

„A Tsunami in Education“: Interview mit Xavier Prats-Monné

Anlässlich der Konferenz des Bundesministeriums für Bildung und Forschung "Berufliche Bildung in Europa – Perspektiven für die junge Generation", traf *ad hoc* den stellvertretenden Generaldirektor für Bildung der Europäischen Kommission, Xavier Prats-Monné, 57, zu einem Gespräch im Hotel Maritim am Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. Der fröhliche Katalane sprach mit *ad hoc* über die europäische Dimension der Bildung, Tsunamis, Don Quijote und *Entrepreneurship Education*.

ad hoc: *You are here in Berlin for a conference on vocational education organized by the German Ministry of Education and six other EU member states. – what exactly is the Commission's interest?*

Xavier Prats-Monné: Our interest here, apart from being invited by a member state, is a broader one: We want to give a European dimension to education and youth employment. There is actually a problem of skills mismatches.

ad hoc: *You mean mismatches between what you learn at school and what you have to deliver on the labor market?*

Prats-Monné: Not just that. We currently have youth unemployment rates of 23% in the EU, with 55% in Greece and Spain, which means five and a half million young people unemployed. This is really staggering. At the same time, you have two million unfilled jobs in the EU, especially in the health, science and information technology sectors. This is very striking because it is not just unemployment but a mismatch. And this is unprecedented. Other recessions did not produce this kind of mismatch.

ad hoc: *Speaking of the European dimension of education: Do you think there is something specifically 'European' about our education systems compared to those of other countries, such as China?*

Prats-Monné: Yes. Not surprisingly, universities are a European invention. Maybe this is actually the most important European contribution to humanity. The way we see the link between education and society: education is not just for productivity and work, but also for creating critical citizens. The European idea of education has a very clear sense of the rights of individuals, of democracy being linked to citizens capable of making critical judgments. Some emerging economies like China have a very determined focus on education as a way towards prosperity and also to address inequalities. They see education as it was seen in Europe maybe fifty years ago: as an extraordinary way of social progress.

ad hoc: *How does this translate into the understanding of education?*

Prats-Monné: It is a big difference and has many consequences, for example an extraordinary increase in the quantity and quality of education. If you look at the PISA indicators you see that some Asian countries like South Korea or the city of Shanghai have top results. At the same time, we see evidence that for the 21st century and the very rapid changes of our societies, pure accumulation of information are less important because it is obsolete very quickly. Yet, cognitive skills are the ones that are easy to teach and on which many emerging economies focus on, with young people spending up to twenty years of their lives studying to accumulate knowledge rather than developing the capacity for creativity, innovation, communication and entrepreneurship.

ad hoc: *And are these European qualities?*

Prats-Monné: Yes, in the sense that in Europe there is a sophisticated view on what education should be. But we do have a big challenge in adapting education systems to what I think is a tsunami in education.

ad hoc: *A tsunami in education?*

Prats-Monné: Demography, technology and globalization combined are having an extraordinary impact on education, promising great potential and opportunity. Ever since school has existed, the main principle has been that you get information at school and do homework at home. Now we actually can get information at home. This means that we have a much nobler function of school, namely to discuss how this information is understood. This is what education is about. This is a very fundamental change in who provides education and in the balance between equity and excellence.

With every technological innovation such as the invention of the radio, the television and the computer there were great hopes that have not been met with regard to their implications for education. But I really think that we are now at a turning point. To give you an example: Don Quijote was written 400 years ago. For 390 years, the availability of Don Quijote was exclusively based on one thing: the number of hard copies available. For the past ten years, anybody, at any time, for free, and simultaneously can have a copy of Don Quijote. This is so extraordinary and such an important change it we have to look at that and how we can exploit it.

ad hoc: *How is the EU addressing these challenges?*

Prats-Monné: It is everybody's task to ensure that we do not just suffer these tsunami waves, but that we manage change. In the field of education as in many others, the EU has limited competencies. We cannot and should not and do not intend to tell countries what to do, but we should tell them how they are doing. The first thing is to provide more evidence. The second, that we have policies and funding, which is significant. We provide an incentive and a complement to the modernization strategies of member states in education institutions. Education systems by nature are very slow to react to social changes, but now things are so quick that we must provide the support to institutions, teachers, ministries of education. Former Harvard Dean Derek Bok once said: "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." But not only do we need more money in education, we also must find the ways in which education is effective.

ad hoc: *Could you name some of the tools that the EU offers?*

Prats-Monné: The Europe 2020 strategy has one merit: From the broad Christmas tree of policy priorities, there are only a few top concerns, one of them is education. That means education is at the forefront of EU policy priorities. We have a EU quantified target for tertiary attainment of 40% and a target for the reduction of early school leaving in the EU: 10%. Also, not just having education as a satellite but having it as part of a growth strategy. Important for us is also the EIT, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology. It links business, research and education. In November, we published a strategy paper, "Rethinking Education", where we sum up our policies and tools.

ad hoc: *This paper clearly states that good education will contribute to innovation and growth ...*

Prats-Monné: The link between education and growth is not automatic and not a linear relationship. But we must make sure that the world of education and the world of work are closer together. And we need to analyze together with countries how they are ensuring, particularly in times of fiscal discipline, investments in education.

ad hoc: *Finland and Sweden have integrated entrepreneurship education in their curricula and foster entrepreneurship education early at school.*

Prats-Monné: In Europe there is a pretty low level of interest in participation in entrepreneurship education compared to other developed economies like the USA. And this is more than fear of the crisis, as the US labour market is looking more and more like the European one – and still you see more young people interested in entrepreneurship. The Nordic countries with a strong welfare state and a very high level of social equality do foster entrepreneurship. This is interesting because the simplistic view sometimes suggests that in order to have entrepreneurs you have to have a jungle, and that only in a jungle people will be competitive. This is not true. You can be creative and have a strong sense of equality, which is exactly the example of social democracies in Northern Europe.

ad hoc: *Let's talk about visions. When my 9-year-old son threw a snowball at school, which is forbidden, he had to write an essay about the school of his dreams. He started out: "In my school we would have snowballs made of cotton ...". What does the school of your dreams look like?*

Prats-Monné: I would have much more imagination if I were 9 years old. That is actually one of our problems: Somehow, as we grow, we are gaining in information, but not in fantasy. What your son said is not just clever, it is out of the box. This is what we need. I find it very striking that schools are like 19th century factories which produce products with an expiration date. Differences between students due to age are much smaller than the difference due to personality, capacity, inventiveness. If we really look at the education in the 21st century, classrooms should look like the society of the 21st century where differences in age, race, background are less important.

ad hoc: *So would your school mix different ages and cross boundaries?*

Prats-Monné: It would be a school based more on the needs of the learner instead of what people should learn theoretically. This should be the focus of education policy, to try to ensure that teaching and learning become what they were meant to be a long time ago: interesting – as your son surely also wants it to be.

ad hoc: *Thank you very much for this interview. It was a pleasure.*

Das Interview führte Stephanie von Hayek. Fachliche Vorbereitung in Zusammenarbeit mit Ulrike Storost.



Stephanie von Hayek, Jg. 1971, war 2000/01 Stiftungskollegiatin und verbrachte ihr Jahr beim United Nations Office for Project Services in New York sowie bei der Weltbank-Gruppe in Washington D.C. Danach arbeitete sie als Beraterin in einer Berliner Public Affairs Beratung, bevor sie mehrere Jahre als Referentin für die Versammlung der Regionen Europas in Straßburg tätig war. Heute arbeitet sie freiberuflich als Politikberaterin, Moderatorin und Journalistin in Potsdam. Sie promoviert an der Humboldt-Universität zum Thema „Berufung“



Ulrike Storost, Jg. 1977, war 2003 Carlo-Schmid-Stipendiatin in der Bildungsabteilung des United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In Bildungsfragen arbeitete sie im Anschluss bei der Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes, der UNESCO in Paris und im Brüsseler Büro der Bertelsmann Stiftung. Heute ist sie bei der Europäischen Kommission als Policy Co-ordinator im Bereich der Jugendbeschäftigung tätig.