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OSCE Conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination

Human Rights Education in the Austrian Educational System

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Excellencies! Ladies and Gentlemen!

My part is it, to give you a short overview about Human Rights Education in the Austrian Education System.

Permit me to broach my subject by bringing up a number of questions I consider essential – and pose them to you, to myself, to all of us.

- What lessons could we draw from the history of National Socialism and Holocaust if no information were communicated about it and if we learned nothing about it?
- What insight could we get into foreign cultures, if we knew nothing about them?
- What would be our awareness of other people, if we never addressed our own prejudices and stereotyped conceptions?
- How could each one of us contribute to a democratic society, if human rights and human rights education simply were ignored?

And at least the resulting question will be: What must be the main tasks of human rights education in the classroom and in what way has the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Culture facilitated the performance of these tasks?

I. Introduction:

In recent years, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has launched a number of initiatives in the field of human rights education. In particular civics education, both as a so-called 'integral educational principle' applying to all types of school and as a compulsory subject, has served as the substrate for a variety of measures designed to combat prejudices, racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism and to foster respect for values, such as diversity and pluralism, as well as mutual respect.

In compliance with the Durban Action Plan, the Ministry launched a national action plan against racism in 2002 with the aim of establishing, institutionalising and implementing measures promoting tolerance and non-violence and counteracting racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia.

II. Statutory provisions providing for human rights education

Human rights are anchored in the framework decree on the "integral principle of civics education" and in the curricula of the Austrian schools:

The educational objectives pursued with the curricula of compulsory schools providing general education and of secondary academic schools require classroom teaching actively to promote a spirit of democracy committed to human rights.

The curricula for secondary academic schools, secondary technical and vocational schools and secondary technical and vocational colleges stipulate human rights as a mandatory content of civics education.

In the framework decree on the "integral principle of civics education" which was introduced at all types of school in 1978, it is laid down that

Peace, liberty, equality and justice are basic values which must underlie any organised form of society and thus any political action.

By applying the "integral principle of civics education" the following objectives are to be achieved in the area of human rights education:

Students should become aware that in a democratic community, personal courage is often required in pursuing legitimate interests and that both majority decisions and minority rights must be respected, provided they have been made in a democratic manner and are in conformity with the principles of the fundamental human rights.

Civics education should promote the ability and readiness to advocate inviolable values such as liberty and dignity, to eliminate prejudices and to champion the cause of the disadvantaged; it should provide the insight that the establishment of a fair system of peace is necessary for the survival of humankind; it should clarify that an all-out global effort is required to achieve this aim which must be perceived as a personal responsibility by every individual.

In the early nineties, “cross-cultural learning” was introduced into the curricula of all academic secondary schools as another “integral educational principle” designed to impart a spirit of tolerance, dialog and acceptance.

III. The observance of international days and memorial days against racism in the classroom

At the start of every school year, the Ministry issues a decree whereby schools are informed about topical events, remembrance days as well as anniversaries and are called upon to take account of and observe such days in the classroom. The Department for Civics Education issues separate decrees in which the attention of schools and of teachers is drawn to the observance of international days, such as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (21 March) or the International Day of Human Rights (1. December) or the National Day of Remembrance against Violence and Racism in Memory of the Victims of National Socialism on 5 May, which was introduced in 1997 by an unanimous decision of the Austrian National Council in compliance with the decision taken on 18 October 2002 by the Conference of Ministers of Culture and Education of the Council of Europe, to initiate National Days of Remembrance in Memory of the Nazi-victims.

IV. Special services for schools and teachers

Human Rights Education Service Desk at *Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Human Rights*

In cooperation with *Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Human Rights* in Vienna, the Department for Civics Education of the Austrian Ministry for Education, Science and Culture set up the Service Desk for Human Rights Education, in February 1997. The occasion and the international framework were provided by the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004). The Desk offers advice, supplies teaching materials, maintains its own website (www.humanrights.at) and issues a quarterly newsletter, entitled “*Teaching Human Rights. Informationen zur Menschenrechtsbildung*”, each number of which is devoted to a priority theme. It functions as a centre for information exchange primarily for school education. Activities range from the imparting of knowledge on human rights (*knowledge*), via awareness raising (*attitudes*) to the reinforcement - in training courses - of the social skills required for the enforcement of human rights (*skills*).

In 2002, the Service Desk, in cooperation with the European Training and Research Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (ETC) in Graz, put together a human rights education kit which the Ministry made available free of charge to all secondary academic schools in Austria.

In the school year 2002/03, the Service Desk for Human Rights Education together with the Service Desk for Civics Education (also set up at *Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Human Rights* at the Ministry's initiative), with the two NGO's *Asylkoordination Österreich (Asylum Coordination Austria)* and *ARGE Jugend gegen Gewalt und Rassismus (Task Force „Youth against Violence and Racism“)* launched a two-year project with a view to implementing the peer-group concept of EPTO (European Peer Training Organisation), a partner organisation of ADL (Anti-Defamation League).

- Action Days for Civics and Human Rights Education

From 27 April to 15 May 2003, the Ministry of Education (in cooperation with the Civics Education Service Desk, the Human Rights Education Service Desk, and other agents) for the first time presented the wide range of programmes designed to promote civics and human rights education during nationwide “Civics Education Action Days”, which are an Austrian contribution to the Council-of-Europe project, “Education for Democratic Citizenship”. In 2004 these Action Days will be organised from 18 April to 9 May. Through this initiative the Ministry of Education shares in developing, safeguarding and promoting a culture of democracy at the pan-European level.

- Project on “National Socialism and the Holocaust. Remembrance and the Present”

Building on in-service seminars for teachers at Yad Vashem, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has run an intercommunication programme and multiplier network focusing on the theme of “National Socialism and the Holocaust. Remembrance and the Present” (www.erinnern.at), which is expected to generate new forms of intercommunication on and engagement with this topic. The Booklet “History Teaching in Austria. The Nazi Era and the Holocaust” gives you further information.

V. In-service training for teachers

Several institutions provide in-service training seminars for teachers in human rights/fundamental rights, for example:

the University of Innsbruck (MBA-university course in civics education) or

the ETC in Graz, which has, inter alia, produced a “Manual on Human Rights Education – Understanding Human Rights” for the Human Security Network at the initiative of the Austrian Foreign Minister, Her Excellency Mrs. Ferrero-Waldner, which deals with human rights in general and contains modules on selected human rights issues, such as the prohibition of torture, freedom from poverty, non-discrimination, right to health, human rights of women, rule of law and fair trial, religious freedom, right to education, human rights in armed conflict, etc.;

at least the In-service Teacher Training Colleges in their capacity as institutions specially established for the in-service training of teachers.

VI. University teachertraining programmes

In the autumn of 2003, a new university curriculum will become compulsory for students enrolled in accreditation programmes for secondary school teachers who take “history, social studies and civics education” in which fundamental and human rights are a central element .

VII. Xenophobia - priority subject in science and research

Between 1995 and 2001, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture organised and funded sociological research into the causes and forms of xenophobia. The findings were to provide the basis for possible counter-measures. This focal research programme was the prime mover in establishing and upgrading internationally recognised research capacities in the fields of migration and xenophobia at the Academy of Sciences, at the universities and at extra-university institutes.

VIII.Outlook:

With all these measures the Ministry has made a major contribution to putting human rights education into effect at the national level.

It follows that the main tasks of human rights education in the classroom must be:

to impart age-appropriate knowledge,

to raise awareness and strengthen the social skills required in the enforcement of human rights, and

to educate young people for tolerance and the non-violent settlement of conflicts.

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