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Respecting and Promoting the Right of the Child to Education

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The European Conference on Monitoring Children's Rights has formulated two key questions concerning the monitoring mechanism and especially its reporting system: WHAT to be reported and BY WHOM ? WHAT refers to the substance of the report and calls for better knowledge of children's subjective experience and of the social reality of childhood. WHO refers to the more formal and procedural aspects of the reporting system: effectiveness of the adopted procedures, the practical use of these reports, the role the State and the NGOs may play and, the involvement of children themselves in the process.

The topic of interest in this paper falls within the scope of the first question as it will focus on representations of and attitudes towards the right to education and its implementation shared by Bulgarian students, teachers and parents. As far as questions related to the research methodology and its relevance for an active and systematic collection of comprehensive human rights data will be addressed, this presentation might have implications for the discussion of the second group of problems as well.

Why such an approach?

It is evident that improvement in the child's life situation does not flow automatically from a progress in providing legislative and/or administrative norms conforming to the internationally adopted standards for children's rights. Rather than being merely a question of legislation or one of government social policy, children's rights are increasingly becoming a matter of individual attitudes, group interactions and human relations shaped within the family, the school, the peer groups etc. In this sense, the effective implementation of children's rights and therefore, the establishment of an effective monitoring process in this field depend on social and psychological factors to a considerable extent (Dall, 1993; Himes, 1993).

Among these factors, public opinion and social attitudes are of particular significance; as Fuglesang and Chandler (1993) pointed out, "Children's rights are realized through human closeness to them". The importance of human factor with respect to children's rights implementation is largely recognized (Dall, 1993; Himes, 1993) and the following task is formulated: "...to ensure that the spirit of the Convention and its provisions progressively work their way into the everyday life of individuals, families and communities" (James P. Grant, cited by Himes, 1993). The existence of an adequate system for monitoring the situation in practice as well as in theory of the rights on a regular basis is considered as a precondition for effective reporting [8].

Why the right to education?

This presentation will focus on the right of the child to education as defined in Articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The issue of the child's right to education has been chosen for its significance with respect to children's rights in general. Education can be a successful method of creating human rights consciousness and a powerful tool of development of standards of morality and standards of behavior [6]. Improving the understanding of the right to education and reinforcing social and individual respect for it are both important as education has a strong

influence upon children and their future (Dall, 1993). The development of a better understanding of children's rights as well as of a positive attitude towards them offer the best possible protection against any potential violations of these rights and can improve the overall position of children in society. As far as children and young people are concerned, schools bear a great responsibility in this matter, as the school is an important link in the chain of socialization and it is a most appropriate setting for the task of human rights education being fulfilled effectively.

The Study

The data to be examined come from a piloted micro-project on respecting and promoting the child's right to education in the present Bulgarian socioeconomic context. The project combines empirical research on the topic with workshops and discussions specifically designed for the population concerned: high school children, their teachers and parents. It was also stimulated by a national programme "Children at Risk" that has been initiated by the Bulgarian Association of School Psychologists.

The project is aimed at:

- analyzing the meaning children give to the right to education and how they feel about being able to achieve it in their own life;
- investigating the representations of and attitudes towards the right to education and its implementation among children, teachers and parents;
- identifying threats to the right of the child to education in the present situation of radical change in the Bulgarian society;
- promoting human rights consciousness among children and adults and increasing their sensitivity to the issue of education as a child's right as well as an important social factor for enhancing respect for human rights [10];

Two secondary public schools situated in one of the new districts of the Bulgarian capital are enrolled in the project. The research has been carried out in June and in September 1994. The workshops and the discussions of the obtained results are scheduled for October

1994 with the participation of children, teachers and parents that took part in the research phase of the project.

Herewith will be presented and discussed the results that have been obtained within the first, research phase of the study as well as the research methodology that has been used.

Subjects

The study comprised 9th- and 10th-graders from two public secondary schools in Sofia, their teachers and parents. The age of the students (41 boys and 70 girls) ranges from 15 to 17 with a mean of 16,14 (SD = 0,65). 25 teachers (5 of whom men), aged 27 to 50, participated in the study, which is about 90 % of all teachers working with these students. 44 of the addressed parents (n = 80) - 32 female and 12 male subjects, aged 35 to 57, filled in and returned the questionnaires. All teachers and the great majority of parents hold university degree.

Method

For the purposes of this study, a special research questionnaire has been designed by the author. Approaches in attitude measurement (McGuire, 1986) and previous empirical research in the field of human rights (Gallagher, 1985) contributed to the choice and the design of the method. Three parallel forms (for students, teachers and parents) of the questionnaire have been used.

The questionnaire is a mix of closed and open-ended questions and has three parts. The first part of the questionnaire deals with the meaning subjects assign to the right to education (RE). An open-ended question "What does the right to education mean to YOU PERSONALLY" is used to collect the needed information. Answers to the open-ended question are content-analyzed and categorized by the author on the completion of the questionnaire.

In the second part of the questionnaire, subjects are asked several closed questions making use of five-point Likert-type scale, which probe their view of:

- a) the components of the right to education as given in Article 28 of the Convention;
- b) the goals of education as stated in Article 29 of the Convention;
- c) the role the Bulgarian school plays actually in providing for the right to education;

- d) children's possibilities to realize their right to education;
- e) the impact of different groups and institutions in the implementation of the right to education, and
- f) how much they know about the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child (for teachers and parents only).

In the third part of the questionnaire, information is required about subjects' involvement in discussions concerning the right to education and children's rights in general. A dichotomous scale " 1) no; 2) yes, please specify" is used.

Results and Discussions

Statistical comparisons didn't reveal significant differences among boys and girls, so that further analyses were performed for the group of children as a whole. The only exception was girls scoring higher than boys on the value assigned to the education in respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms ($t = 2.18$, $p = 0.031$). This result fits well developmental data on adolescent girls being more involved in social concerns and caring for others while boys are more instrumentally oriented.

1. Lay conceptions of the right to education

1.1. Students' ideas about the right to education (RE) are listed below, ranked by their frequency of appearance (in percentage):

- * (46) *RE defined through the freedom of choice;*
 - choice of: (26) disciplines and school subjects to be studied; (8) to go to school or not; (7) the school or college to study in; (5) what to become and what to do in life; (4) kind and level of education;
 - choice based on: (14) students' desires; (6) students' interests; (4) students' capacities; (3) not only on adults'/parents opinion;
 - (4) required greater individualization in education;
 - (1) children's right to participate in decision-making in their schools;
- * (36) *RE defined as everyone's possibility to receive education;*

- (14) irrespectively of one's: (13) race; (11) sex; (5) religion; (5) opinion and origin; (4) finances; (3) age and language; (1) culture and position in society;
- (3) possibilities for those who want to learn;
- (2) highly gifted children should not be restricted;
- * (35) *RE defined through its role in the individual's development;*
 - with respect to: (16) one's realization in adult's life; (12) the development of one's talents and abilities; (11) the personality's growth; (4) one's career; (3) one's general knowledge and culture; (2) the future position in society;
- * (19) *RE defined through the free access to education;*
 - (6) access to the desired schools and colleges;
- * (7) *RE defined as right to receive enough information and knowledge;*
- * (3) *RE defined with respect to its financial aspects;*
 - (2) free or sponsored education;
 - (1) preference for paid education;
- * (3) *RE as providing for obligatory basic education;*
- * (3) *RE defined with respect to the society's democratic and cultural development;*

Students' perceptions are clearly centered around the respect for individuality and diversity which is expected to be realized through availability of individually appropriate educational alternatives and freedom of choice in educational matters. Similar data are reported elsewhere [9]: the standardized learning process which ignores children's individual characteristics is taught to be one of the basic reasons why students are alienated from school and bored with their studies.

1.2. Adults' point of view mainly focuses on educational possibilities that are provided for, as it can be seen from teachers' answers given below:

- * (32) *RE defined through its role in the individual's development;*
 - with respect to: (12) one's realization in adult's life; (8) the development of one's talents and abilities; (8) the personality's growth;
- * (32) *RE defined as everyone's possibility to receive education;*
 - (12) irrespectively of one's: (8) race, sex and social class; (4) religion and country;
 - (4) "green lights" for the highly gifted children;
- * (24) *RE defined as an important aspect of human rights and freedoms;*
 - (4) a right that is guaranteed by Bulgarian Constitution and the People's Enlightenment Act;
- * (16) *RE defined through the freedom of choice;*
 - choice of: (4) to go to school or not;
 - choice based on: (8) students' capacities;
- * (12) *RE defined through the free access to education;*
- * (4) *RE defined as right to receive enough information and knowledge;*

1.3. Parents' conceptions of the right to education are very similar to those of the teachers, both in the content of the categories they used and in the subordination of priorities. The both groups used to describe RE in relation to a more generalized and abstract notion of human rights, which tendency is not observed in the group of children. Parents' definitions are:

- * (36) *RE defined through its role in the individual's development;*
with respect to: (16) one's realization in adult's life; (16) the personality's growth; (9) one's general knowledge and culture (7) the development of one's talents and abilities; (7) one's career; (2) being useful to others and society; (2) better finances in the future;
- * (32) *RE defined as everyone's possibility to receive education;*
(5) irrespectively of one's: (5) age; (2) sex and race;
(14) to a extent convenient for: (9) students' capacities; (5) students' interests; (5) students' desires;
- * (18) *RE defined through the free access to education;*
(2) irrespectively of parents' financial possibilities;
- * (11) *RE defined through the freedom of choice;*
choice of: (7) disciplines and school subjects to be studied; (7) the school or college to study in; (2) teachers to work with;
- * (11) *RE defined with respect to its financial aspects;*
(7) free or sponsored education;
(5) students with highest achievements should be sponsored with preference;
- * (9) *RE defined as an important aspect of human rights and freedoms;*
(2) a right that is guaranteed by Bulgarian Constitution and the People's Enlightenment Act;
- * (7) *RE defined with respect to the society's democratic and cultural development;*

2. RE as a value and its implementation in today's educational practice

The following ranking, based on mean scores given in brackets, shows subjects' highly positive evaluation (5 = very important; 1 = not at all important) of the aspects of RE and the goals of education as instrumental values with respect to *the full and harmonious development of child's personality* (Table 1).

Adults' scores tend to be higher than those of children's, a result probably due to adolescents emphasis on criticism. Brieland and Korr (1993) have also found distance between the standards of youth and of parents and differences in their attitudes towards the

content of the Convention. In our case, in their value orientation students are closer to their parents ($R=0,73$; $p<0,05$) than to their teachers ($R=0,17$; n.s.).

Table 1. Subjects' evaluation of RE aspects and goals.

	Students	Teachers	Parents
Basic, elementary and higher education available to all, irrespectively of race, sex, language, religion, opinions, origin, property	2 (4,58)	7 (4,32)	1 (4,80)
Educational and vocational information available to all;	5 (4,22)	9 (4,20)	5 (4,59)
Free access to modern scientific and technical knowledge	7 (4,06)	8 (4,25)	8 (4,46)
Preparation of the child for an individual and responsible life in a free society;	1 (4,61)	3 (4,67)	2 (4,77)
Development of child's talents and mental and physical abilities	3 (4,54)	5.5 (4,56)	3 (4,73)
To bring up the child in the spirit of understanding, peace and tolerance	8 (3,99)	2 (4,68)	6 (4,58)
Development of respect for the natural environment	4 (4,26)	5.5 (4,56)	7 (4,57)
Education in respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms	6 (4,19)	1 (4,75)	4 (4,64)
Development of respect for the child's own culture and values and for those different of his/her own	9 (3,98)	4 (4,60)	9 (4,42)

Students' criticism is even more pronounced in the evaluation of the degree (5 = very much; 1 = very little) to which Bulgarian school today contributes to the realization of these values. They produced scores below the average on 8 of 9 indicators and parents did almost the same. Teachers' personal and professional involvement with the school is probably responsible for their more positive perception of the existing conditions (Table 2).

Table 2. Subjects' evaluation of the role the Bulgarian school plays actually in providing for RE goals.

	Students	Teachers	Parents
Basic, elementary and higher education available to all, irrespectively of race, sex, language, religion, opinions, origin, property	1 (3,76)	1 (4,16)	1 (3,55)
Educational and vocational information available to all	2 (2,89)	2 (3,24)	2 (3,05)
Free access to modern scientific and technical knowledge	4 (2,50)	8 (2,88)	3 (2,64)
Preparation of the child for an individual and responsible life in a free society	8 (2,26)	4 (3,08)	9 (2,25)
Development of child's talents and mental and physical abilities	5 (2,47)	3 (3,20)	5.5 (2,41)
To bring up the child in the spirit of understanding, peace and tolerance	7 (2,29)	7 (2,92)	4 (2,43)
Development of respect for the natural environment	9 (2,06)	9 (2,84)	5.5 (2,41)
Education in respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms	6 (2,43)	5.5 (3,04)	8 (2,32)
Development of respect for the child's own culture and values and for those different of his/her own	3 (2,67)	5.5 (3,04)	7 (2,34)

3. The impact of different groups and institutions in the implementation of RE

The perceived effectiveness of social groups and institutions under consideration with respect to RE implementation is quite low: average and above average scores predominate (Table 3).

Table 3. Subjects' evaluation of the impact of different institutions and groups in the RE implementation.

	Students	Teachers	Parents
State and state institutions	2 (2,94)	3 (3,24)	5 (2,71)
UN Children's Fund and other United Nations organs	1 (3,05)	5 (2,48)	3 (2,88)
Nongovernmental organizations	4 (2,43)	6 (2,08)	6 (1,88)
Teachers	- *	1 (3,80)	2 (3,12)
Parents	- *	2 (3,56)	1 (3,23)
Children	3 (2,88)	4 (3,08)	4 (2,79)

* - items not included in students' form of the questionnaire

The measures applied in this study do not allow us to reach a conclusion as to whether these results are due to 1) the evaluation of these groups and institutions as being not very effective in promoting children's right to education or, 2) to the lack of concrete information on this topic, complemented by a general dissatisfaction with social institutions and/or the actual situation in the field of education.

The latter interpretation is suggested by the relatively great number of children (from 5 to 17% for the different items) who didn't answer this question, because they "don't know anything about it". It seems useful to differentiate evaluative and informational measures in further investigations on this topic.

Whether justified or not, public's mistrust in the monitoring effectiveness of formal social groups and institutions (especially among parents and when compared to informal groups) is an obstacle standing in the way of the effective implementation of children's rights (Himes, 1993).

4. Children's possibilities to realize their right to education

All groups are practically unanimous in their estimation of children's possibilities to realize their right to education as above average: children (Mean = 3,8; SD = 0,84); teachers (Mean = 3,83; SD = 0,70); parents (Mean = 3,98; SD = 0,83). These scores indicate a shared perception of the social context as favorable to children's right to education in its essential dimensions, but not sufficient for the full and effective enjoyment of this right.

The analysis of the empirical distribution of the scores shows that, in the frame of a general orientation towards a global positive evaluation of the existing educational possibilities, students choose answers below the average more often than do parents and teachers.

5. Involvement in discussions and knowledge of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Neither teachers ($M = 2,8$; $SD = 1,35$) nor parents ($M = 2,58$; $SD = 1,4$) state they possess good knowledge of the UN Convention on the rights of the child.

About 50 % of the *teachers* report having discussions related to children's rights and in particular to the RE with their students during the last school year. The topics that have been addressed point to either more general problems like: CRC and how to stand up one's rights; homeless children; right to religion and religious sects; or actual educational concerns, i.e. paid education, could high school children be allowed to work for providing their education, the choice of school or university to study in, vocational orientation and the freedom to choose one's future profession, how to solve everyday school problems in the spirit of tolerance and mutual understanding.

Parents report to be less involved in such discussions - only about 38 % of them answered this question in a positive manner. There is also a clear difference in topics that have been addressed in children - parents interactions: they all are related to educational problems and their specific focus is on children's position in the society as young citizens with rights of their own. Answers were given like: the freedom to choose future education, profession and personal contacts; problems and perspectives of the secondary education in Bulgaria, entry exams for the universities, financial concerns of the family with respect to child's education and social differentiation with respect to actual educational opportunities.

76 % of the tested *children* report having not discussed children's rights issues during the last school year. The topics reported by those who answered positively this question give information very similar to that provided by teachers and parents: immediate concerns about the freedom to choose one's own life, negative phenomena in school, university education and financial restrictions imposed to them. Among the more general topics that have been addressed students mention homeless children, children without parents and children in institutions.

Conclusions

Most of the students associate the *right to education* with the exercise of their *rights in education* (Verhellen, 1994), namely the freedom of choice, the respect for individual's views, being allowed to express one's opinion in school matters. This fact might be essential in understanding students' generalized disappointment by the school our empirical data have shown. Once again it shows how important is to apply human right principles in the daily conduct of education at each level and in all its forms. If "all true knowledge comes from experience" [10], recognition needs to be given to the quality of daily life in the school and classroom as a factor of crucial importance for ensuring the fulfillment of children's right to education as well as of other children's rights.

It might be that developmental patterns specific to adolescents - the search for autonomy and individuality - have influenced these results too. Further research work with students of different age can help in differentiating age-specific from typical for all components in students' lay concepts of right to education; this kind of information can be used successfully in the development and the implementation of programmes in human rights education.

There is a great similarity among subjects' subjective perception of the right to education and the approved international standards in this field. This is a positive indicator for the human rights culture in our society and represents a solid base for both individual growth and social progress.

Greatest discrepancies between the students' values orientation and their perception of the present situation in school were found with respect to:

1) the role of the school in preparing the child for his/her life as an adult. Students feel like their expectancies about education are not met and this decreases the impact the school might have on them; therefore, their right to fully profit from the education is limited. Dissatisfaction with school is an undesirable outcome in itself and it could also have negative implications for the implementation of children's rights in school and through the school.

2) ecology awareness and nature preservation. This finding reflects a known weakness of the present educational programmes, complemented by increased public' s sensitivity to

ecological problems in Bulgaria and calls for greater attention to students' attitudes towards the problems of the environment.

The obtained results could hardly be generalized as the subjects that have been involved are not very representative as a group for the Bulgarian population of high school children, teachers and parents.

The adopted research methodology reveals itself as a useful in identifying problems related to human rights that might exist and therefore provide information what interventions are needed and might be more successful. Further research work should however be done in order to study in depth the limitations and the advantages of such an approach in gathering information relevant to human rights implementation.

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