# EGYPT

# Promoting child participation in school environment

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## 1. Frame of Reference

Human right is one of the main issues currently raised on the political area with a top priority on both local and global agenda. On the local level, Egypt has keenly sought to participate in all international effort on issues pertaining to human rights.

Egypt was also among the first countries to sign the United Nations child right convention in December 1989 and ratified it in 6 July 1990. It further declared its first decade for the child protection (1989-1999). The promulgation of child law number 12/1996 is considered one of the most important accomplishments of the national council for childhood and motherhood in Egypt. In 2008 amendments were made to the child law, to adopt a rights-based approach for some Egyptian children are victims deprived of their rights to education, health and social care, and especially the right to family care.

The political situation in the Middle East has created instability over the decade, a situation which has affected Egypt in spite of the number of activities for development. Egypt has made significant progress over the past decade toward achieving the millennium development goals with substantial gains in child survival rates, school enrolment, immunization coverage, and accesses to safety drinking water.

We believe that the Child Right Convention has to be disseminated among parents, teachers, school admin, other authorities and stakeholders who work relating to child. There is a close relationship between education and democracy as education is crucial to the development of a democratic society, democratic culture and respect for human rights. Students' participation increase child2 rights at the school level and democracy at the national level.

Student participation "Article 12" is the area that has influence on our students' lives especially after the Egyptian Revolution that committed a change in all aspects of life of the Egyptian people, particularly our students. Empowering the students' participation, building up their personality, increasing their involvement in all school activities is the overall target that could promote the idea of considering the child an active citizen, who can practice democratic values effectively.

After the revolution, some youth misunderstood the meaning of freedom. Unwanted practices appeared in the society which was closed and vacuumed for a very long time. This always happen after years of suppression and salvation. If we, as adults, believe that we can change, we will. As a result we will be able to change our attitudes, concepts and beliefs; we will educate our kids in a way that guarantee freedom of expression. When we raise them on these principals, they will enjoy a better future where they will have space to build their society on principals of democracy and freedom.

## Participation

In both well-established and newly-formed democracies, there is a need for children to experience the implications of democratic decision-making. In those countries facing internal conflict and tensions that threaten democracy, such experience takes on an even greater significance. Children need opportunities to learn what their rights and duties are, how their freedom is limited by the rights and freedoms of others and how their actions can affect the rights of others. They need opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making processes within school and within local communities, and learn to abide by subsequent decisions. Only by experiencing respect for their own views and discovering the importance of their respect for the views of others, will they acquire the capacity and willingness to listen to others and so begin to understand the processes and value of democracy. It is through learning to question, to express views and having their opinions taken seriously, that children will acquire the skills and competence to develop their thinking and to exercise judgment in the myriad of issues that will confront them as they approach adulthood. Unfortunately, when democracy is taught in schools, it is often undertaken through simulation activities - for example, copying formal elections, running UN exercises – with no reference to the day-to-day arbitrary exercise of power in the school. What is needed is the development of participatory processes in all institutional settings with children to promote their understanding that these settings are what democracy is actually about – that democracy means more than the election of a national government.

There is considerable evidence that young people are increasingly disaffected from the formal political process in many European countries as well as North America, where patterns of both voter registration and actual voting among young people are low. Promoting involvement of young people is a means whereby they can acquire knowl-

edge and understanding of political processes as well as strengthening their interest in and commitment to democracy. And there is evidence that children do want a greater say in their lives. Cynicism and lack of active engagement in existing political structures is not necessarily an indication of lack of interest in political issues.

Many children in many countries in the world feel that their views do not matter, that they cannot influence outcomes and that democracy does not work for them. At a formal level, most children are precluded from the right to vote in elections until they are 18 years old and are thus unable to exercise any role in formal representative democratic institutions. Bosnia Herzegovina, Brazil, Croatia, Cuba, Iran, Nicaragua, Philippines, Serbia, Montenegro and Slovenia are the only countries that have reduced the voting age below 18 years. However, democracy can be understood in much broader terms as participation in civil society. Many groups who have traditionally suffered disadvantage - for example, women and people with disabilities - have increasingly entered into dialogue with politicians at local and national levels to promote and press for greater recognition of their concerns. The instruments of parliamentary democracy have not proved sufficient to reflect their interests. Without access even to the formal democratic processes, children have an even stronger claim for comparable political participation. Exclusion from participation imposes a twofold discrimination on children. It represents a denial of the fundamental right to be listened to and taken seriously in decisions that affect them in legislation, policy, resource allocation, as required by Article 12 of the CRC. As a result of this exclusion, they are denied the right to influence the exercise of other rights.

## Arguments often used to challenge participation by children

### \* Children lack the competence or experience to participate

But children, like adults, have different levels of competence in different parts of their lives. Even small children can tell you what they like or dislike about school and why, can have ideas to make lessons more interesting, can offer help to other children. Provided they are given appropriate support, adequate information and allowed to express themselves in ways that are meaningful to them – pictures, poems, drama, photographs, as well as conventional discussions, interviews and group work – all children can participate in issues that are important to them. Indeed, babies and toddlers can be seen as participating in varying degrees depending upon our orientation to their development. The creation of settings that maximize children's opportunities to explore and initiate activities themselves is one way to fulfill the spirit of the CRC.

## \* Children must learn to take responsibility before they can be granted rights

One of the most effective ways of encouraging children to accept responsibility is to first respect their rights. If children are given the chance to share their ideas in a group

and to have them taken seriously, then they will learn that others too, have a right to be heard that must also be respected.

## \* Giving children rights to be heard will take away their childhood

Article 12 does not impose an obligation on children to participate. Rather, it provides a right for children to do so. And it is a romanticized view of childhood to imagine that they are not making decisions and taking responsibilities from a very early age. Even small children in much protected environments might be involved in making decisions about friendships, coping with parental divorce and negotiating between parents in conflict, deciding what games to play and negotiating rules.

## \* It will lead to lack of respect for parents

Listening to children is about respecting them and helping them learn to value the importance of respecting others. It is not about teaching them to ignore their parents. Indeed, Article 29 of the Convention clearly states that one of the aims of education is to teach children respect for their parents. Listening is a way of resolving conflict, finding solutions and promoting understanding – these can only be beneficial for family life. Listening to children is a positive symbol of love and respect. It can be difficult for some parents to respect children's rights to participate when they feel that they, themselves have never been respected as subjects of rights. This does not imply the need to retreat from encouraging children to participate but, rather, the need to be sensitive in doing so. Children should not be led to believe that they alone have a right to have a voice; wherever possible, their families should be involved in the process.

### Principles of democratic participation

There are a number of fundamental principles that should underpin any activity seeking to promote children's democratic participation.

\* Children must understand what the project or the process is about, what it is for and their role within it

Bringing children in to promote an adult agenda is at best tokenistic and at worst exploitative. Events that have children carrying banners displaying slogans that they have had no part in formulating or conferences that get children to perform without understanding the full agenda do not comply with the principle of participation. Similarly, if children are not provided with appropriate information, they cannot make informed choices or express reasoned views. Information needs to be provided for children in formats that are accessible and age-appropriate.

## \* Power relations and decision-making structures must be transparent

It is important that children understand from the beginning what decisions can be made and by whom. If they discover, after a project has started, that they lack the power that they thought they had, they are likely to feel resentful and cynical about the process.

## \* Children should be involved from the earliest possible stage of any initiative

If they are brought in at the last minute, they have no opportunity to shape or influence either the process or the outcomes. Their presence will have little impact on the project as a whole. Evidence shows that children are likely to have strong and creative ideas about how a project needs to develop if it is to be meaningful and relevant to them. It is not always possible to involve children from the very beginning but the earlier they are involved the more likely it is that the project will allow a genuine engagement and contribution from them.

# \* All children should be treated with equal respect regardless of their age, situation, ethnicity, abilities or other factors

The participation of all children should be respected as of equal value although children of different ages and abilities will require different levels of support and will contribute in different ways. Furthermore, it is important to ensure that all children for whom an initiative is relevant are enabled to participate and are not excluded as a result of their "invisibility" within local communities – for example, an initiative focusing on improving the local environment should include children with disabilities, girls, younger children, children from ethnic minority communities and so on. There is also a need to avoid an exclusive focus on activities or projects that address the concerns of more visible groups of children. There is, for example, a great deal of work carried out with children living and working on the street, but very little to empower children in institutions.

### \* Ground rules should be established with all the children at the beginning

All projects involving children need to establish ground rules that are negotiated and agreed between the adults and the children. There may be some boundaries that the adults need to impose because of their responsibilities for a project. However, any such boundaries need to be clear and explicit from the beginning. While ground rules can be renegotiated during the course of the project, this needs to be done democratically with the children involved.

## \* Participation should be voluntary and children should be allowed to leave at any stage

Children cannot be required to take part in a project if it is to be genuinely participatory. For example, taking children from a school to attend a conference without their

agreement or active involvement is not participation, even if they contribute once there. Furthermore, children should be enabled to leave at any stage.

## \* Children are entitled to respect for their views and experience

All projects need to be grounded in recognition that children's participation is a fundamental human right. It is not a gift on the part of sympathetic adults and should never be offered or withdrawn as a reward or punishment.

Although we think that article 3 "The best interest of the child" is as important as article 12, we will not focus on it temporarily because of the circumstances Egypt go through nowadays. The Revolution has opened the door that has been closed for 30 years, so the right to express ideas and to be heard is priority. We think that article 12 paves the way to people and will help them well in this transitional stage, then, may be later, we can refer to article 3. After we all learn how to express opinions freely and get convinced that this is our children's main right, by then we will be able to understand the meaning of the best interest of the child.

Target area: Port Said, Egypt.

### Target groups:

- 1. Port Said international Schools. (Kto12 Private school High social level)
- 2. Mohamed El Sayed School. (Primary Public school middle social level)
- 3. Nahdet Misr School. (Primary Public school low social level)
- 4. Faculty of Education in Port Said

#### Why we selected these schools?

- As for PIS, Our teachers usually used communicative approaches in their teaching. They try to involve the students in most activities but they will do it even better if they know more about CRC and get convinced that there is still much to be given to those students. PIS teachers, with little effort can help all PIS students to be active participants in the school environment.
- Mohamed El Sayed School is an experimental school. Teachers know what but do
  not know the how. They are ready to use interactive methodology with their students, giving them freedom of expression and space to do projects.
- As for Nahdet Misr School. It is underprivileged school. Students come from poor
  areas and some of them live in an orphanage House. Change is a dream for them and
  for their teachers. Teachers need different kind of training and awareness raising of
  CRC. Once they get convinced, they will directly apply to their methodology with
  their students.

The Faculty of Education in Port Said is the place where future teachers get their education. On those bases we thought that orienting those teachers about Child Rights will have great impact on their way of teaching and dealing with children.

**Stakeholders:** Governor of Port Said – Ministry of Education undersecretary in Port Said – Board of Trustees – School principals.

# 2. Purpose

Enhancing and increasing child participation in school environment.

## **School Environment**

Various school characteristics and practices and the school atmosphere in general were related to academic behaviors, attitudes, and achievement. There were generally high levels of achievement at the school when students are identified with its norms and goals. This identification was most likely to happen if three general conditions were in place: (1) the school environment was pleasant, and the school staff was positively disposed toward students; (2) there were numerous shared activities between staff and students; (3) there were broadly shared student positions of responsibility in the school. All three of these conditions are central aspects of community in school.

## 1. Methodology/Activities

The following activities took place throughout the 3 stages of the project:

## A. Planning Stage

- 1. We had a meeting with the Governor of Port Said, explained the change project's objectives and our plan to implement it .He was very supportive and gave us his approval.
- 2. We had a meeting with the Ministry of Education undersecretary in Port Said, explained the change project's objectives and our plan to implement it and he checked more details regarding training material and place, target group and training outcomes. He was very interested and gave us his approval, but he wanted to monitor the implementation of our project after we give him a detailed plan.
- 3. We had a meeting with the Board of Trustees, explained the change project's objectives and our plan to implement it, to guarantee their support and cooperation throughout the project implementation process.
- 4. We had a preliminary meeting with the other 2 schools principals and their assistants to orient them about the Change project objectives.

- 5. We had a meeting with Port Said University Council, reporting about Swedish training and the future plan, survey among faculties regarding child rights as part of curricula.
- 6. We developed a material for the seminars that were held to target groups to raise their awareness about CRC and help them better understand (concepts, articles & implementation in Egypt). Increase their knowledge about some concepts like: Education for all, the friendly school, Education for Democracy and Human Rights . Draw their attention to the importance of promoting Students participation in the school environment.
- 7. We developed a material for the training workshops that were held to target groups to raise their awareness about CRC and help them better understand Positive Discipline and child participation promotion.
- 8. We had a meeting with the Dean of the Faculty of Education in Port Said, explained the change project's objectives and our plan to implement it and she checked more details regarding training material and training outcomes. She was very interested and gave us her approval to implement the training with the Faculty of Education in Port Said teachers.

## B. Implementation Stage

- 1. We hold 2 seminars one for Port Said International School teachers, stakeholders and parents and the other one for Mohamed El Sayed and Nahdet Misr schools' teachers and principals as they have different backgrounds. We used power point presentations, flyers and a poster. We measured their awareness and understanding by a pre and post questionnaire. We used brain storming, elicitation and lecturing techniques during the seminars.
- 2. We created a Facebook group called "Child Rights in Egypt" as a communication channel for all people who are interested in promoting Child Rights in Egypt. We believed it will raise people's awareness towards CRC and give them a chance to reflect on the situation in Egypt and to exchange ideas and views. We invited most of our friends on facebook.
- 3. We hold training workshops for Port Said International School's teachers. We used power point presentations, brain storming, elicitation and lecturing techniques during the seminars.
- 4. We hold training workshops for Mohamed El Sayed and Nahdet Misr schools' teachers. We used power point presentations, brain storming, elicitation and lecturing techniques during the seminars.
- 5. We hold several sessions with the students' councils to increase their awareness about their responsibilities and their rights and we encouraged them to have a real role to make the school a better place.

- 6. We hold a seminar for the Faculty of Education in Port Said teachers. We used power point presentation, brain storming, elicitation and lecturing techniques during the seminar.
- 7. Port Said University established a child rights committee to redesign curricula to add this important topic.

## C. Evaluation and Reflection Stage

- 1. We visited classes of the trained Port Said International Schools' teachers to monitor, guide them and stand on their practices.
- 2. We visited classes of the trained Mohamed El Sayed and Nahdet Misr schools' teachers' to monitor, guide them and stand on their practices.
- 3. During our Mentor's visit, He paid the 3 schools different visits for observation, evaluation and reflections.
- 4. During our Mentor's visit, He paid the Faculty of Education in Port Said a visit to meet faculty teachers and the dean and discuss with them the importance of CRC .Our mentor also met Port Said University president and discussed the importance of this issue and how embedding CRC in curricula is an important action and a needed step for the future of New Egypt that we dream of.
- 5. During our Mentor's visit, we organized a Recognition Ceremony for all teachers participated in our project to motivate and appreciate their efforts.
- 6. During our Mentor's visit, we participated in Egypt's network meeting for all previous patches to discuss the methods of expanding our network and to help in the spreading of Child Rights in Egypt.

## 3. Results

## What has been achieved in the short-term (output):

- PIS Parents, teachers, admins and local stakeholders and core group of the Faculty
  of Education in Port Said staff, the other 2 schools teachers and principals have been
  oriented.
- Higher levels of ownership, increased belonging and motivation, identification with educational goals.
- Adults hear new perspectives about schools; partnership promoted to become norms; greater acceptance of programs and decisions.

### What has been achieved in the medium-term (outcome):

• Support and appreciation of the Governor of Port Said and the Ministry of Education Undersecretary in Port Said.

- Parents' satisfaction of the new methodology used with their kids.
- Teachers developed materials that consolidate child autonomy and project based approach in the school environment.
- Increasing the awareness of PIS Parents, teachers, admin and local stakeholders and the other 2 schools' teachers and principals and the teachers of the Faculty of Education in Port Said.
- PIS Parents, teachers, admins and local stakeholders' and the other 2 schools' teachers and principals have good knowledge about CRC.
- PIS Parents, teachers, admins and local stakeholders and the other 2 schools' teachers and principals show better understanding for student participation.
- When we visited the classes, we noticed that the kids talking time increased versus teacher talking time. Kids are given chances to express opinions and implement activities inside and outside the class. For example, in Nahdet Misr school, the teachers and the kids implemented a project that the called" Let's change and help others change". In this project, it is clear that teachers are aware of the CRC and this helped them give space to their kids to express their ideas and reflect on their school environment. The kids lead a campaign among their colleagues to change a lot of thing such as the school toilets, the behavior of some students who are not behaving, some bad habits of their daily routine.
- We monitored the kids' behavior and noticed the change. Their behavior improved, their grades were higher. What is more important is that they look happier and more comfortable in the school. Absence rate dropped as well.
- As for parents, during our talks with them, we noticed the change in their beliefs and attitudes. Can you imagine that some parents used to ask the teachers to hit their child and punish him physically? They stopped this; they are aware now of their kids' rights and know that they should help the school providing better learning conditions to their kids.
- What was surprising is the administration change especially in Nahdet Misr School, the director started to collect the sticks that the teachers have to threat the kids. He prevented any teacher in the school to hold a stick. He also made a survey for the kids to ask them about their dreams and hopes, if they like the school or not and why. The director started to work on these kids dreams. He fixed the toilets and planted some trees in the school. This is the greatest change and its indicators are crystal clear.
- On the personal level, we as change agents changed a lot. Two of us are school administrators; we changed our style of management. We know now how to delegate, how to give more space to teachers, this give them a chance to be leaders and to show more creativity in their class activities. The change is happening at all levels, it started and never ends.

## **Unexpected Results:**

- We decided to take 2 schools every year to train and do the project with them. On long term we will have a pool that is full of change agents and many schools will be aware of CRC.
- Our students in PIS got involved and changed a lot. When we visited this unprivileged school, they decided to start a project in this school. They called it "Healthy nutrition". They targeted primary 6 students in Nahdet Misr School. They brought them breakfast for a whole weak. Every day give the kids a session on a certain topic, for example, healthy food, hygiene, healthy habits, importance of sports..etc.

## 4. Discussion and Reflection

We believe that we are on the right track and we were able to do everything according to our action plan. We were able to attract people's attention towards child rights in Egypt and managed to make them think if children in Egypt enjoy their rights and know about their rights and to what extent. We had lots of positive and fruitful discussions on how we should take the initiative to change especially after 25<sup>th</sup> January Revolution. We do believe that the change is not going to be easy, but it is necessary to happen. People were different in their opinion concerning how to change and to what extent we should change, but most of them agreed that we should start with child.

We have to admit we faced some obstacles that we actually considered them challenges that we should overcome. Here are some examples of those challenges:

\* To start our project, we had to get many approvals from different authorities, for example: Port Said Governor, Ministry of Education undersecretary in Port Said, the experimental schools directorate, the other 2 schools principals and the Board of Trustees .Some of these people welcomed the idea at once and others needed time to check and approve and they asked for a detailed plan before we start implementation. We also had to get these approvals more than once as the government changed the Governor and the Undersecretary many times during the transitional stage. Things were not stable on the political level and this consequently affected authority and their decisions and their priorities. This was effort and time consuming, but it paid off as we had good relation and support from all authorized people.

\*During Seminars people discussed the conflicts that could occur in culture values between the child and their teachers and parents regarding their rights in expressing their feelings and opinions. Conflicts between the parent's beliefs can be expressed in what is right for the minor child, and the minor child's beliefs in what is in his or her best

interest. Parents see that they have fundamental right to assert parental authority over their minor children in order to protect the family unit and control the upbringing of their children. This authority enables the parents to have a dominant role in any decisions that affect the upbringing of minor children. The rationale for recognizing that a minor child's parents have this right is that society has traditionally believed that minor children cannot be trusted to make important decisions on their own behalf.

We discussed the conflict with them and convinced them that listening is a way of resolving conflict, finding solutions and promoting understanding can be beneficial for family life. Listening to children is a positive symbol of love and respect. It can be difficult for some parents to respect children\( \text{S}\) rights to participate when they feel that they, themselves have never been respected as subjects of rights. One of the more effective ways of encouraging children to accept responsibility is to first respect their rights. If children are given the chance to share their ideas and to have them taken seriously, then they will learn that others too, have a right to be heard that must also be respected. At the end of discussions, people agreed that the majority of child rights don't conflict with culture or religion and we should concentrate more on the positive side of Child Rights.

- \* Schools on the national level are after the educational objectives achievement regardless other aspects related to students' capacity and personality building. Because our Educational System is test oriented, teachers believe that they should concentrate more on child assessment, educational material preparation, lesson plans and exams, but not free activities or free discussions, the higher levels of thinking not reciting and memorizing information. In the curriculum teachers don't have space on exchanging ideas with the kids. At the end they agreed that materials and methodology should be revisited and children should be given the chance to express themselves, to discuss and analyze, teaching methods should be communicative and they should consider the differences of learning styles of students. After the training, teachers realized that designing activities that enhance child participation and brings an active role of the child in the school environment is as easy as developing the traditional activities..Students' centered activities could be developed easier as children will take their responsibility reacting and implementing. When kids get involved they learn better.
- \* All previous challenges were expected, but this one was not. At the beginning of the academic year, teachers all over Egypt had been on a strike demanding a raise in their salaries, which affect our progress in training our teachers. We faced difficulties in setting the seminars dates, in motivating teachers to attend, in convincing them that we need to start the change, while they think nothing changed in Egypt; they were very disappointed, because they can't get their rights, so how come they help children get their rights. Many teachers were positive and tried to convince others that they are parents before they are teachers and that our children have nothing to do with the conflict happening these days in Egypt and that if we want our rights as teachers, we should help our kids be better citizens who can get their rights.

\* In general the 3 schools' teachers were very enthusiastic about the change project and considered it the hope and the best solution for what is happening in Egypt on the long term. Children as citizens of the future should be raised on understanding the concept of the balancing between rights and responsibilities. However, if their participation is to be meaningful, it is imperative that their engagement is directly linked to their own first-hand experience and is identified by the children themselves as a key area of concern.

# 5. Way Forward

We are planning to implement the following action plan in future:

- We are planning to train 2 different schools' teachers about CRC and Child Participation every year after getting the approval of the Ministry of Education undersecretary in Port Said. We can encourage the trained teachers from the 3 schools to act as trainers for the teachers of the new 2 schools. They can share with them their experiences and practices to spread the awareness about Child Rights.
- We are planning to train the teachers and students of the Faculty of Education in Port Said about CRC and Child Participation and try to embed it in their curriculum. As they will be the teachers of the future, they should be oriented and trained about Child Rights and techniques of engaging students to be active participants.
- Keep up enhancing the students' council role to promote Child Participation in trained schools. We believe that it can be a great idea to involve students in matters affecting them and to be decision makers. It is sufficient to give children the right to be listened to and to take what they have to say seriously. Give students a chance to implement projects and share in projects implemented on the governorate level.
- Monitor the trained teachers to stand on their practices. We have to pay them regular visits to support, guide and mentor them. We also should provide them with all materials and tools needed to help them in implementing the change projects in their schools. We want to collect the teachers' best practices in one portfolio and make it available for all teachers and specially fresh ones to encourage them sustain and consolidate these practices in their schools.
- Expand the network of change agents whether in Port Said and Cairo to spread the idea and to make our project sustainable. We should hold regular meetings for the purpose of reflection and exchanging experience.

# 6. List of References

Lund University's presentations.

Child Rights Convention articles.

Roger A. Hart(1992) . Children's Participation" from tokenism to citizenship". Unicef

Adam Fletcher (2005). Meaningful student involvement, Guide to students as partners in school change. Created for SoundOut.org in partnership with Human Links Foundation.

Gerison Lansdown (2001). Promoting children's participation in democratic decision-making. Unicef

# **Appendix**

• Questionnaire used before and after seminar sessions: (prepared in Arabic language)

# Questionnaire

What is the definition of the child?

What do you know about Child Rights Convention?

What do you know about Child Rights especially in School?

What is Corporal Punishment?

What is your opinion about child participation in school environment?

80

• Presentation presented to Port Said Governor, Ministry of Education undersecretary in Port Said, Board of trustees, the other 2 school principals and the Dean of the Faculty of Education in Port Said.



Board of Trustees orientation



Faculty of Education orientation

• Materials used in Seminar sessions and training.





• Photos of the Seminars held about change project.



• Photos of the trainings held about change project.



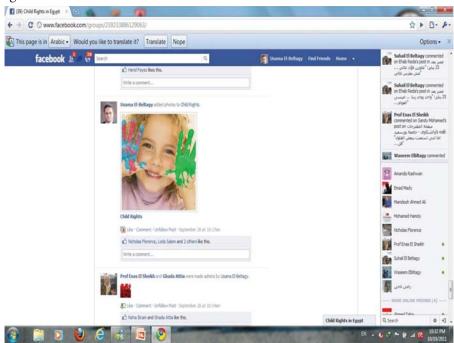
• Meeting with the students' council:



• Students' activities :



• Facebook page as a communication media between all participants to reflect on child rights.



# • Mentor's Visit to the 3 schools:

Mohamed El Sayed School visit	Nahdet Misr School:	Mentor with Students council at Port Said International Schools