European Meeting on Child Participation. Conclusions.

Alcalá de Henares. September 29 and 30 and October 1.

BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

Every six months the Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) rotates among its Member States. Spain took this role in July 2023, a responsibility that plays a fundamental role in shaping the political agenda of the EU.

In its commitment to promoting child and adolescent participation at various levels, Spain is committed to greater recognition of this right in EU decision-making. It has therefore made child and adolescent participation a priority during its presidency, in the hope of inspiring other European governments to follow.

To this end, the Spanish Government, in collaboration with UNICEF Spain and the Platform of Children's Organizations, organized the European Meeting on Child Participation, which took place in Alcalá de Henares on September 29 and 30 and October 1. To prepare for this meeting, a pan-European consultation was previously launched, led by the organization Child Friendly Governance. This organization has coordinated the work with an advisory group of adolescents from several European countries, that has laid the foundations for the European Meeting on Child Participation.

Advisory group: During the months of July, August and September, a group of adolescents have worked together to identify and create the survey, also they have interpreted the opinions and contributions received from the children who participated in it. They are Anna (Austria), Aleksej (Croatia), Anna (Czech Republic), Magdaléna (Czech Republic), Alexandru (France), Solal (France), Bao (Germany), Faisal (Greece), Isobel (Ireland), Patricia (Spain), René (Spain), Rim (Spain), Sonsoles (Spain), Vidar (Sweden), Tekla (Sweden), Jewel (Malta) and Tasneem (Malta).

Thirty boys and girls from 10 EU countries participated in the **face-to-face meeting**: Patricia, Ainara, René, Carla, Sonsoles, Víctor, Rim, Andrei, Adriana, Anmdrés, Nuria, Daniel, Ailin and Irene (Spain), Tasneem and Jewel (Malta) Emily (Ireland) Bao Chau and Gerhold (Germany); Lana and Sam (Luxembourg); Solal and Gorgan (France); Anna and Magdalena (Czech Republic); Maria dos Santos and Isabel (Portugal); Cyryl and Wiktoria (Poland) and Anna (Austria).

METHODOLOGY

Preparatory phase

An advisory group with 17 children aged 11 to 17 from ten European countries, appointed by their respective governments, was created. This group represented different experiences of child participation from several European states.

In a first phase the group identified their main issues and concerns: education, safety (understood as safe space), mental health and participation. Then they developed a 14-question survey to establish children's priorities in each of these areas. The survey was conducted online during July, August and early September 2023.

Although the results are not representative of all children and adolescents in the EU, and should not be interpreted as scientific data, they are indicative of the issues that most concern them

and show issues that decision-makers should pay attention to. With this information the advisory group produced a series of recommendations for the Spanish government and other EU decision-makers.

Throughout this phase, the Child Friendly Governance organization has coordinated the work of the advisory group following safeguarding rules to ensure that children's participation was safe and meaningful.

Face-to-face meeting

The methodology of the work that has been done during the weekend group work has been collaborative and always carried out by professionals through teamwork and games. In the working group phase, all the work has been developed in groups in which all members have been able to participate in finding solutions to solve the challenges that had been identified in the preparatory phase.

CONCLUSIONS

1) SAFETY

The European advisory group concluded:

Invest in children's safety at home, in schools and in public spaces. While most children feel safe at home, it is concerning that a relatively high number of children feel either 'unsafe' or 'very unsafe' at home. A significant number of children do not feel safe in school or public spaces. Children are calling for the implementation of preventive measures, anti-bullying programs, and emotional education in schools, as well as improved access to support when they need it.

After the face-to-face event the working group conclusions are:

1. SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT: Everyone needs someone to talk, so they can feel safe. Family, school or friends are very important part in this matter.
2. CORRECT USE OF TOOLS: We must be conscient of the danger and consequences of the posting in social media. We need to protect our privacy.
3. EDUCATION AND PREVENTION: Educate children from the beginning, to prevent discrimination or violence based on gender.
4. PROTECTION AND PUNISHMENT: Increase the protection of children. Aggression cannot be allowed (punishment).
5. GETTING INVOLVED: Being part of the solution, participate in the community. Act. Do not look away.

2) EDUCATION

The European advisory group concluded:

Include life skills and practical learning in school curricula and include children in decision-making in schools. Children request a greater emphasis on practical learning, including lessons on life skills, mental health, relationships, and political decision-making. They also seek more flexibility in their choice of subjects and more opportunities to have a say in shaping their school experience.

After the face-to-face event the working group conclusions are:

- **Education based on projects:** We feel like ever thought we study a lot. We don't learn as much as we would like and, in this way, we are not comfortable with the form they teach us. The aims are not always the best option. We are memorizing but we are not actually learning. We feel that we learn more through experience than with theory.

    We all spend between 6 and 8 hours at school a day. This maybe is enough, but we spend two or more hours every day doing homework or studying. It's well known that the average adults work 8 hours a day and when they arrive home, they are relaxed and disconnected to their task. **Why don't we have these rights?**

    We propose significant learning that consists in the process that the student understands and keep information for a long time, relation it with prior knowledge and establishing a personal connection with the topic. The learning environment is very important for a good concentration.

    Do you think we have a good learning environment? Some high schools are in very bad condition. This problem also affects to the resources that the school center offer. For example, the electrical installation that every week broke, the Wi-Fi, the heaters in winter, the electronic devices. That you really think that these are good ways of treatments for the children and adolescents?

    To sum up, as we said, we are memorizing but we are not actually learning. We insist on dynamic ways to learn. We all insist too in the part that infrastructure while learning is so important too. And we would like you to consider all our requests.

- **Equality education for everyone:** We think all of us deserve the same high-quality education. We agree that education costs too much for some families and we must have the same opportunities. One of our solutions is using secondhand books; teaching with technologies and not with books. Give students more opportunities.

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- **Gender equality in education.** The aim of gender equality in education is to increase the number of young girls and women seeking an education.

    Encourage young men and women to take up subjects that are not traditional, masculine or feminine.

    We mean don't back down them to enter the career they want regardless of their tradition. Social class equality in education.

    Such policies aim to equalize educational opportunities and achievement following on the socioeconomic background of students.

- **Safe-place.** The typical problem in the school is that the children don't feel comfortable and safe, so they don't open to each other, and they don't express their opinion. So, we came up with the solution that there could be smaller classes, because when there is only 15 people in the class instead of 30 children, have more space to speak and they feel more comfortable with it. And also, you will be more focused on studying.

    And that leads us to another point. We would love to have classes with discussions about important topics, like mental health or self-confidence. We also think that teachers should have qualification and knowledge about the subject they teach.

We agree that children often feel uncomfortable in the school with expressing their opinion.

- **School should prepare Students for their future**
Imagine that you are a 15-year-old student, and everybody treats you like a kid. But in a few years, you will be an adult with all the responsibilities that come with it. For example, paying your taxes, understanding your salary, paying the rent, buying a property, managing your money, or learn how to be critical, how to speak in public, how to be self-confident, how to respect each other. These are skills that we will need in the future, and we have to be prepared for it. So, we thought it would be better to have some classes to learn about these life skills. The solution could also be some courses that we will have once per month.
We believe that children should be prepared more for the future and adult life.

- **Develop the teaching quality.** Teachers needs some formation for new up coming topic/ issues that we might need help with. (mental health, technology...) for example: invest money education, new school equipment for a better education.

3) MENTAL HEALTH

The European advisory group concluded:

Invest more in mental health, particularly combating stigma, and improving access to Services. Children express significant concerns about their mental health but feel they lack the proper support and tools to address mental health challenges effectively. They desire more open conversations about mental health and a stronger emphasis on providing support that caters to their specific needs.

After the face-to-face event the working group conclusions are:

- Algorithms in social media sites which automatically detect and delete photos or videos of children.

- Raise awareness on cyberbullying and violence over the web.

- Mandatory psychological training courses for teachers. Teachers should be trained as they are closer to students than school psychologists.

- More control over how medicines are sold and prescribed. Limiting the access of youth of the abundance of medicines.

- Normalizing the practice of going to therapy, not outraising people who go to therapy.

- More dynamic and alternative education.

- More integrating people and teaching soft skills; increasing coordination between teachers.

- Limiting the negative impact of students being overworked; for example, students can't have more one exam per day.

4) CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PARTICIPATION

The European advisory group concluded:

Take children's concerns seriously – and work with them to find solutions. Children have concerns about numerous issues, yet they also possess numerous solutions to the problems they encounter, and they are eager to collaborate with adults to implement these solutions together. Children expect adults to honor their promises and follow through on their commitments.

After the face-to-face event the working group conclusions are:

- **Lack of feedback and actions:** The request is to publish the work and impact of the proposals made by the young people every four months. This will provide additional motivation to participate.
- **Language not accessible to young people**: Simplify or adapt official documents to make them more accessible.
- **Not taken seriously enough:** Empowering children by voting at age 16. Politicians respect our needs (votes! ;)
- **Incrementar el interés de los jóvenes hacia la participación infantil y adolescente**: Se propone la creación de una plataforma y grupo asesor en cada EM. Más información y coordinación para incrementar la participación.
- **Lack of interest and access to participation**: The creation of a platform and advisory group in each MS is proposed. More information and coordination to increase participation.