Opening speech ECNAIS Conference, Istanbul April 2019

Student participation – The future of independent education in Europe

Mr. Minister of National Education of the Turkish Republic
Mr. President of the Turkish Association of Independent Schools, Mr. Nurullah Dal
Members of ECNAIS,
Students,
Headmasters and teachers,
Ladies and gentleman,
Dear friends,

A special word of welcome to the speakers in our conference.
I would also like to welcome our new friend from the Independent Schools Association of the UK, hoping these days are inspiring for you.

On behalf of ECNAIS, I welcome you all to the conference “Student participation – The future of independent education in Europe”.
I am proud to announce that we have gathered here 116 participants. Students, teachers, headmasters and leaders of national associations, representing 18 national organizations of independent schools from 13 European countries. 30% of the participants are students!

For those of you who are new to ECNAIS, we are an association founded in 1988 by a group of educators who that wanted to learn more about the challenges and the vision of each other for independent education in Europe. We are a non confessional, non political association, with headquarters in Helsinki, that unites national associations of
independent schools from all countries of Europe. Our vision is to promote dialogue within countries and to promote the freedom of education for parents and for educators.

Today, independent education represents more than 18% of all students in Europe – over 20 million students.

We gather for these two days of work under the theme of student participation in the governance of schools. And, of course, we opened the conference to students and gave them an equal role in the work.

The issue of student participation in schools is not a new one. All child centered pedagogies have this in mind. But we think that this is an idea that still has a long way to go.

School systems, schools, classrooms have, since the advancement of the modern school, been adult centered.

This is not something that originated in the education field. An adult centered society has been in place since man is man. It is the way society is organized. When discussing student participation in schools, we must begin by thinking about the position of children and youngsters in society as a whole.

Let’s begin with the early ages of children’s rights.

In 1873, a 10 year old girl – Mary Ellen Wilson – who lived in Hell’s Kitchen, New York, was abused by her foster parents. The neighbors found out what was going on and filed a complaint with the local authorities. However, at the time, there were no laws that protected children.

Frustrated with the situation, the social worker assigned to the case asked for help at the A.S.P.C.A (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). The society’s founder, Henry Bergh, hired a lawyer and they filed suit in the court of New York. Their argument was that the law protected animals from inhumane treatment and that Mary
Ellen, as a human being, belonged to the animal kingdom. Therefore, she was protected by law. The court granted her protection.

In the aftermath of this case, the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was founded (December 1874).

Since then, children have been granted a number of rights, including the right to education that is today enshrined in article 14 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and in the Constitutions of several countries.

I bring all this to your attention because I suggest we think about student participation not only as a pedagogical idea, but as part of the students’ fundamental right to education.

Education is, first and foremost, about personal development and social participation. These are the founding factors of European liberal democracies. Social participation is not only about obeying the law – though this is very important – but, firstly, it is about empowering people to fully engage in societal matters; about making people use their personal freedom and to take responsibility for the advancement of society.

This is not something you learn reading books or hearing an adult speaking; it is a competence you develop over time by doing. And it is not something that begins when you are 18 and old enough to vote; it is a competence you develop since you begin socializing at pre-school.

So, if children have a right to education, if education is about empowering to act and take responsibility and if this is a competence developed since early ages, it follows that participating in school is a fundamental right of the students.

And what does participation mean? Well, as a starter, it means being heard by the adults; really heard. Not as a group – the students – but as an individual – each student. Secondly, it means that your voice has effective impact; things change because of your voice.
Thirdly, that this happens not only on trivial issues such as the color of a wall or the menu of the cafeteria but also on important issues such as the way the curriculum is organized or the school is managed.

Lastly, it means that the student`s dreams are integrated in their education.

By sharing national experiences in student participation, through the voice of the students themselves, ECNAIS wishes to contribute to this discussion. We hope that this may enrich your own practices and help to better understand the connections of student participation and the ideals of freedom of education in Europe.

This seminar was prepared in strong cooperation with TOZOK, the Turkish association of Independent Schools, and ECNAIS. We are very pleased to be in Istanbul; in the confluence between Europe and Asia. This simbolizes the need for different generations to hear each other; for different people to hear each other; for a certain “detente” in society.

We wish you an inspirational Seminar. And please take some extra time to enjoy your stay in the beautiful city of Istanbul.

I would like to end with a well-known quote from a song: I know I am a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope someday you will join us, so the world may be as one.

Thank you very much

Rodrigo Melo

Istanbul, 11th April 2019