focuses in particular on media policy, intellectual property and digital agenda issues. She took part in the conciliation committee on the telecom package and has been a member of the European Parliament's annual delegation to the Internet Governance Forum since 2009. As former mayor of Aachen (1999 to 2009) she focuses additionally on issues that are of relevance to the local authorities.

One other possible way to help fighting illiteracy amongst all age groups are mobility projects in adult education for organized learning or teaching stays. Such mobility projects include training courses or teaching purposes. The projects are organized by adult education institutions (e.g. adult education centers, associations, church organizations, etc.). Also, volunteering work within the educational sector offers various options for people of any age to learn how to read and write.

5. Are you in favour of an educational revolution over a natural development and growth?

I believe a balance between educational reforms and the natural development and growth is needed. Education and training need to be designed to fit to young people's needs as well as to the labour market. Therefore, the comprehensive package of policy initiatives on education and employment for young people in Europe

called „Youth on the Move“ is part of the Europe 2020 strategy and a very important measure. „Youth on the Move“ aims to improve young people's education and employability, to reduce high youth unemployment and to increase the youth-employment rate across Europe. Besides being an engine for economic growth, education also needs to serve the development of personality. Young people need to develop their full potential and all Member States should work together to make this possible.

6. Have you ever been involved in any volunteer projects? What do you think is their biggest merit?

Yes, in many. I do obtain numerous memberships and sponsorships of non-profit organizations and voluntary associations. For example, I am a member of the advisory board of the donations for CARITAS KINDERHILFE, chairwoman of the association of RAA - Regional job center for children

from immigrant backgrounds and patroness of the Cystic Fibrosis self-help organization, whose members have already visited me in Brussels. Also, the traditions in my constituency mean a lot to me. Hence, I am supporting several cultural associations as the Foundation for Music and Culture St. Severin, the Franco-German Cultural Institute Aachen and the Association for the Promotion of the Aachen Carnival Children. Besides the carnival, I am also promoting another important tradition in Aachen, the equestrian sport. I am member in the Horse Charity e.V. and in the Aachen-Laurensberger Rennverein e.V.

There are several merits for volunteer work: Volunteering has a meaningful, positive impact on your community but also has many benefits for the volunteers. **Volunteering is ultimately about helping others and having an impact on people's wellbeing.**

Thus, it is a great way to connect with your community and give a little back. As a volunteer, you certainly return to society some of the benefits that society gives you. Volunteering is also the perfect vehicle to develop new skills, to connect with a community and broaden the network. By meeting a diverse range of people, communication and interpersonal skills will be enhanced and one gets life experience and inspiration. Volunteering can boost career options and credibility and could give an edge when it comes to finding a new job. Also, if one is thinking of a career change then volunteering is a perfect way to explore new fields, to expand the work portfolio and to gain a real insight into a chosen path.

I believe volunteering is a very rich and useful experience and a chance for intercultural enrichment. This engagement, in all areas of social life, is also an expression of active citizenship and therefore essential for the development of the values of democracy and solidarity as well as of European identity.

We have integrated the European Voluntary Service into Erasmus+, so that young people now have the opportunity to try to work in other countries, without sacrificing pay and social security. It is time that volunteering, also with regard to professional qualifications, is upgraded. Supporting voluntary activities of young people by expanding the number of volunteer centers, facilitate volunteering by removing obstacles, raising awareness of the value of volunteering and recognizing volunteering as an important form of non-formal education, is very important and needs to be continued.



7. When hiring people in your team, have you ever taken into consideration whether the applicant had been a volunteer?

Yes, this is an integral part of the general assessment.

8. What do you understand by non-formal education? How important is it in the educational system of a country or region?

Non-formal education is any organized educational activity that takes place outside the formal educational system. Usually it is flexible, learner-centered, contextualized and uses a participatory approach. Non-formal education and learning have again and again proven to be effective in helping people to find approaches and solutions to overcome disadvantage they possibly experience and to become active and constructive contributors to the development of their communities and society as a whole. Furthermore, the development of non-formal learning opportunities can be seen as a measure to tackle the problem of early school leaving in European countries. The most important task that non-formal education has to fulfil today is certainly our united responsibility for the society that we all share. Through non-formal education people with very different interests and background get a chance to meet and talk with each other. These are good meetings where people get time to reflect and share views, which is immensely important for democracy.

The political strategy “Europe 2020”, which was proposed by the European Commission, should contribute to employment, productivity and social coherence in Europe. At the same time, the EU wants to accompany the economic growth – which is visible since 2010 – with reforms created to secure a sustainable development for the upcoming decade. Against this background, non-formal and informal learning, especially for underprivileged and unemployed people – or for people at the brink of unemployment – is very important. Through the validation of their participation in non-formal education, their access to the job market is improved. Qualified employees, at the same time, foster growth and further employment across Europe. For this reason, non-formal adult education has a facilitating function within the EU market – in the sense of securing economic growth. Promoting non-formal and informal learning will continue to be subject to the EU. It appears that non-formal education can provide basic skills in particular to those people, who in formal learning settings can record only few learning successes.

Within Erasmus+, “Youth in Action” is the part of the European programme for all young people in the field of non-formal and informal education. With the EU youth strategy, all EU countries have agreed to improve by 2018 the situation of young people significantly. One of the points is to promote voluntary activity for young people a lot more. The recognition of non-formal learning is one of Germany’s priorities in implementing the EU Youth Strategy on a national level.

Education - formal or non-formal - remains primarily the competence of national government and their regions.

9. In your opinion, could there ever be a unified education system across Europe? Should we look behind our borders in order to do that?

Education systems across Europe are very diverse, they follow different traditions, policies, programmes, projects and approaches across the Member States. I do hence not believe in a unified education system, but I do believe that we should learn from each other and exchange our best

practices. As for volunteering, I believe it must also be possible across borders. The European Skills Passport will help to make skills and qualifications more transparent and comparable and thus enable people to work without bureaucratic hindrance also in another EU country.

10. A lot is being said about non-formal education, yet there are many schools and systems where there is no such thing. How can each of us help in that direction?

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning is an important measure. Non-formal and informal learning is one of the foundations of the EU programme Erasmus+. The Youthpass is a solid instrument of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. As in the previous programme, the Youth Pass will also be in Erasmus+ the tool of recognition in order to describe and confirm non-formal learning outcomes. The Youthpass for funded projects from Erasmus+ "Youth in Action" can be created on the portal of the Youthpass since August 2014. In a first step it will then be possible to use the Youthpass for youth exchanges, European voluntary service, for training courses, seminars or youth initiatives, which have been supported by Erasmus+ "Youth in Action". At a later stage also long-term processes should be documentable.

Non-formal education and quality youth work have a strong innovation potential and more should be invested in this. Further work must be done on the recognition of non-formal education. Each of us can help promoting or organizing possibilities of non-formal education, e.g. to schools, associations, universities or directly to pupils, parents or to students.

11. Would you be in favour of students receiving extra credits in schools and universities for their extra-curricular activities?

This is an interesting approach since credits might enhance the motivation for participation and, at the same time, acknowledge the extra efforts. Still, what needs to be considered is: credits should always be connected to activities with an academic relevance, to clearly defined learning outcomes and criteria for assessment. Also they should be limited and meet certain, pre-defined standards in order to make them comparable to other attainments. Such credits could be accrued for example to research-based or curriculum-related work undertaken in vacations (like structured internships) or for approved extra-curricular courses (run for example by Humanities or the Business School) during term time.

12. What would you say are the most important skills one should look to develop through volunteering or non-formal education? (e.g.: teamwork, project management, leadership, NLP, etc.)

Leadership skills, such as planning projects, managing time, motivating individuals, giving feedback and building teams, are definitely important skills one can develop through volunteering. These skills, often termed 'soft skills', are considered to be very important for successful business leaders. Volunteerism develops and improves these and other critical business skills, such as problem solving, coaching and communicating effectively.

While working side by side with others from very diverse backgrounds, you will develop interpersonal skills. In a professional workplace, the ability to interact with others is important to advancement. Through volunteering, you learn how to handle not only different types of people but also different situations. You will learn the value of diversity, strong communication, mutual respect, shared planning, cooperation and working towards common goals.

Volunteers learn to plan effective meetings, organize events and coordinate other volunteers. Through planning an event, you learn how to set goals, define actions and track results. These planning and organization skills are transferrable through all career paths.

Also, communication skills will be improved. Clear, concise and organized communications are essential to almost all professional positions. Volunteer activities typically require you to communicate what you are doing and to persuade others to assist in your cause. Through practice, your communication skills will improve.

Furthermore, volunteering requires that you learn how to juggle your work, family and volunteer priorities. In order to maintain a reasonable balance, you learn how to manage your time.

Volunteering also allows you to grow your professional and personal network. It is a very social activity that allows you to interact with and meet many new people. You

will establish contacts and make friends who can introduce you to job leads, or provide recommendations for future employers. You will meet not only individuals sharing a common passion for an activity or cause but also individuals from very diverse backgrounds.

Last but not least volunteering is about “giving back” to others or a community some of the benefits you have received from society. This engagement, in all areas of social life, is also an expression of active citizenship and therefore essential for the development of the values of democracy and solidarity as well as of European identity.

13. What is your opinion on the proposed Finnish education reform? Do you think it is a good idea to replace teaching subjects with teaching topics? After all, they are indeed one of the most successful examples, achieving it all without homework or extreme normativity?



The integration of subjects and a holistic approach to teaching and learning are not new in Finland. Finnish education policy has been built upon periodic change and systemic leadership led by commonly accepted values and shared social vision that resonate closely with contemporary ideas of sustainable educational change.

Finland’s plan to add to the teaching of classic school subjects such as History, Mathematics or English, also broader, cross-cutting “topics” into the education such as the European Union, community and climate change, or 100 years of Finland’s independence, brings in multi-disciplinary modules on languages, geography, sciences and economics. Receiving a broader view on such topics while also being taught the „classical subjects“ can surely be enriching. For the teachers this might mean additional challenges and it still needs to be waited and seen how students’ test scores will develop. Regarding this point, educators in Finland support the idea that schools should teach what young people need in their lives rather than try to bring national test scores back to where they were. In this regard it is important to underline that Finnish education governance is highly decentralized, giving municipalities a significant amount of freedom to arrange schooling according to the local circumstances and needs. Thus, in this educational system such a reform might work well .