

Statement

of

Prof. Dr. mult. Wassilios E. Fthenakis

President of Didacta & WorldDidac

Esteemed ladies & gentlemen,

I would first like to thank the organiser of this event for inviting me in my function as the President of the Didacta Association of the German Education Industry and the WorldDidac Association to welcome you here in our country, and to share with you some of the issues that are of particular interest to our organisations and me personally as a scientist.

For over 90 years Didacta has represented the interests of 250 education industry companies in Germany, most of which are geared toward export. Each year we organise Europe's largest education fair. In our role representing the education industry, Didacta lobbies on behalf of reforming the education system to provide high-quality, socially equitable education addressing the needs of today's children. We are actively involved in the related continuing political and technical discussions, presenting our own concepts and recommended solutions and maintaining a role of "critical friend" in the political debates that take place in our country. We have our own informational bodies and trade publications, and we use the latest technologies to constantly keep education professionals, parents and policymakers permanently

updated. Our activities help to improve the quality of education. Each year at the Didacta education fair alone we organise some 2,000 events for education professionals and representatives from the worlds of politics and education management. Didacta is where all the parties involved in education in our country and in many other nations around the world come together.

Didacta International acts abroad in close cooperation with the WorldDidac Association headquartered in Bern, Switzerland. WorldDidac is the only association of its kind that is globally active, representing the interests of more than 160 members from 39 countries for 60 years now. WorldDidac organises education fairs linked with forums all around the world presenting the very latest in innovative products and hosting debates on education with outstanding experts and figures from the fields of politics and management. Every other year WorldDidac organises its international education trade fair in Basel, Switzerland, bringing the international education industry together with experts, scientists and other players. The next WorldDidac fair will be held in Basel in late October.

I invite all of you to cooperate with both organisations in order to initiate an Education fair with a Forum in your county.

As part of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, Didacta worked in close cooperation with the German wing of UNESCO and it was a great pleasure for me to open this event at the Didacta fair. I want to cordially invite

all of you to attend both the upcoming WorldDidac fair in Basel in October and the Didacta education fair in Hanover, Germany next February. We in the education industry want to continue pursuing this close cooperation with UNEVOC so that together we can meet the challenge of ensuring the very best development and educational opportunities for all of the world's children.

We all have an obligation to reform and modernise our education systems, and education systems today face their greatest challenge ever.

Historically, and in terms of children's progression, education systems have developed from top to bottom. First the universities were founded; institutions for the earlier stages of education followed much later. Schools and kindergartens are products of the nineteenth century and even more so of the twentieth century. Vocational Education is the product of the last decades. Today, during these first decades of the twenty-first century, it is high time to reverse this development and to conceptualise an education system which unfolds from bottom to top. The chances for achieving this are currently favourable.

Education systems are facing some of the greatest challenges in their history. So many aspects are in need of change if the goals of meeting children's individual needs and pursuing social justice in education are to be accomplished: the philosophical and theoretical foundations, our understandings of education, our ways of defining educational goals and ap-

proaches to learning and teaching – in short, the whole architecture of education needs overhauling. This need has been precipitated by processes of social change at the macro and micro levels which have been impacting on all aspects of society - the economy, culture and not least, family life. The globalisation of communication through digital technologies, the increase in cultural diversity and social complexity, differently motivated processes of migration, wars and social conflict, and general contextual changes on many different levels represent challenges which education systems have to face up to and act upon.

Against this background, fundamental changes have been taking place internationally since the mid-1990s: education systems can no longer function within the assumptions of the modernist paradigm, but need to be viewed within the premises of so-called postmodernism, requiring transformation processes at all levels. During the previous century, education systems acquired their legitimation by processing knowledge and transmitting it to the next generation. However, in the early twenty-first century, knowledge transmission can no longer be regarded as a sufficient basis for legitimation. Instead, strengthening children's individual development and competencies must be seen as the goal of reformed education systems. This new orientation has been accompanied by various debates and discourses, of which only three will be briefly outlined here:

- a) The *political debate* is grounded in empirically proven inefficiencies of education systems, drawing on findings of econometric studies which suggest that early

investment in education brings the highest individual and societal returns (Heckmann, 2011) and on findings which suggest that education systems need to focus on strengthening children's competencies from the very beginning (Fthenakis, 2004; Fthenakis et al., 2009). Political debates have been highlighting the significance of the early years regarding later educational achievement and reviewing the role of early childhood education in the education system in general, thereby increasing public recognition of early childhood as the basis for individual learning paths. In order to reinforce these foundations, various instruments have been developed and implemented, in particular curricular frameworks. Forms of consolidation have included combining these frameworks with reforms of the systems of regulation, evaluation and staff professionalization, and in general embedding them within a reform of the overall education system.

- b) The *professional debate* has highlighted shifts in understandings of child development, leading to new theoretical perspectives on educational processes: social-constructivist positions have been gradually displacing the previous dominance of classical constructivist concepts. The former widespread acceptance of universalistic stage theories of child development, associated with the works of Jean Piaget and biological maturation, is being displaced by interactionist approaches. Alongside social-constructivist positions, post-structural approaches (MacNaughton, 2005) and

social theories of childhood are opening new philosophical perspectives for understanding early learning. In the area of cognitive development theories in particular, former universal assumptions are being complemented by domain specific explanatory models towards understanding children's learning (Sodian, 2003, 2005).

- c) The *curricular debate* was triggered off by the political and professional debates. Whereas formerly, curricula were designed by experts at universities and their implementation was both selective and voluntary and thus a matter of chance, since the mid-1990s they have become policy instruments and mandatory frameworks aiming to guarantee high quality educational experiences in all settings and for each child. Experts still play an important role in the construction of early childhood curricula, but this responsibility is shared with policy makers, practitioners, parents, children and other social agencies with responsibility for children's education, leading in effect to a democratization of curriculum development. Integrating stakeholder perspectives has become a central part of developing, piloting and implementing curricula. Defining curricula in this new way represents a fundamental reform associated with a paradigm shift in the theoretical foundations, combined with changes in the architecture of educational pathways and in the educational goals and pedagogical approaches pursued, thus helping education systems to meet the challenges at hand.

As you try to develop an agenda for the next 15 Years to strengthen skills for work and life it would be very useful first to clarify the theoretical approach, to conceptualise competence, to develop a taxonomy of competencies from the perspective of the child, to introduce a holistic approach, new didactic concepts and to rethink about the architecture of the education System.

Such debates are currently changing our understandings of the significance of the early years in the overall educational process.

This paradigm shift in which modern education systems are tasked not only with conveying knowledge, but above all with reinforcing the development of children and their competencies right from the start has led to a reassessment of the importance of preschool education and a revised concept of the education stages that follow, particularly vocational education. Germany implemented the dual vocational education model you are all familiar with. This resulted in places of learning outside the education system, in Germany's case the industry sector, assuming both technical and economic responsibility for education. This initiated a development highlighting the importance of places of learning outside the realm of the education system. Such developments are now being introduced into other stages of education. The importance of education and places of learning outside of conventional educational institutions is being re-evaluated. The borders between formal and informal learning are blurring with numerous participants actively involved in the simulta-

neous or successive construction of individual education biographies. If today's education systems need to reinforce children's competencies, then we have to recognise that such competencies are developed within the child's first 8 to 10 years and that this development is more dependent on institutional variables other than those that are related to educational institutions. This is the reason because we need an Education System that is learning place oriented. If a country is determined to establish qualified vocational education, then the most effective way to achieve this goal is in combination with a good preschool education.

Almost before we have begun to enter into a really serious debate, further challenges are already looming on the education horizon: All theories of child development, all approaches towards education and pedagogy have been conceptualised for the real world, whereas children today are also growing up in a digital world. This virtual reality opens up further perspectives for the organisation of learning processes. Georges Siemens' publication in 2005 was one of the contributions which sparked off a controversial debate as to whether we need new theories for the organisation of education processes in the virtual world. And indeed, stimulated by connectionism and the work of Christakis & Flower (2011) and others, the theoretical debate has already taken on a new dimension - and we can look forward with enthusiasm to the continuing discussions.

Ladies & gentlemen!

The education industry around the world is eager to make an active contribution to the further development of education systems and the improvement of educational quality with innovative, high-quality products designed to drive development. For example, working together we must ensure we can take advantage of the opportunities presented by new technologies and support our children in developing their own technological skills right from the start. We must ensure that the integration and application of new technologies in the education system are closely linked with the curriculum and new didactic concepts. And we must equally ensure that our education professionals have the professional-level skills needed for this. Representatives of companies and institutions from the international education industry are on hand here at the conference beginning today to discuss vocational education innovations in detail with you.

Together we must succeed in guaranteeing greater educational equality and fair opportunities for all of the world's children. UNEVOC has made substantial contributions to this end. As a representative of the education industry, I would like to express my gratitude to you for this and ask that you never fail to speak up when it comes to the welfare of children. I assure you that the education industry will always stand by you when you do.

Contact:
Prof. Dr. Wassilios E. Fthenakis
Maria Theresia Str. 9
D-81675 Munich
Tel. +4989 41900530
Mobile: +49891713535990 + +491755855558
E-Mail: wassilios@fthenakis.de
Homepage: www.fthenakis.de