Opening speech ECNAIS Seminar

Independent education in the Digital World

Mrs. Representant of the European Parliament in Spain, dear friends from Escuelas Catolicas, Fomento and CECE, members of ECNAIS, students, headmasters and teachers, ladies and gentleman, dear friends,

A special word of congratulations to our Spanish members. To pull this event together, 4 associations working as one is something to be noted. Secondly, I would like to thank the speakers in our conference for helping us think about this fascinating theme. And finally, a very warm welcome to our friends from the Independent Schools Association of the UK, that are, since the general assembly of yesterday, members of ECNAIS.

On behalf of ECNAIS, I welcome you all to the seminar “Independent education in the Digital World”. I am proud to announce that today we have gathered 120 students, teachers, headmasters and leaders of national associations, representing 18 national organizations of independent schools from 14 European countries. 33% of the participants are students.

For those of you who less acquainted with 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 between countries and to promote the freedom of education for parents and educators; the freedom to establish independent schools and the freedom to choose the school for our children.

Today, independent education represents more than 18% of the students in Europe – more than 20 million students.
Last April, in Istanbul, we discussed how school systems, schools and classrooms have, since the advancement of the modern school, been adult centered and how this must change so that the learner is the originator of the learning activities. Now, we will discuss how technology may help us in this Copernican revolution in schools.

It is famously cited that the first thing you learned in a tutorial on computer programing back in 1972 was to make the computer print “Hello world!” on the screen. It is a powerful metaphor of a technology that came to conquer the world it just was born into. And in fact, in just 40 years digital technologies have changed just about everything in the way we live and work. But it has not changed, and I think it never will, what we are and what we stand for. I think you will all find, through the seminar, that although technology is great, powerful and everywhere, for us in the independent school sector it is just a tool - maybe even the context - but it is not the aim or the mission. For us, education is about human development; about making sure all children and youngsters rise to their full potential as individuals, as members of society, as members of the ecosphere.

As I mentioned earlier, this seminar was prepared in strong cooperation with Escuelas Catolicas, Fomento and CECE, the Spanish associations of Independent Schools, and ECNAIS. It is very interesting that we are in Spain, in a moment were union and autonomy are being disputed in such a passionate way. In the independent sector we have always been struggling with this dilemma: the feeling that we are different and how we fit in the whole. This symbolizes the need for different generations to meet each other; for different people to meet each other; for a certain “detente” in societies. Independent value based education is, we think, the most powerful way to bridge these gaps.

Now, turning to more informative issues, I would like to share with you some of the decisions and announcements we made at the General Assembly of ECNAIS that took place yesterday.

Firstly, in February we will again meet in the European Parliament under the theme EDUCATIONAL PLURALISM FOR A PLURAL EUROPE. As in the last meetings, we aim at
bringing awareness to MEPs about freedom education and the role of independent education. Educational pluralism is at the roots of the European Union. We can found it recognized in the article 14.3 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and it is also recognized at the constitutional level by 23 State members (as is the case in Spain: article 27).

Secondly, in early June, we will participate in a freedom of education event in the United Nations. The aim, in the long run, is to promote the declaration of an International Freedom of Education day.

Thirdly, we are proud to announce that ECNAIS will continue to strengthen the participation of upper secondary students from our member associations in our events. Student participation is an important educational tool and a way to help our students to not only develop the so-called 21st century skills, but also a global view and understanding about what is really essential to our human condition; what we all have in common despite our different habits, culture, ethnicity or gender.

I would like to end quoting the Jesuit Pedro Arrupe and going back to our theme. “The world advances in spite of us; it is up to us to make it advance because of us”. Let`s use our values and our efforts to make sure algorithms are always preceded by androrythms.

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

Rodrigo Melo
Madrid, 25th November 2019