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## COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL CO-OPERATION

Symposium on

"Human Rights education in  
schools in Western Europe"

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Summary of the talk on  
"Teaching and learning about  
Human Rights in the secondary school:  
some positive proposals"

by

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1. The Field

Consideration will be given to the general condition of the Social Studies area of the school curriculum, and to the peculiar characteristics of Human Rights Education. In Social Studies, we observe both prophets of gloom ("the field as a whole seems to be suffering from a terminal illness"\*) and vital developments (Civic and Political Education; Development Education; Multi-cultural and Inter-cultural Education; Human Rights Education; Education for Peace and for International Understanding). Peculiarities of Human Rights Education include that it had little research base; that examples of practice have been hard to find; that outstanding pioneers have been lacking; and that it is the only area of study in Education which is populated by lawyers. The new developments pose problems of overlap and competition, and sectarianism and the promotion of rival group cultures threaten the field with fragmentation. There may even be competition between the overarching concepts (Political Education; World Studies; Global Education) proposed to solve the problems.

2. Aims

Human Rights Education needs clear aims and limited and achievable goals. It must not be "goal-rich and content-poor" or be characterised by high rhetoric and sparse practice. The twin basic aims of Human Rights Education should be to inform citizens of their rights and to encourage the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed to secure and maintain Human Rights nationally and internationally.

3. The Peculiar Contribution of Human Rights Education

At the core of Human Rights is the idea of inherent rights and fundamental freedoms and a concern for fair treatment and due process. Promoting an understanding of these two notions may be the peculiar contribution that Human Rights Education can make to Political Education in schools.

4. Content

The content of Human Rights Education should have two aspects - the specific data (documents, dates, events, personalities, themes and topics) and the concepts associated with Human Rights. Some content (the three key documents - the UN Declaration of 1948; the European Convention of 1950; and the European Social Charter of 1961; and the associated concepts) should have a place in any programme.

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\* Howard S. Mehlinger, Director of the Social Studies Development Centre at Indiana University, writing in 1981.

Other content will vary according to the context. The documents, as they stand, may be the bread of life to lawyers and constitutional historians, but they are not the spark of classroom life. However, the Geneva Project (directed by Professor L. MASSARENTI) has produced a version of the UN Declaration which is written in simple and straightforward language. Cases from the European Court have a strong human interest and touch upon issues (such as compulsory sex education; corporal punishment; and freedom of expression) which are familiar to many school students. The stories of famous campaigners for Human Rights, like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, can show that Human Rights are about people. It is important to include some "success stories" in order to guard against feelings of powerlessness and despair which so many examples of violations and negations of Human Rights, in far away countries, induce in some students. Many themes and topics associated with Human Rights - the persecution of minorities; refugees; torture; prisoners of conscience; Apartheid - read like a catalogue of inhumanity, but even here instances of progress, and of the triumph of the human spirit, can be found.

#### 5. Methods and materials

Because it is concerned with knowledge, attitudes and skills, Human Rights Education needs a variety of teaching and learning methods and materials. Because it is concerned with those procedural values (such as fairness, toleration, a respect for truth and for reasoning) which underpin both the ideal of Human Rights and the ideal of democratic discourse, Human Rights Education cannot be achieved in teacher-dominated classrooms where frontal teaching is the main form of pedagogy. Political socialisation research has established that an appropriate classroom climate is a crucial element in democratic Political Education. More recently, educators like Robin RICHARDSON have found ways of helping teachers to acquire the skills to create an appropriate classroom climate, where open discussion is possible within a framework of security. In addition to oral exposition by the teacher, and group discussions, students learn by projects, through drama and role play, and through games and simulations. It is possible to role play some of the cases of the Human Rights Court, and many of the best games and simulations have important Human Rights dimensions.

It is important to find some games and simulations which stress co-operation - and to be aware that the two archetypal games - chess and Monopoly - are based on war and on possessive individualism. ("The Co-operative Sports and Games Book", published by the Writers and Readers, London, 1982 can help here).

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Teaching and learning methods which encourage - and even guarantee - activity on the part of the students are essential if the students are to acquire and develop those skills necessary to act on Human Rights issues. Skills can only be acquired and developed by practising them.

#### 6. Learning Through Practical Activities

Some schools have organised some very impressive activities to facilitate learning by doing. The Tvind School in Denmark has major projects in which students design and build low-technology windmills for low-income countries, and the confederation of schools at Stantonbury in the United Kingdom takes groups of students to work with their peers in Tanzania. However, the need for experiential learning in Human Rights Education can be met in less grandiose ways. Students can work in voluntary activities in organisations like Amnesty International; Brot für die Welt; Christian Aid; Oxfam; and the United Nations Association. Here students will have the opportunity to develop skills of organisation, discussion, decision-making and policy-formulation and, on occasions, they may work on a particular issue and develop the skills needed to organise and carry out a campaign.

Issue-based groups can produce teaching and learning materials for schools (such as the Human Rights Project of the British Section of Amnesty International and the List of Resource Materials on Human Rights Education produced by the United Nations Association London Office). Issue-based groups can also link school students with the wider society (of their own country, of Europe, and of the world).

#### 7. Evaluation

Evaluation of Human Rights Education may be more difficult than in some other areas of the curriculum - partly because some of the aims are in the affective domain (to do with attitudes, values, and sensitivities) and partly because some of the aims are long-term. However, it is important to evaluate learning where that is feasible. Examples exist of knowledge tests (to assess mastery of information and of concepts) and of projective tests (to assess issue-recognition and to assess political reasoning). Games and simulations can be used to make some assessment of action skills.

#### 8. Conclusions

Until recently, Human Rights Education was an under-developed area. It had enjoyed high-level support from international organisations, such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe, but low-level support from

national governments. There had been many meetings of experts, and many resolutions for action, but little action by real teachers with real students in real schools. There was a dearth of textbooks and other teaching and learning materials. As a result of work done by educational planners, researchers, issue-based organisations, teachers, and the consistent support of the international organisations, the situation has now changed.

Given limited and achievable goals, and a careful concern to place it within the ecology and culture of particular school systems, teaching and learning about Human Rights can now become part of the common experience of students in the schools of Western Europe.

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This paper is based partly on the following work carried out previously:

- Ian Lister "Issues in Teaching and Learning about Human Rights: A Working Paper", 1981 (available from the Political Education Research Unit, University of York, England)
- Ian Lister "Reflections on the Council of Europe Seminar on Human Rights Education held at Bergen, Norway, 1981" (available as above)
- Ian Lister "Teaching and Learning about Human Rights", 1983 (available from the Council of Europe)