Education Research and Perspectives
An international journal

Volume 48, 2021, Pages 77-86
© The Graduate School of Education
The University of Western Australia

The European Schools

Ylenia Casadio†

The University of Western Australia

After World War II there was a push to reinvigorate the economies and industries of Western Europe, and to find methods to avoid the outbreak of more wars in the region. As a result, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was founded in 1952 (European Coal and Steel Community, 2016) an important step towards the full European Union (EU), led by the French bureaucrat and diplomat Jean Monnet (Jean Monnet, 2016). On the initiative of the officials of the ESCS, the European Schools (ES) system was established in Luxembourg in 1953 as a means of providing their children with an education in their mother tongue and with a similar curriculum to their home countries (Savvides, 2006b), leading to a European Baccalaureate which was recognized by all of the member states. Since that time, a total of 14 ES have been established in 7 different countries, financed and administered by the EU, and since 2005, a further 11 Accredited European Schools have been established which offer the same curricula and accreditation, but who are administered by the host nation (Schola Europea, n.d. a)

Background

The ES were established to serve both the practical aim of educating the children of officials of the European Institutions, but also as a means of fostering a multicultural and multilingual education, ultimately leading to the formation of “Europeans” (Beardsmore, 1993). This ethos is described clearly in the aims of the schools:

† Address for correspondence: Ylenia Casadio, The University of Western Australia, M428, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, Western Australia, 6009. Email ycasadio@gmail.com.

> Educated side by side, untroubled from infancy by divisive prejudices, acquainted with all that is great and good in the different cultures, it will be borne upon them as they mature that they belong together. Without ceasing to look to their own lands with love and pride, they will become in mind Europeans, schooled and ready to complete and consolidate the work of their fathers before them, to bring into being a united and thriving Europe (Jean Monnet, n.d. b)

The ES provide education from pre-primary through to the secondary level. They are based on a system in which students are enrolled in their principle or first language (e.g. English, French, German etc.), which is the language of instruction in all subjects (except for their second language) in primary school, and for their core subjects of Science, Mathematics, and their Language 1 (L1) in secondary school. As students progress through the years, further languages are added, and instruction in a second language is undertaken in other subjects, for example History and Geography (Schola Europea, n.d. c). The teachers in these schools must have language proficiency at least comparable to that of a native speaker. These characteristics set the ES apart from other "International Schools", in which the vast majority of instruction is in a single language, usually English (Beardsmore, 1993; Hayden & Thompson, 1997).

All of the subjects are based upon identical syllabi, except for the primary language (L1). Therefore, when students are studying Chemistry in the English L1 section, their Dutch L1 colleagues will be following an identical program but delivered in Dutch. Mixing of the different language streams occurs as the students meet in their L2 subjects, for example as the students from all language streams meet in their History class delivered in German. Further mixing occurs in the playground and common rooms, and a variety of methods are employed to ensure further interaction between the various language sections from social events and school excursions to a flagship program involving the Model European Council (MEC). The latter project is an inter-ES event hosted in a new city each year, whereby the students take up different roles ranging from

parliamentarians to journalists and various real-life proposals are debated and eventually signed into "law" (How MEC works, n.d.).

In many other respects, the ES operate just like any other typical high school in Australia, but there are a few differences worth mentioning. The final baccalaureate grades are determined by a formula comprised of 3 separate components, namely the C, W and O marks. The C mark (50% of final grade) is an average of the grades received by the student for their schoolwork during the year, including class work and school-based examinations. The W mark is the average of their five written standardised baccalaureate exams (35%), and the O mark (15%) is the average of their three oral baccalaureate exams. The oral examinations are not restricted to the languages, and may be taken in subjects such as history, geography, mathematics and the sciences. The questions for the written examinations are pooled and collated from submissions from teachers at the various European Schools, whereas the questions for the oral exams, randomly selected from a pool of questions on the day of the exam, are prepared by the student's own subject teacher, and are approved by an external examiner prior to their use (Schola Europea, n.d. c).

Passage from one grade into the next is far from assured at the ES, and the decision to promote or withhold a student is made during special meetings, held biannually, called 'Class Councils'. These meetings are attended by all of the teachers responsible for a given cohort, and a member of the schools direction, and each of the student's report cards are examined by the group, with comments sought on the content of the report card and future actions necessary to support the student if required. Finally, for those students who do not possess the minimum number of passing grades, a vote is taken to determine whether that student should be granted passage to the next year. A student may only repeat a year once, unless special permission is granted by the Principal (Schola Europea, n.d. c).

Achieving the Aims

The ES sets very lofty ambitions for the education and upbringing of a generation of "Europeans" that feel at home in a multicultural and multilingual environment. The students should feel that they are affectionate members of their home nation, whilst also feeling a highly developed sense of belonging to Europe. In this way, it is hoped that many of the prejudicial barriers and xenophobia that are present in a society can be overcome by the co-education of children from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Beardsmore, 1993; Bulwer, 1995; Savvides, 2008). The question remains as to how effective the Schools are in achieving these aims? Furthermore, do the students and the parents share these aims?

The ES can be considered a subset of the larger group of international schools, the definition of which is not straightforward (Hill, 2006). Indeed, Hill's attempt to characterise and compartmentalise the students and their schools into a spectrum from '(mono)national' to 'international' involves so many caveats and exceptions as to render precise categorisation practically impossible (Hill, 2006).

Interviews with students and teachers at a variety of ES back in 2008 indicated that, by and large, the students gained a feeling of togetherness, and were comfortable mixing with people of other linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Savvides, 2008). That effect was perhaps not unique to ES, with students at other international schools attaching comparable levels of importance to mixing with students of different nationalities and cultures (Hayden 1997). Both systems place emphasis on the understanding and appreciation of other countries and cultures, and it is encouraging to see that these efforts are reflected in the attitudes of the students (Savvides, 2008).

Teacher attitudes towards the European dimension of the aims of the schools can be somewhat mixed. For some time now we have known that generally, teachers feel that they are there to ensure high levels of academic achievement to students from a variety of European countries in their mother tongue, and that they don't feel

compelled or well placed to enhance their feeling of "Europeanness" (Savvides, 2006a, 2006b). Any enhancement of the students' self-perception of being European citizens has also been shown to largely be due to their mixing with students of a range of European backgrounds, and less to do with specific strategies employed by the school (Savvides, 2006a, 2006b).

From the parents' perspective, it is perhaps a little less clear as to whether they place a strong emphasis on the European aspect of the school, and are perhaps more concerned with academic success, usually taught in their own mother tongue. Certainly, my own experiences with parents at the ES in Strasbourg showed them to be interested in the usual aspects of school life, namely academic performance and behavioural issues, and less motivated by the European dimension of the school. One of the great motivators for parents at the school was the idea that by studying in a given language stream, there was a perception that the students would have a better chance of entering universities offering courses in those languages (i.e. students in the Anglophone section would be more likely to gain entrance to Universities in the UK or the US). Any development of young "Europeans" was perhaps seen as secondary, and little importance placed on it (Savvides, 2006a, 2006b).

The ability to speak more than one European language is one of the cornerstone outcomes expected of students at the ES. Indeed, this aspect is clearly appreciated by the students themselves, who place great importance on their ability to speak more than one language fluently, and in being in a multilingual environment, when compared to students at "International Schools" (Hayden & Thompson, 1997).

A study was conducted to compare the language acquisition of students in Canadian "French immersion" Schools versus students who took French, either as their first language, or as a vehicular language at the European School of Brussels. This study showed that, predictably, the students enrolled in the French L1 group of the ES performed the best in all categories, but also that, almost without

exception, the students from all language streams of the ES slightly outperformed their Canadian counterparts. This result is perhaps surprising given that the Canadian children received approximately 3 times as much instruction in French when compared to their ES counterparts (by the end of grade 8) (Beardsmore & Swain, 1985). At first glance, it seems that this shows that the ES system is extremely efficient in delivering good language outcomes, but the study was complicated by the fact that the Canadian school was public, and had students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, whereas the school in Brussels catered largely to the children of officials of the European Economic Community, and were thus of a relatively high socio-economic background. Also, the ES students were immersed in a largely French speaking city, with regular exposure to the language in everyday situations, which was not the case for the Canadian students, who lived in a primarily Anglophone environment outside of school. The authors came to the conclusion that in fact the extra language instruction largely compensated for the geographic and linguistic disadvantage of the Canadian students, and highlighted the important role that the external environment plays in the motivation and linguistic acquisition of students (Beardsmore, 1993; Beardsmore & Swain, 1985).

Problems with the European Schools

No schooling system is perfect, and indeed the ES suffer from their own fair share of problems, quite aside from any potential issues in delivering their aims as outlined above. These problems derive from a number of key sources, namely a general sense of exclusivity, a heavy emphasis on academic achievement, and difficulties with meeting their infrastructure and staffing needs (Kinstler, 2015). Whilst the Politico article paints a particularly alarmist view of a system in crisis, unable to meet the needs of its students, and even placing them in physical danger, it does raise some valid points which need to be addressed.

One of the major complaints that can be levelled at the ES is that they cater almost exclusively to students who are academically

inclined and seeking entrance into University courses after they graduate (Beardsmore, 1993). There is little to no support for students who seek or are more suited to other vocational pursuits, or even keen on athletic endeavours, and those who suffer from learning disabilities will receive little specialized help (Kinstler, 2015). Furthermore, from my own personal experience, serious issues can arise when students who are effectively forced out of the school due to a lack of academic progress can often find themselves in a situation where they are incapable of speaking the language of the country that they live in, and therefore are forced to enter into the local schooling system at year 11 or 12 level. Parents are often faced with the sobering reality of going home in order to allow their children to continue schooling in a suitable setting.

Staffing is a major concern for the ES, which will only become more acute as the Brexit situation unfolds (Palmeri, 2016). Currently, at least for the 14 Type 1 schools, each member of the EU sends teachers from their own national systems on secondment to the ES and pays their salaries accordingly. This is not true of the Associate Schools (of which Strasbourg was a member), who have to recruit teachers using more traditional methods. The former system suffers when the member states do not provide enough teachers, as is the case with Britain, and the latter suffers because they must be able to attract native language teachers on their own. Britain is an interesting example because, despite the aims of the schools to provide education in the students' own language, a large percentage of parents push for their children to be enrolled in the English (and to a lesser extent French or German) language sections at the expense of their own language, as they feel it would give their children academic and employment advantages later in life. Therefore, Britain felt that they were over subsiding the educational needs of the other EU members, and withdrew much of their support for the system (Palmeri, 2016; Savvides, 2006b). Despite the perhaps short-sighted nature of this decision, given the effective continuation of the linguistic and cultural hegemony in Britain's favour, it highlights the difficulty in trying to accommodate the aims of the schools with those of the students and parents within them. Furthermore, the usual oversight mechanisms that are present

in national schooling systems are difficult to enforce at the European level. It was seen as an open joke amongst the staff at the ES in Strasbourg when a French inspector would come to inspect an Anglophone teacher, as not only was there little comprehension taking place, the inspectors could only make recommendations. Clearly problems can, and surely do arise when professional practices and standards are not readily enforced.

Conclusion

The ES began as a means of educating the children of the newly minted group of 'Eurocrats' after World War II, and have grown enormously since then to encompass students, languages and cultures from all across the EU. They provide a unique and enriching schooling environment for students to experience a wide range of cultures and languages. They are very successful in producing young people who value multiculturalism and a European outlook, and who fit quite easily into different linguistic scenarios. Problems of exclusivity, an overly academic focus, and staffing and infrastructure issues are apparent at the schools, and these issues need to be addressed if the ES are to thrive, especially in the post-Brexit world of EU uncertainty. From a personal point of view, I think the ES offer a wonderful environment for children to grow linguistically and academically, and I sincerely hope that the schools overcome the challenges they face. As a microcosm of the EU, these schools offer great hope for a united and prosperous future.

References

Beardsmore, H. B. (1993). The European School Model. In H. B. Beardsmore (Ed.), *European models of bilingual education* (pp. 121-150). Clevedon, England: Multilungual Matter Ltd.

Beardsmore, H. B., & Swain, M. (1985). Designing bilingual education: Aspects of immersion and 'European school'

models. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 6*(1), 1-15.

Bulwer, J. (1995). European schools: Language for all? *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 16*(6), 459-475.

European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). (2016). In Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. Retreived from https://www.britannica.com/topic/European-Coal-and-Steel-Community

Hayden, M. C., & Thompson, J. J. (1997). Student perspectives on intenational education: a European dimension. *Oxford Review of Education, 23*(4), 459-478.

Hill, I. (2006). Student types, school types and their combined influence on the development of intercultural understanding. *Journal of Research in International Research, 5*(1), 5-33.

How MEC works. Retrieved from modeleuropeanparliament.blogspot.com.au

Jean Monnet. (2016). In *Encycopedia Britannica Online*. Retrieved from https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Monnet

Kinstler, L. (2015, September 7). The European School Crisis. *Politico*. Retrieved from http://www.politico.eu/article/european-schools-european-problems/

Palmeri, T. (2016, April 29). European School daze over Brexit fears. *Politico.* Retrieved from http://www.politico.eu/article/european-schools-brexit-fears-british-teachers-salaries-transferseu-kari-kivinen/

Savvides, N. (2006a). Comparing the promotion of European identity at three "European Schools': An analysis of teachers' perceptions. *Research in Comparative and International Education, 1*(4), 393-402.

Savvides, N. (2006b). Developing a European identity: A case study of the European School at Culham. *Comparative Education, 42*(1), 113-129.

Savvides, N. (2008). The European dimension in education. *Journal of Research in International Education, 7*(3), 304-326.

Schola Europea - Office of the Secretary-General of the European Schools (n.d. a). Schola Europea - Background. Retrieved from http://www.eursc.eu/en/European-Schools/background

Schola Europea - Office of the Secretary-General of the European Schools (n.d. b). Schola Europea - Principle and Objectives. Retrieved from http://www.eursc.eu/en/European-Schools/principles

Schola Europea - Office of the Secretary-General of the European Schools (n.d. c). Schola Europea - Organisation of Studies. Retrieved from http://www.eursc.eu/en/European-Schools/studies-certificates/studies-organisation