

Opening Speech, delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the Lisa Maria Foundation Seminar, entitled “The Child in Early Childhood Education”, 23 November 2018

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

It is my pleasure to inaugurate this year’s Lisa Maria Foundation Seminar, which is focusing on such an important issue.

Earlier this week, I was invited to Brussels for the celebration of Universal Children’s Day at the European Parliament.

During this event it was clear that, although our countries have definitely made some progress to include the active participation of our children and young people in processes of decision-making, there is still a long way to go.

Therefore, let me begin by commending the organisers of this event, including Professor Valerie Sollars from the University of Malta, for

highlighting the much-needed awareness about the importance that children's voices are heard, and that their concerns and aspirations must be taken seriously.

I am pleased to note that the Minister for Education and Employment, and the Opposition Spokesperson for Education, will both be participating in today's seminar, as it should be a national commitment to promote, prioritise, and create the necessary social infrastructure for effective child participation.

Furthermore, let me take this opportunity to welcome Professor Hayes to Malta.

Professor, I am pleased that, although I cannot be physically present, arrangements by the organisers have been made, for a recording of your keynote address to be sent to me.

The topic to establish meaningful participation of children, at every level of policy formulation, development, and implementation,

happens to be also the objective of the upcoming 4th National Child Wellbeing Conference.

This annual conference, which will be held next week and is being organised by my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, is further encouraging in promoting our deeply held beliefs, that the experts on childhood, are children themselves.

Our responsibility, as adults, is not just to create safe spaces to listen to our children and young people, but also to take appropriate action in response to their concerns and aspirations.

Unfortunately, we must admit that, children in the Maltese Islands and all over the world are still being denied full access to such spaces to be listened to, as is their intrinsic right.

Children are still being denied their rightful recognition as individuals, and as the holders of universal human rights, because children's rights are human rights.

According to a 2018 survey conducted by Eurochild and UNICEF, published earlier this week to mark this year's World Children's Day, only 14.6 per cent of children feel that they are always listened to in their schools.

These indicators include the responses of Maltese children and children across the European Union.

The right to be heard is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is the most widely ratified Convention in the world.

Article 12 of this Convention specifically highlights the right of children to express their views freely on matters involving them, and to be given due weight and recognition.

It is our duty, as parents, professionals, and authorities, to ensure that the fundamental right of children to be heard is more structurally incorporated, in our current policy planning and practices.

I truly believe that, we must move away from consulting with children in superficial ways, and move towards the adoption of consistent mainstream initiatives, which support the contributions of children.

On the other hand, we cannot expect such structured participation to happen on its own.

Authorities and schools must support professionals, through continuous professional development, to be able to create the necessary structures which empower children to participate meaningfully, and as a natural part of their schooling experience.

In order to achieve effective child participation, we must constantly work to promote and strengthen good practices, which encourage children to realise their full potential as active citizens.

The current limitations in doing so, are perhaps indicative of a wider uncertainty on how best to listen to children.

Spaces for children to be heard must be inclusive and meaningful. We must work to create supportive environments in which we can learn from one another, and specifically, to learn from children themselves, by monitoring, evaluating, and measuring the outcomes of our endeavours.

Since its inception, my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has explored ways of actively including, listening to, learning from, and advocating for children.

Our commitment has arisen both out of a sense of responsibility towards our children, as well as an inherent conviction of the value which children bring when they are able to share their views.

I believe that a truly holistic educational methodology is one which values the participation of children, as an essential process, through which the child develops a sense of identity, strengthens his or her independence, and builds a personal sense of agency.

Participation enables a child to be an active collaborator in his or her own development, while also building the confidence and the capacity to be included as a contributor to society.

The effective participation of children will lead to social benefits for children.

When children participate, they will be empowered to share their challenges, and to effectively address them.

Children who are raised in a participative environment will be better placed, to be the active citizens of our nations, throughout their lifetime.

In fact, child participation has a direct effect on a healthy and evolving democracy.

While preparing for my input today, I came across an influential report, which was released by UNICEF some years back, entitled “Children’s Participation: from Tokenism to Citizenship”.

This report is still relevant, as it states that participation is essential, because traditional educational practices can leave children and young people feeling alienated and open to manipulation.

This report continues to state that through genuine participation in projects, which involve solutions to real problems, young people develop the skills of critical reflection which are essential to the self-determination of their political beliefs.

The report also states that the benefit of child participation is two-fold. First of all, it achieves the self-realisation of the child, and secondly, it achieves a stronger democracy within society.

In a rapidly changing global context, where extremist political ideologies are growing stronger every day, this level of critical thinking and self-awareness is of utmost importance.

Such critical thinking and self-awareness can only be achieved by nurturing the meaningful participation of children.

The President's Secret Garden concept, which my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has developed over the past four years, has been created specifically to address these concerns.

The President's Secret Garden has developed a methodology of active child participation, which has been endorsed at the highest European levels.

We have managed to develop a participatory community of learning, which focuses on inclusion, peace studies, and education for sustainable development.

We have developed an innovative toolkit and good practices, which we are sharing within our European family of nations, and other neighbouring countries.

The National Institute for Childhood, a research entity within my Foundation, of which Professor Sollers is a member, has also made a valuable contribution in this regard.

The National Institute recently developed a policy paper, which focuses on supporting children to be meaningful participants in society.

The National Institute for Childhood has explored key principles of child participation, while also proposing innovative recommendations to explore and strengthen ways of bringing children's voices into the mainstream.

Real child participation has to include all children, including children from minority groups, children with disabilities, and children from alternative family backgrounds.

I believe that the inclusion of our children cannot be a tokenistic gesture. It must be an ongoing process, at every stage, by involving children in the policies that affect their daily lives.

Children must be empowered to think about their needs and the issues that touch them. Children must be empowered with the necessary skills to be able to express these issues in a child-appropriate environment.

We must strive, as a country and as a European Union, to keep promoting more accessible, informative, and child-friendly strategies, for our children to be heard, and for their views to be treated with respect and acted upon.

To ensure that our endeavours to create the right environments for child participation are reaching their appropriate targets, we need to measure the outcomes, in terms of how much our children's aspirations are influencing policy.

We, as adults, must hold ourselves accountable to our children, so that they know that their input is being valued and implemented.

On concluding, it is my profound belief that children's aspirations for their own future, and the future of our educational system and our democratic society, must be given the prominence which they deserve.

We must make our children feel that they are truly the valued contributors, to the wellbeing of our society.

We are just a year away from the 30th anniversary of the most widely ratified United Nations' convention, which is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Let us mark this year by reforming our national structures, to include child participation at every level.

This is what truly effective child participation is all about.

Thank you for your attention.