

**International Conference on ‘Cultural Education,
Innovation, Creativity and Youth’ - CANON**
Towards better arts and cultural education in Europe

Speech by Frank Vandenbroucke
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Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen,

(Welcome to this conference)

Welcome to this international conference on cultural education, innovation, creativity and youth. I am very happy to be your host today in the premises of the Flemish Ministry of Education.

This conference however is not an exclusively Flemish initiative. It has been organised in cooperation with the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Since we speak the same language, it is no more than logical that there is an intense collaboration between Flanders and the Netherlands in the field of education and culture. This takes place within the framework of the Dutch Language Union. But we have also been working together more specifically on arts and cultural education for years now. We have for instance organised conferences for teachers and people from the cultural field as well as specific exchange days for teacher trainers. We also work together on research. In the Netherlands as well as in Flanders we have asked Anne Bamford – whom you undoubtedly know from the ‘The Wow Factor’, the worldwide UNESCO research on arts and cultural education in schools – to take a critical look

at the quality of arts and cultural education in our schools. This research was carried out in the 2006-2007 school year and it was the catalyst behind a series of policy developments in both countries.

Meanwhile we have such good experiences with exchanges and collaboration on the subject of arts and cultural education that we decided to organise this conference. The aim was to involve as many other countries as possible in order to create an interesting merge of ideas. The quantitative goal has already been attained. I am very happy today to welcome policy makers from 24 of the 27 European Member States, together with a number of people from countries outside the European Union.

Of course, we cannot take all the credit for this. Also at the European policy level we notice very clearly an increasing focus on arts and cultural education. 2009, for instance, was named 'European Year of Creativity and Innovation' by the European Commission. And since 2007 Eurydice has been carrying out research into arts and cultural education throughout Europe, to enable us to make international comparisons. The results of the first parts of this investigation will be presented later during this conference.

(The importance of arts and cultural education)

I actually wonder whether it is a coincidence that you as well as I, and my Dutch colleagues, and the European Commission today – in 2009 – are all putting arts and cultural education at the top of our policy agendas? I don't think so.

Globalisation is making the world increasingly smaller. Our society is changing rapidly. Familiar concepts are being questioned, which leads to uncertainty.

Just 200 years ago Darwin said the following about 'change':

"It is not the strongest of the species that will survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one that is most responsive to change".

Being responsive to change and dealing with it intelligently. That is actually the core of what children and youth have to learn at school. It is actually the core of 'learning' full stop. This implies more than simply acquiring 'competences', as we usually define them, and certainly more than just practising instrumental skills. In order to be able to make choices and take decisions, children and youth need a framework of reference, an identity.

High quality arts and cultural education can play a crucial role here. After all, where can one learn more about human identity, than through the arts and culture of the ages of human civilisation before us? Not just as an aspect of knowledge, but as a part of our human experience and search: arts and culture thus form an essential basis for our self-awareness.

This is why conscious experience of arts and culture must form parts of the education of all children and youth. Equal educational opportunities in this field also need to be ensured. Families or the environment where children grow up should not be allowed to stand in the way of this.

Depending on preference and talent, different forms of expression exist: words, images, music, dance, etc. High quality arts and cultural education must create opportunities for a wide variety of different talents.

You probably hear me speaking for the first time today, but you must know that I keep repeating the following idea over and over again: I plead for equal opportunities, not because I believe that all children are equal, but because they are different. Discovering what children are good at and helping develop these talents fully is what we need to be doing.

But not simply because of the importance of individual opportunities to develop. Eventually because the whole society benefits from it. Self-aware people are able to interact more consciously with the world they live in. We all feel that the world today is in dire need of this. Given the huge social challenges we face in Europe today, our increased focus on arts and cultural education could not have come a day too soon.

Actually this reasoning goes back to the basic notion of the humanistic educational ideal from the Enlightenment, namely that 'better people make a better world'. This conviction is the leitmotif through the programme of this conference. After all, the main theme of the conference is 'Personal and Cultural Development of Children and Youth in a Changing Europe'. This theme can then be split into two different aspects: the first relating to the cultural socialisation of children and youth within the society (the 'better world') and the second the personal and creative development of individuals (the 'better people').

(Keynotes)

The keynote speakers that we have invited for this conference, will talk in detail about the theory behind both aspects.

Professor Aidan Chambers from the United Kingdom will start today with a general social and cultural philosophical talk about the cultural basis of human life. He links the earliest human insights to the technical and cultural developments taking place today. In particular he will focus upon the role and place of literature in our current development and upon the new forms of writing and reading that he sees emerging. Aidan Chambers is known mainly as an author of books for young people and as a professor of literature. He received various awards for his work. A few weeks ago he became made a member of the Royal Academy of Literature.

Professor Peter Adriaenssens, the first keynote speaker tomorrow, looks at how education can feed creativity. He points out that in our rapidly changing environment, parents and schools should work together to teach children how to adapt flexibly to that environment. Professor Adriaenssens is professor in child psychiatry at the Catholic University of Leuven.

The last keynote speech will be given by Professor Kevin Tavin from the Ohio State University. His story is about visual cultural education as a relatively new domain. He looks into how visual culture has an impact on the interpretation process among children and youth and how children and youth can create productions themselves based on this.

(Practical example)

In addition to theory, there will also be room - of course - for practice during this conference. Before I explain what you can expect here, I suggest we look at a practical example. It is an extract from a DVD that

was made by a number of pupils from a vocational school in Gent. In the 7th form 'industrial electricity' they set up a cultural educational project on multimedia literacy. The class teacher organised a trip to the Fort of Breendonk (a concentration camp from WW2, just 20 kms from Brussels), within the framework his classes on world conflicts. The pupils took pictures and made drawings, but felt that they needed to show something else to counter the horrors of humanity. Under supervision, they made a second film. They each looked for a medium to express what existence meant for them and that provided a counterpart to all that violence. A group of pupils that was labelled in the school as difficult and not very motivated turned out to be a class full of opportunities. Something that they wanted to express in the title of their film: 'Interconnectedness'. Everything in the film was made by them: the music, the words, the subject. While looking for an alternative to violence and destruction, they looked for what linked them with the world. Both the main themes of the conference, personal development and social involvement, feature strikingly in this project.

(Film projection: 8 min)

(Parallel sessions)

Practical examples like this one, and above all the question which policy instruments can be used to encourage this type of good practise, are featured in the parallel sessions this afternoon and tomorrow afternoon. These sessions focus on four sub-themes: (1) Youth Policy, Youth Culture and Cultural Education, (2) Innovation in Education and Cultural Education, (3) Citizenship and Cultural Education and finally (4) The Social and Educational Role of Teachers and Educators. Each time, a practical case from a specific European country will be presented, looked

at and discussed from the perspectives of policy, practice and evaluation. The cases have been selected on the basis of the first results of the Eurydice study. It is the intention of course that you participate actively in these discussions and that a full exchange of ideas will take place. And who knows, perhaps we will move on to a shared European policy agenda for arts and cultural education? In addition to the Bologna, Copenhagen and Lisbon objectives, perhaps we will be able to define the Brussels objectives? In any event, I am curious to see which lessons the civil servants of the European Commission will tomorrow draw from the results of these discussions.

(Conclusion)

For my part, I have already asked the civil servants in my ministry to keep their ears and eyes wide open. Thanks to the critical study of professor Bamford, high quality arts and cultural education have become one of my policy priorities. During the last year specialists from the educational and cultural sector have proposed a number of policy recommendations. Plans for the future are gradually taking shape, but of course we still have much to learn. I hope that this European conference will provide lots of inspiration. I wish you all a very exciting two days.

Thank you.