

A SCHOOL DAY IS A SCHOOL DAY

Robin Engelhardt, *Research Consortium Math and Science,
Learning Lab Denmark*

The Sint-Jozef-Klein-Seminarie in the Flemish town of Sint-Niklaas reveals a school system distinguished by hard work, solicitude and tradition.

Departing from Brussels by train and heading north for about half an hour, you would expect to arrive at a nice middle-class town with small houses, neatly dressed shop windows, and perfectly clean streets. As I step off the train and look around from the exit of the main railway station, this does indeed seem to be the case. The white churches and windows decorated with flowers seem to match the blue sky perfectly. The name of the town is Sint-Niklaas. It lies in the Flemish part of Belgium.

I have an appointment with Walter Roggeman, the headmaster of Sint-Jozef Klein-Seminarie, a Catholic school for twelve to eighteen-year-olds. The remarkable thing about this school, and the reason why I wanted to visit it, is that student performance here was consistently at the highest level in all domains of the PISA-2000 study, as well as in the TIMMS study from 1995. Although Belgium's score in the PISA study cannot be said to have been very high overall, as the country only ranked eleventh in reading literacy, ninth on the mathematical literacy scale, and a mediocre seventeenth on the scientific literacy scale, Belgium still had the widest within-country variation of all thirty-two countries participating. In the PISA-study, the main reason for this variation was explained, at least partially, by huge differences in performance between the Flemish and French communities.

The Flemish results are among the best in the world. In reading literacy, Flanders is third after Finland and Canada. In mathematical literacy, Flanders is third after Japan and Korea – which, in fact, would make them the European champions. In scientific literacy Flanders ranked eighth, which is comparable to the Austrian performance and still a lot better than most other European countries. In order to understand the level of performance at Sint-Jozef Klein-Seminarie, one also has to consider the variation in the quality of schools in Flanders itself. Because of an indiscretion that was passed on by the German newspaper, *Die Zeit*, I had become aware that the school I was about to visit showed the best results in all disciplines when compared to all other schools in Flanders. It was simply the best.

A combination of hard work and tradition

In order to understand why this school did better than all the others in these comparative tests, I ask the headmaster all sorts of questions about the French and Flemish educational systems, and about the social, political and cultural circumstances that could explain such differences. Is it the thirty-two hours each student has to spend in school every week, and the many hours of homework they have to do in the evenings, I ask? Or is it the five Latin lessons each week? And why do you need to learn Latin anyway?

The headmaster looks at me with forbearance and begins telling me about the long-held traditions in this part of the country.

“More than seven hundred years ago, the town was just a small soggy village close to the sea,” he says. “The name of the area, Land van Waas, literally means “soggy land”. But as the land grew out of the water and moved to the west, more people settled in the area. Many religious houses and seminaries were built in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A part of our school is also a seminary. We also have a monastery that was built in 1696 by followers of Saint Francis of Assisi. After the French Revolution, many Catholic monks fled to Holland, and the seminary was bought by wealthy men. In 1808, the Bishop of Ghent started a school on these premises, and the school was combined with the seminary until 1950.”

Latin, I learn, is very popular. It is regarded as an analytical language, which helps the development of intelligence and rational thought. So it doesn't matter that people do not speak it anymore. French and math also have a high priority in the school. Every child learns two or more foreign languages as well as math, physics, chemistry and biology. And they are tested often and thoroughly. Moreover, the students are differentiated on the basis of how they

perform. At the age of fourteen, it is decided whether a student can continue at a general, technical, or vocational level. When asked whether this early differentiation might comprise an irreversible selection process and result in social stigmatisation, the headmaster shakes his head: "We are trying to avoid wrong decisions by providing parents with good, solid advice. Nobody is perfect, but we prefer this "early" differentiation to postponing the choice between a general and technical level, because in our opinion, our system is better for student motivation. Being in an educational system that corresponds better with their interests improves their performance. So what we do is in the children's best interest."

Taking care of them all

Compared with the French communities, where many children have to repeat a year if they fail the tests, the children in the Flemish communities get a lot of help if they risk failing. In the beginning of the first school year, the students can

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do their homework in the school together with their own classes and class teachers. The teachers are mainly concerned with the students learning how to organise their homework better. "It is not enough just to be able to read," the headmaster explains to me, "They need to learn to know *what* they read, and they need to learn *what and how* they have to learn. It is not an oppressive system, but one of definite rules, which you have to follow."

If performance problems persist, students are given extra lessons, and problematic children are put into smaller classes, so that the teachers can better focus on their needs. In addition, a staff of "green teachers" pledged to secrecy talk to students who have personal or social problems. As many teachers will know, parents sometimes need as much help as their children. At Sint-Jozef-Klein-Seminarie, it has become a highly valued practice to involve parents in the students' work as soon and as much as possible. Before the beginning of the new school year, parents are invited to the school to talk about the coming year's program. They are given general information about the school, they exchange telephone numbers, and they receive a magazine. In the third week of September, the parents attend optional meetings with the teachers about how to help their children with homework, or they can obtain information about higher education. "We have very good cooperation with the parents," says the headmaster, "and we try to get them more and more involved in the school."

The art of combining disparate parts into a prosperous whole

Although Belgium lacks a systematic and formal teachers' education system – short-term practical training is all the system offers in terms of education, apart from the normal university Bachelor's or Master's degrees – the teachers' own efforts to further their professional status through engagement and social recognition seem to be very strong. This becomes evident to me, as the headmaster talks proudly about his teachers, who have been teaching at the school for ten, fifteen or even more years. They seem to take great pride in their jobs, and they also seem to have a lifelong commitment to their cause. "It is the art of combining disparate parts into a prosperous whole," he says. "We believe in a combination of tradition and the integration of new elements where the tradition doesn't work anymore. And the best is step-by-step innovation to which all members of the community agree."

It would be difficult to pin down just one factor that explains the differences between the French and Flemish schools. "But I guess it is a combination of many things," says the headmaster. "In this part of the country, three out of four schools are Catholic, whereas in the south it is only one out of four. Our basis is effective teamwork between the headmaster, the teachers, the parents, and their children. You also have to remember that we are not centralized like the schools in the south. Many of our teachers have worked here for many years, and they know what to do when things are not working. Our local infrastructure emerged in accordance with our own decisions, and it was therefore our own responsibility. The local community supports our financial and pedagogical autonomy. We are *not* being organised from a desk in Brussels."

Another important aspect of the Flemish success might be the long reign of the Flemish Minister of Education, Luc van den Bossche. Having read about his motto several times before, it does not come as a surprise to me to hear the headmaster reiterating it: "A school day is a school day," he says, "there are no excuses for not attending school, whether it is the beginning of January or before the tests in June." This motto has not only taken root in the heart of the Flemish community. It is also very popular among the Dutch in the border regions. They frequently send their children to Flanders away from what they feel is a wretched state of affairs in the Netherlands.

While I walk around this odd combination of an ordinary middle school and a former seminary, I wonder: is success Catholic? I have a good look at the old church that is connected to the school. Its vaults extend into parts of the school corridor and even make up the ceiling of the dining hall. Everything looks as if it is organically integrated into a functioning whole. No signs of carelessness. No

signs of excess. Just the kind of school you would expect to read about in old-fashioned memoirs telling stories about a time not yet out of sync.

Sint-Jozef-Klein-Seminarie
Collegestraat 31
9100 Sint-Niklaas,
Belgium
www.sjks.be