

Council of Europe Higher Education Forum 2: Higher education and Democratic Culture

“Promoting Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship”

*Presentation by Thomas Hammarberg, Commissioner for Human Rights
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One misunderstanding about human rights is that they are a quick-fix. Respect for the rights does not come automatically when the dictator has been removed. Experience shows that decisive steps towards a rights-based society require a series of actions, some of which produce results only after a considerable time.

A deeper respect for human rights is a question of societal culture. That is, a culture in which people at large know about their rights and how to claim them. It is a culture in which those in power respond to those claims and develop a system of true justice. In all this, learning about human rights is key.

I will comment upon three aspects of human rights learning. Firstly, the preparation and training of professionals, of particular importance for the protection and promotion of human rights. Secondly, education in schools at all levels. Thirdly, awareness in society as a whole about human rights.

Human rights in higher education

Those who have the privilege of higher education have indeed a particular responsibility. Some professionals are pillars in a human rights' society: teachers, lawyers, journalists, social workers, doctors and other health personnel, military and police officers – to mention but a few. Their attitudes, knowledge and competence influence many others. It is of crucial importance that they are well educated also about human rights and understand their true meaning.

Traditionally, human rights were an aspect of legal education and no more. The law and the justice system are crucial tools for the protection of human rights, but not the only aspect. Human rights have an ethical dimension which is broader than the law. This means that human rights are multidisciplinary and should be seen as a dimension of all education.

During recent years there has been significant progress in several countries in this field. Multidisciplinary courses on human rights have been organized on the basis of new curricula. A number of excellent human rights programs solely dedicated to human rights teaching and learning have been established. The graduates of these Master's Programs form a new generation of experts with good knowledge of human rights issues – in many cases combined with enthusiasm and commitment to promotion of human rights.

Also, human rights have been introduced as an aspect of the more specialized education for the professionals I have just mentioned. For instance, how to handle issues relating to gender equality, children's rights and equal opportunities, is now part of the training for police officers, judges and social workers in several countries.

This is an important development and should be further promoted. The time has come for a more systematic evaluation of these experiences. A comparative analysis of lessons learnt in different countries would be of great value in order to serve as a discussion on future development. For instance, a review of teaching material would probably give ideas for further improvements.

Human rights education at primary and secondary level

Competent, well-educated teachers are needed to ensure a meaningful human rights learning in the school system as a whole. The Convention on the Rights of the Child says that the school should help to develop "*the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential*". This can only happen if the curricula relate to the daily life of pupils and what is relevant for them. The key point is that the school must be relevant to the child, now and for the future. This applies also to the teaching and learning of human rights.

A comprehensive education in human rights provides not only knowledge about the rights and the mechanisms that protect them, but also provides the skills needed to apply human rights in daily life. Human rights education fosters attitudes and behaviors needed to uphold human rights for all. It should convey fundamental human rights' principles, such as equality and non-discrimination, while affirming their interdependence, indivisibility and universality. At the same time, activities should be practical – built on real-life experience and enabling the learners to build on human rights' principles found in their own cultural context and daily life.

Governments should include human rights in the national curricula to ensure that such education is given appropriate importance. Respect for human rights should also be developed through a democratic spirit in the school itself and expressed in, for instance, teaching methods and behaviour codes. Another important aspect is the combination of learning to respect one's own nation and culture while at the same time respecting those of others. The school has a role in preventing xenophobia and creating better understanding for minorities, indigenous peoples, refugees and immigrants; the word 'respect' is significant in this context. Gender equality should be given priority. No discrimination should be tolerated in regard to the treatment of girls in school.

Sometimes the question is raised whether such teaching amounts to preaching certain ideologies rather than objective, impartial education. I do not agree with that objection. Values are part of life and cannot be kept outside school. The risk of undue indoctrination can be avoided in a democratic school in which the child is an active participant, rather than a listener.

There are strong arguments for democratic schools:

- Firstly, participation is a right in itself;
- Secondly, it is an important task for schools to make it possible for students to understand and respect the democratic values of our societies. It is all the more important that these values are prominent in schools;
- Thirdly, participation is a condition for an interactive learning process which we know is pedagogically effective. There are interesting examples of schools where the teachers have made efforts to open a genuine discussion on the question of what knowledge the pupils wanted to obtain, and thereafter, to allow lessons to be directed accordingly.

Few educators today deny that children should have a chance to be active. ‘Learning by doing’ is often much more interesting and effective than passive listening. Memorization of raw facts are less valuable than application and processes which enhance understanding. A child-centered school gives the teacher a new role: less of a lecturer or a classroom police officer, more of a facilitator or group leader. A modern teacher will organize activities, provide materials, stimulate, guide and give advice. The pupils should have opportunities to ‘learn how to learn’ as a basis for continued, lifelong learning.

The inner life of the school must reflect its educational message, including the values of human rights, such as the importance of tolerance and respect for those who are different. Democratic learning requires respectful relations in the school. One important task is to give children the tools for peaceful conflict resolution. It is thus most important that teachers themselves do not use violence against pupils.

Human rights awareness in the whole society

We are aiming at a universal human-rights culture in which mutual understanding, tolerance, peace, justice and human rights understanding reach all sectors of society in a process of life-long learning. A rights-based approach to education can clearly contribute to this goal. However, the school system is not the only instrument for spreading awareness about human rights. Messages from opinion leaders are also highly influential, not least on younger people. Music and film artists who have spoken out against repression and injustices should be applauded – being role models for many. The anti-racism campaign involving football stars in the World Cup is also an excellent initiative.

Leading politicians should also recognize their role as teachers. Any xenophobic tendency in their speeches may have the effect of legitimizing discrimination and harassment of minorities and those who are different. On the other hand, clear statements for tolerance could be very important in tense situations.

The Media forms attitudes in today's society. Journalists - as individuals - usually do value human rights, and in particular, of course, freedom of expression. At the same time, media workers resist instructions on what to write or broadcast – this is consistent with their independence, which in turn is a protection of their freedom.

This poses a problem. How do we ensure that the ever more influential media do indeed spread awareness of human rights - in a situation where the media are independent? Our experience is that we should trust those in the media, as state interventions do not lead to better reporting, on the contrary. With this approach we have to accept that negative coverage does occur and we have to criticize such tendencies in a free discussion.

One important counter weight is the civil society. Non-governmental organizations play an enormously important role in promoting human rights values today. There are of course a few bad apples also in that basket, but, again, the best support for the positive activities is to secure that the organizations can operate freely.

The religious communities have a vast outreach and a deep impact on values. The core ethical values which we find in all major religions are very close to the human rights principles. Much important work for the defence of human rights have been done by religious activists.

At the same time we are aware that xenophobic tendencies, or worse, are promoted by people in – as they say – the name of God. The religious communities have an important role to address such misrepresentations and protect values such as respect for “the others”. The inter-religious dialogue convened by the Council of Europe has taken up this problem.

Information campaigns by governments and intergovernmental organizations, including the Council of Europe, do not always have much impact. They are needed of course, but I feel that there is a need to discuss how they should be organized to have a broader impact in a world where the media dominates and much information is now transmitted informally through electronic means. For instance, there should be video games about how you protect human rights as an alternative to games about how you kill as many creatures as possible.

International efforts in the area of human rights education

Last year, a special UN Decade on Human Rights Education ended. Establishment of national plans of action and national human rights' resource and training centres were among the key measures to be taken.

Sadly, at the end of the Decade the targets set were far from being achieved. Very few countries currently provide every child with formal human rights education at all levels of school education. Rather than establishing human rights education as a separate subject in the curricula of all learning institutions, most governments include human

rights in a non-compulsory part of civic education. Training of teachers, if offered at all, is also based on voluntary participation.

The importance of human rights learning has been stressed in the outcome document for UN reform at the General Assembly summit last autumn. A decision has also been taken about a new World Program for Human Rights Education to advance the implementation of human rights' education programmes in all sectors.

Whatever the status of human rights education or the situation or type of education system, the development of human rights' education should be on each country's education agenda. Each country should establish realistic goals and means for action in accordance with national context, priorities and capacity.

The Council of Europe has a crucial contribution to make. It can assist in a variety of ways, for instance in the elaboration, implementation and monitoring of a national strategy, in direct contact with the Ministries of Education or other relevant national actors; by facilitating information-sharing at all levels, including through the identification, collection and dissemination of good practices as well as information about available materials, institutions and programmes. It could encourage the development of human rights' education networks as well as support training and research.

The Council of Europe has already made a major contribution to the increased awareness of human rights through its human rights' education and training activities. As a Commissioner for Human Rights, I intend to raise the importance of human rights' education at all levels of my work.