

Prof. Dr. Albert Scherr, Freiburg (Germany)

The potential of youth work for HRE Mainstreaming -

Keynote, Tallinn, 10/29/2019

In my contribution, I will address the question of the specific potential of youth work for human rights education. I will argue that this potential stems from the fact that, unlike school education, youth work draws on the experiences of its addressees and organises learning processes in which these experiences form the basis for talking about the meaning of human rights principles. Thus, youth work shall not simply be a transfer of knowledge about human rights, designed as an authoritative transfer of valid values and norms. To start with, however, let me briefly clarify what characterises human rights and why it is insufficient to consider them as undisputed values. I will outline what characterises a genuinely political conception of human rights and why this is of central importance for human rights education.

I Human rights education as political education (“Bildung”)

With regard to the first aspect, let me remind you that the crucial aspect of human rights for politics and education in Europe is that they function as the only conceivable framework for coming to an understanding regarding the principles of shaping social coexistence. In a European context, it is obviously impossible to bring about commonality based on the different historical experiences and traditions of national societies, or on the religious, philosophical and political currents, which are also very different within national societies. Human rights therefore enable a fundamental consensus within which agreement can be reached on different political positions. However, this formulation already includes a clear demarcation: right-wing extremism and radical nationalism do not agree with this consensus. They commonly reject the idea that each individual is granted the same dignity and the same rights. Their political program is to privilege citizens over non-nationals, and members of the nation over those who are considered foreigners. From this, French philosopher Alain de Benoist, a pioneer of European right-wing extremism, formulates a philosophically consistent critique of human rights. In this critique, he rejects the idea of human rights with the argument that the concept of man is empirically untenable. According to him, empirical validity can only be applied to citizens of individual nations, thus to Germans, French, Spaniards, etc., and there is no compelling basis for claiming that they should have equal rights. This argumentation is important in that it points out that the assumption that all people are equal and should therefore have equal rights is by no means a direct and compelling result of our everyday experiences. The political order of modern society is based on the basic division of people into citizens of nation states. The ideas of equality and equal rights for all human beings do not therefore arise by themselves, they must be justified and made plausible. Although there is empirical evidence that all human beings are equal in many respects, there is also evidence that they differ from each other just as much. Neither implies the empirical fact that all people have common characteristics and needs that they should also have equal rights. Rather, the idea of human rights is fundamentally a normative one, an understanding of what characterises a good society and what should be rejected as principally inadmissible when dealing with people. From an empirical point of view, it can also be seen that fundamental human rights are repeatedly violated. Young people who grow up in Europe and who pay close attention to politics and society will find that fundamental human rights are disregarded in many regions of world society and that European policy is by no means consistently geared to the demand to guarantee human dignity and the rights of every individual. This becomes obvious when dealing with refugees at Europe's external borders as it reveals how the prevention of unwanted migration is the central principle and how the deadly consequences of this principle are politically accepted. The dying in the Mediterranean and the Sahara is, cynically speaking, the collateral damage of a policy geared to

national and European interests of migration control. Even within European societies, human rights principles are by no means consistently implemented, not even for the citizens of European states. This applies, for example, to discrimination against minorities and, in parts of Europe, to ensuring a standard of living for all that enables a dignified life. For young people, this means that the conviction that human rights are recognised and respected principles of social coexistence is by no means self-evident from everyday experience. There is therefore a need for education that convinces young people of the importance of human rights, that gives them the conviction that it is worth striving for and rewarding to stand up for human rights as design principles. In this respect, it is also understandable and wise that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (§ 26) already demands the right to such education, which is oriented "to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms". After all, human rights can only be an effective basis for politics if the citizens of democratic societies recognize them as an important basis for political action; they are not laws whose observance the legal system guarantees. Because in the end, human rights cannot be upheld and enforced against the will of the citizens.

This consideration already suggests what I would like to call the genuinely political nature of human rights. I will now explain in more detail what this means, because it is of central importance for the pedagogy of human rights.

In principle, we can distinguish three different concepts of human rights:

Firstly, an understanding of human rights as general standards or as principles of general morality. Human rights are therefore norms and values that can always be appealed to when it comes to the question of which basic principles should guide the shaping of social coexistence. However, this includes two fundamental problems: First, it is not necessarily possible to deduce from very general principles what their consequences should be in a concrete situation. Secondly, this applies even more if it is not just a matter of one principle, but of several principles, that the question arises as to which principle should have priority. In this sense, human rights are no more than a basic consensus that does not resolve political controversies, but merely offers a framework within which they can be carried out. In addition, this concept leads to very different ideas about which values and norms are included in human rights, diffusing the idea of human rights itself. It therefore can also be misleading for human rights education to give young people the idea that the moral concept of human rights provides a secure and clear basis for political actions and decisions.

A *second*, contrasting understanding of human rights defines them as rights enshrined in laws that, in cases of doubt, can be sued before the courts. It is then not about morality, the meaning and implications of which are to be negotiated in public discourses, but about rights enshrined in laws, the observance of which is decided in the legal system. The European Court of Human Rights is the highest authority for human rights issues. This understanding of human rights has at least two problems: firstly, the tension between law and morality is levelled out here, and there is a tendency to deny that the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights documents can go beyond what is contained in national and European legislation. Secondly, this perspective must take into account the fact that laws are constantly changing. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, however, claims to declare universal principles, i.e. principles that apply everywhere, at all times, and therefore cannot be changed. That is why, in the case of human rights, the tension between law and morality cannot be eliminated.

Thirdly, an understanding of human rights has to be developed which I would like to characterise as a genuinely political conception of human rights. This conception is based on the assumption that human rights are a field of discourse based on certain political and historical experiences with forms of violence and cruelty, which have led to an agreement on certain principles aimed at preventing repetition. Taking the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as an example, the historical experience of National Socialism and the Holocaust, as well as colonialism and slavery

formed the principal basis for the debates that led to the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Moreover, it can be shown that the formulations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were the result of a political negotiation process in which different socio-political ideas were incorporated and which was the result of a compromise between moral principles and political conviction. To clarify: In the discussion of human rights, the relationship between individual freedom rights and social human rights was and is controversial. Socialist human rights concepts emphasize the primacy of social human rights, such as the right to work and social security; liberal civil human rights concepts focus more strongly on rights such as freedom of opinion and freedom of the press. The genuinely political character of human rights has become clear, not least in debates on the right of asylum: the question of how broadly or narrowly defined the right of asylum should be was already a controversial issue in the outline process of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Moreover, the finally very weak asylum law of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights demonstrably reflects the consideration that a too broad asylum law would not be compatible with the interests of the signatory nation states. Seen in this light, human rights are the expression of political compromises between moral principles and political state interests. They are not unchangeable either. Rather, the question what consequences for human rights should arise from social development are discussed again and again. Human rights are thus a field of discourse in which socio-political consequences from political and historical experiences - from concrete experiences of injustice - were and continue to be repeatedly renegotiated. The guiding question of human rights is therefore: Which principles must be recognised and enforced in order to avoid or not repeat a situation that all parties judge unacceptable. Seen in this light, human rights are the result of a compromise between moral convictions and political interests, and are therefore controversial and repeatedly need to be re-interpreted.

Thus: Human rights education shall not be restricted to transferring knowledge about values and laws or value education. Moreover, human rights education is always also political education. In other words, an education that addresses controversies about the right design of a good society. One that deals with the question of what kind of society we want to live in. Such political human rights education must also point out that referring to human rights is an inescapable framework for political controversy, but that it is not capable of providing clear solutions for political decisions. Furthermore, it follows from an understanding of human rights as a political concept that states and state policy can by no means be understood as guarantors of human rights. For state policy always has and continues to violate human rights. This means moreover that: "Human rights are placeholders for the always new, public discussion of humiliations and violations, which are tolerated, permitted or even committed by the official side. (I. Kreide 2013, p. 91)

In this respect, human rights education must enable people to critically question state policy and to engage in civil society structures for the observance and enforcement of human rights.

II Human rights education in youth work

In my opinion, youth work is well advised not to see itself as a supplement to and extension of school education and knowledge transfer, but as an independent area of education that is fundamentally different from school. Because youth work is based on voluntary participation while school forces participation. For this reason, youth work is directed towards the needs and interests of young people, as an offer attractive to young people. Youth work therefore faces the challenge of developing forms of awareness raising about human rights that are attractive to young people, and recognizably relate to the issues, interests, themes and problems that concern them in their everyday lives.

Thus, on the one side, youth work can and should try to address young people who have already developed their own interest in political issues and are involved in different ways in civil society contexts. To answer the question of what youth work has to offer such young people, the

distinction between three dimensions of human rights education is significant: human rights education is education about, through and for human rights. Education for human rights not least means enabling people to actively engage in human rights, for example in forms of protest, which raise human rights concerns in public. Let me illustrate this; a youth work project, which I currently support scientifically, invited young refugees to take part in youth work offers. Young refugees living near the youth centre were informed about its offers and invited to make use of them. One outcome was the idea that it is important to inform other young people as well as adults about the situation of young refugees. The young refugees developed a project called 'Lampedusa calling' together with local youths and youth workers. In this project, two containers were extended in such a way that it was possible to demonstrate a video installation on the topic of flight and refugees in one of the containers, and to use another as a mobile place where lectures and discussions could be held. With these containers, the young people then went through different cities and held information and discussion events. An important element of this project was that the young refugees could play an active role, that they were enabled to publicly present their reasons for flight and their situation as refugees in Germany and thus contribute to the public discourse. This is an example of how youth work can support young people who are already involved in human rights issues. The same youth centre where this project started is also a meeting place for anti-racist youth scenes, who find there a possibility to plan and prepare their actions and activities.

In addition to this activist dimension, human rights education in youth work can and should undoubtedly include forms of seminarist political education that explicitly addresses human rights issues. Useful concepts and materials for extracurricular human rights education are available. A not insignificant problem, however, is that the number of young people who are motivated to deal with human rights issues in their spare time is undoubtedly limited.

On the other side, it is undoubtedly the task of youth work to turn to those young people who have no interest in the topic or any knowledge about human rights and who are not yet politically interested or engaged. In Germany, it still applies to the overwhelming majority of all young people. Their main interest in youth work is finding a place where they can meet their peers and find fun ways to spend their free time. Here, I see the central starting point for youth work in the assumption that youth work regards everyone equally and with equal rights, regardless of gender, social status, skin colour, nationality and other criteria. The

objective, thus, must be to design youth work as a place where equality, equal rights and respect can be experienced and lived. This is by no means implicit, but requires pedagogical work in which conflicts with young people are dealt with again and again and in which an understanding is reached again and again about rules of interaction with one another that are acceptable to all. This means that every conflict, be it between female and male adolescents, between native migrant adolescents, between majority members and minorities, is both a learning opportunity and a challenge for discussing the foundations for a desirable coexistence. This way, youth work is first and foremost about social learning in the context of the everyday experiences of young people. Human rights education can emphasize already at this level the importance and meaning of basic principles such as the dignity of each individual and the non-discrimination rule. Human rights education must further the experience and the understanding why it is a gain for all people involved if they generally observe these principles. Human rights education, however, cannot remain at this level. It is also called upon to encourage and enable the acquisition of knowledge about human rights themselves. I deliberately did not say that it should be about imparting and teaching knowledge about human rights, but about stimulating and facilitating the acquisition of knowledge by young people. According to my understanding of youth work, its pedagogical character implies that it is not an education of young people by adults, but an accompaniment and support of young people in their independent and stubborn learning and development processes.

Therefore, when developing knowledge about human rights, youth work should focus on methods that encourage young people to engage themselves with human rights.

Let me give you a methodological example: Starting point of this method is looking into the question of what are the basic principles for a desirable social coexistence. Young people are thus asked to explore those rules they would like to see had they to live together on an island with others they do not know. The young people are also told that they cannot know whether they belong to the poor or the rich on this island, or to those who are successful in school, or have failed, whether they will be employed or not, etc. Games like this lead to the discovery of rules that actually always contain certain core human rights elements. On this basis, a possible next step is then to deal with human rights documents on the basis of one's own rules and to discuss the comprehensibility and problems of what is understood as human rights, for example, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the European Convention on Human Rights.

The political dimension of human rights also becomes significant in youth work when young people discover discrepancies between declared human rights and social reality. I would like to illustrate this with the example of a youth work project that we carried out in Vienna/Austria: The starting point here were unemployed young people in youth work. Various forms of action have been developed and implemented with these young people, which have drawn public attention to their need to find paid work. In these actions, young people explicitly referred to the right to work enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This has given them support in the sense of the idea that it is not only their personal need to find access to vocational training and paid work, but a right declared in official documents. The reference to human rights is therefore an element of empowerment. In the various forms of public relations work, however, it quickly became clear that it was not enough to draw attention to one's own problems. Talks were then organised with political leaders. In preparation, young people had to learn to formulate questions and demands to politicians and to enter into dialogue with them. This has led to political learning about causes of unemployment and possible ways to reduce unemployment. It became clear to the young people not least that they themselves are in a position to express themselves politically, but also that the factual political realisation of the abstract right to work exceeds the good or bad will of the responsible politicians. The project - and this is of exemplary importance from my point of view - has by no means resolved the problem of youth unemployment. However, it helped the young people to see themselves as citizens, who have rights and can claim them politically. They learned that they are not to blame for their unemployment, but found instead a way of getting politically involved. This is an example of human rights education that addresses the problems and interests of young people, one that does not stop at conveying knowledge about human rights, and that takes seriously the insight that human rights demands are always also political demands.

The example sketched here is also an example of how human rights education has two distinct dimensions: One side is the human rights commitment for one's own interests, the other side the commitment for the human rights of others. It can hardly be expected from young people to stand up for the rights of others, if in their everyday lives, their own basic demands for a good, decent life are denied and if they experience themselves as politically powerless. In this respect, and with regard to young people who find themselves in precarious and socially disadvantaged situations, the primary task of human rights education in youth work is to impart knowledge about their own rights and to encourage and enable them to lobby for their own rights. Human rights education is then obviously not a moral education, but education to democratic and human rights commitment regarding one's own cause. At the same time, however, human rights education must ensure that this does not lead to an egoistic understanding of one's own interests and certainly not to a nationalistic or racist understanding of the struggle for one's own interests against others. Therefore, human rights education is also called upon in youth work to repeatedly raise questions of justice and solidarity. Here, too, youth work cannot simply refer to universalistic principles in an

abstract and general way. It must create a space in which people of different origins, different sexes, different religions, different nationalities and different skin colours find and experience similarities. Encounters under conditions of equal rights, which allow all to work towards a common goal in a pleasant atmosphere are thus crucial. This has been convincingly demonstrated by relevant socio-psychological research. Youth work should therefore create a space, meeting place where the social boundaries and social inequalities that characterise our societies are not consolidated and reproduced, but broken up. If youth work enables the experience of similarities and accordance beyond the boundaries of nationality, race, class, gender, religion and ethnicity, it creates an important basis for an understanding of the core human rights idea of fundamental equality and equal dignity for all people. Processes of explicit human rights education can then build on this experience.

With these considerations I have developed some thoughts on the potential of youth work for human rights education. I am well aware that their practical implementation faces many difficulties. Nevertheless, I am convinced that this is a worthwhile perspective and that it justifies why the promotion of youth work makes an important contribution to the development of societies committed to the ideas of democracy and human rights. However, the profile of youth work outlined here also points in the direction of such youth work, which can be politically uncomfortable because it promotes political commitment on the part of young people and thus also criticism of state policy. In this respect, it should be made clear to those politically responsible that one cannot have both at the same time: young people who are informed and committed to human rights and who accept all the guidelines and decisions of state policy without criticism. Human rights can be politically quite uncomfortable, even in the case of youth work, but that it is their price.