

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION 'ON THE CHECKPOINT'

UNESCO CHAIR IN HUMAN RIGHTS

OTTO-VON-GUERICKE UNIVERSITY OF MAGDEBURG

The UNESCO Chair in Human Rights Education at the Otto-von-Guericke University of Magdeburg organized a **National Interdisciplinary Conference on "Human Rights Education on the Checkpoint"**, 24 - 25 January 2002, held at the LEUCOREA Foundation, Martin Luther City, Wittenberg. The conference was attended by about 100 participants: teachers of secondary education, university professors, students and other individuals interested or involved the issues introduced and discussed at the conference.

The conference intended to offer a "State of Art of Formal Human Rights Education in Germany" and to give teachers the opportunity to make a good start in cooperating with the UNESCO Chair. This conference was followed-up by an **International Interdisciplinary Conference on "Human Rights Education after September 11"**, January 25-27 January 2002, designed for international experts in this field.

Though, the two conferences had different headings and target groups, there were **3 issues** and groups of questions raised, the **special significance** of which was equally acknowledged and should be emphasized hereafter:

1. What is Human Rights Education about? Of course, there is not only one unique approach to Human Rights Education. With regard to the content, we can distinguish between

- approaches that focus mainly on legal aspects and "on the documents" and
- approaches that focus more on the dimension of principles and values.

With regard to concepts, we have different ones for different learning environments and for different target groups. Finally, in the context of Human Rights Education, we have to distinguish between conditions, aims and practical approaches applied in this field

- in 'older' democracies,
- in post-totalitarian or in authoritarian countries,
- in developing countries or
- in post-conflict societies.

Even though we argue for the indivisibility of human rights, we find different priorities of human rights and Human Rights Education in these societies. In order to contribute to the clarification of the profile of Human Rights Education, the UNESCO Chair at the University of Magdeburg has tried to develop "**Cornerstones of Human Rights Education**" presented more in detail in Part III of the present Bulletin.

2. Ignorance and Human Rights Education:

Although, human rights educators make almost the same experience that "most people have only a vague notion of their human rights as reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ..., especially its guarantee of social and economic rights" (Sandy Flowers), we had only scarce empirical evidence so far. On the two conferences mentioned above, Lothar Müller (University of Trier, Germany) presented findings of his empirical *Study on (German) UNESCO-Project-Schools and Human Rights Education (2001)* that confirms these experiences. However, it was surprising that even in UNESCO-Project-Schools, relevant findings were really disappointing. The students knew only 5 out of 30 articles of the Universal Declaration. Only a few of the students said they would become active to promote human rights. Furthermore there was no measurable effect of

Human Rights Education on the emotions or the behaviour of the students. As these findings contradict a study conducted by the Search Institute and Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights (1997) that yielded impressive concrete results and that Human Rights Education really matters that more (comparative) research in this field is requested.

Special mention should be also made of a contribution of Dr. Thomas Henschel, Director of the School of Governance, Berlin, who presented "Knowledge Tools for Human Rights Education - a New Media" aimed at promoting and accelerating students' know-ledge and understanding of human rights by visualizing the content of "the documents" concerned.

3. Human Rights Education under the influence of terrorism:

Fighting terrorism demonstrates that a sustainable Human Rights Education is limited. Human Rights Education after September 11 means building a stronger awareness for and about human rights under conditions of extreme insecurity and fear. This feeling of insecurity causes a deep reluctance towards humans rights issues and even fosters processes of "unlearning" human rights and human rights standards amongst many learners (see increasing discrimination and the debate on torture). What is needed is a new push of empowerment of the learners to enable them to better cope with the challenges of insecurity and to counter the feelings of powerlessness. Even if the threat of terrorism cannot be "educated away", it should be possible to prepare people to cope with the feelings that terrorism can provoke. However, first of all, human rights educators have to rethink their approaches how to over-come ignorance, incompetence and intolerance in times of terrorism.

- Which kind of critical knowledge is needed to understand the root causes of terrorism, the options of political decisions, and the possibilities to defend human rights?
- How can sceptical learners be convinced that human rights are part of the solution of the fight or so-called war against terrorism rather than being an obstacle in fighting terrorism?
- What are the methods that have to be developed to regain confidence in our human rights which, as we believe, have been reduced.
- How can the willingness to accept the rights of others be developed, when he or she is suspected to be a potential terrorist?
- How can learners be convinced that a suspect terrorist has human rights and that the acceptance of torture leads to a breakdown of values of our civilization?
- How can we educate for a sustainable acceptance of equal rights under conditions of social stress and political insecurity?
- Who can provide those resources and experiences which enable the learner to accept equal rights of others even under the conditions of social inequality and insecurity?
- How is personal empowerment possible so that powerless people among us do not escape from reality and become intolerant?

Knowing that one influential factor for change is the public discourse, we have to think about chances and channels to influence this public discourse on human rights in order to improve the protection of human rights and to build a culture of human rights.

Professor K. Peter Fritzsche - Chairholder