

Education for Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship

From Policy to Practice

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The first session of this very significant event was about (Education for intercultural understanding: from policy to practice. This session is about (Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship: from policy to practice). It is fully understood and accepted that this division of the three key concepts of this conference is solely for structural and organizational purposes.

However, in reality it is unrealistic to deal with (1) intercultural understanding (2) human rights (3) democratic citizenship in isolation from each other. They always come together as one package and this exactly what justifies the establishment of this very timely and crucial centre, namely, The European Wergeland Centre (EWC). Therefore, my intervention will be a cross-cutting comment, addressing the three aforementioned key concepts.

As described by Geir Pollen, "Wergeland was a dreamer who did not lose himself in his dreams. He was too much of a rationalist, too much of an extrovert and a man of action". In other words, he practiced very well what he preached. I think if he was with us today, he would have been like me very concerned about talking too much and doing nothing!! During the last few decades, world organizations, regional bodies and national authorities have produced numerous declarations, recommendations and documents about dialogue among cultures, human rights and democratic citizenship.

However, the world today is still on fire, basically because in reality we did very little if any. Today Since we started this conference, I have been listening to my colleagues, the previous speakers, and I have got now a long list of eloquently expressed concepts such as: 'diversity', 'identity',

'equality', 'freedom', 'ethnicity', 'tolerance', 'dignity', etc. These concepts and many others are hanging around in the world for many decades now like ghosts. We feel them sometimes but we cannot touch them. We hear about them but we do not see them in reality. Knowledge has no value what so ever if it is not put into practice. I am very glad today to learn that the establishment of the (EWC) is a serious attempt to move **from policy to practice**, because this is the real challenge that faces us all with regard to intercultural understanding, human rights and democratic citizenship.

A former European Minister of Education states in his biography after his retirement that 'teachers' in our schools are a big army whose loyalty is essential to the success of education systems. Recent research on successful schools around the world confirms this statement; researchers in the field of education today argue repeatedly that teachers are the most significant ingredient in any educational system in the world. The question is how a centre like this (EWC) can play a role in making teachers' practices more effective and powerful in creating future world citizens who live in harmony with all cultures and believe in human rights and democracy??

Oman, my country, is like many other countries around the world, has produced a number of documents in relation to teaching cultural diversity, human rights and democratic citizenship. Nonetheless, it is true also that we in Oman have something in common with Henrik Wergeland!! We practice what we preach. I have no time to tell you much about that, thus I am going to give very briefly two practical examples of how these concepts are taught in Oman.

The first example is about the importance of the local context as mentioned by the keynote speaker of this session. Traditionally in rural areas of Oman we have an old irrigation system, which still works until today very efficiently. In this system, water from mountains run through several farms in any given village. Every farm owner has a share of this water depending on a number of parameters determined by the village leadership. Surprisingly enough, this system has very effective and efficient traditional democratic structures that facilitate the distribution

of water among farmers peacefully. Children in such a village like this in Oman learn human rights and democratic citizenship values since their early childhood. Furthermore, school teachers in Oman use the local traditional irrigation system to explain and simplify for their students complex concepts of dialogue, rights and democracy.

The second example is the project of 'connecting cultures'. It is an initiative that has been initiated by a dedicated British educator who works in Oman called Mark Evans and supported by the Omani Ministry of Education. We bring to Oman young people from different continents and take them to the desert without PCs and mobile phones. The only means of communication there is face-to-face communication. With the guidance of well experienced educator, these young people engage in a constructive dialogue for almost two weeks about their cultures, world affairs, future visions of the world and so on.

They do not engage in a cultural dialogue among themselves only, but sometimes they find themselves in situations where they have to engage in dialogue with snakes and scorpions in the desert also!! After all, we are not alone on this planet!! Through this very exciting adventure, these young people acquire democracy skills as well as life skills. You are all, dear colleagues, invited to send some young people from your countries to Oman to join this annual cultural expedition to the desert for dialogue, human rights and democracy.

Finally, intercultural understanding, human rights and democratic citizenship cannot be appropriately taught only by introducing them as school subjects. They must be practiced in every aspect of day-to-day life of schools and families. It is commonly noticed that teachers in many schools do not practice what they preach. They teach these concepts but the way they treat their students might not necessarily be consistent with what they teach. In addition, curriculum design of other subjects and assessment systems might be in some cases not in harmony with teaching the three concepts.

Consequently, my message to the (EWC) is to support practical projects, to focus on teachers and to take into account local contexts of the

societies it will be serving. I have no doubt that the centre is a step forward towards realizing Henrik Wergeland's dream and our dream when he said on behalf of all of us:

May Christian, Muslim, Heathen, Jew

Ultimately meet each other

In their common father's arms.

Each with his own melody

Sought to enter the same hall

And in the smoke of burning tears

Found comfort in each other's breast!