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Minorities' rights in the educational system of Republic of Slovenia: based on an example of geographical education

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Introduction

The school is often expected to correct what has been done badly or been missed in other areas of the development of citizens of a democratic society: this is so in both in the broader European context (OECD & CERI, 1987) and in the domestic Slovenian space (Motik, 1992). The educational process is expected to co-create the conditions in which complex social processes can be understood, and in which relationships of understanding and tolerance can be developed, and in which the citizens' rights are demonstrated in pedagogical practice (and, more importantly, in life). Culture and education are the primary foundations for shaping identity and preserving personal and national diversity, and as such give the individual the basis for asserting her/his basic human rights.

In the processes of European integration and the formation of new states there is an important need to address inter-human, international and inter-state relations. Upbringing is an important factor that encompasses both the civic and the intercultural. This involves teaching to accept social differences, practice tolerance, and how to exercise one's basic human rights. In geography education such an approach is critical, because of the many levels of social processes involved in recognising and overcoming stereotypical opinions and prejudices: these often spring from ignorance, and pupils need to understand the spatial or geographical component in the differences between civilisations and cultures.

Some rights and duties of the citizens of Slovenia in nationally mixed areas from the viewpoint of Statutes on education

Among basic children's rights (Divjak, 1996) is the right to education. Education can develop shared knowledge and stimulate communication, and can thus reduce prejudice between individuals and between groups. To live in border regions (such as the Slovenian-Italian and Slovenian-Hungarian borders) means working and living with national minorities, and being educated in the same institutions, with the same teachers and educational programmes. Pupils in these regions are schooled in the same educational conditions, but some differences are allowed, and these mostly depend on choices of the individual.

One of these 'special' rights of Italian and Hungarian minorities is the right of pupils to learn about the history, geography and culture of their own nations, and to develop creativity in their native languages. Statutes on primary schooling (1994), on gymnasias and grammar schooling (1994), and the regulations on special rights for Italian and Hungarian national communities in the Republic of Slovenia (1994) all emphasise the importance of the history, geography, culture and other achievements of the respective minority nations, and offer assurance on the respect for the national feelings of pupils.

Education for the Italian minority is conducted in schools that work only in Italian in the nationally mixed areas of Izola, Koper and Piran, while in the bilingual areas of Lendava and Murska Sobota teaching is in two languages – Slovenian and Hungarian - and classes

are held jointly for both majority and minority communities. Pupils learn both languages and both cultures.

Recently changes in the organisation of educational work involve separating pupils for lectures in their native and second languages. Similar changes will be made in future in other subjects that are important for shaping national identity (RS: Office of Nationalities: Overview..., 1994, 3)

Geographical education and study contents on human rights

"The educational aims of geographical education can be important mediators of social power and ideology. Often their task is to create an image of friends as well as enemies" (Hajdu, Paasi, 1995, 35). National and social stereotypes of emotions, myths, prejudices are easily used for propaganda purposes; there have been many examples in both world and Slovenian history. Geography can be used for social purposes, especially in its educational role: its basic purpose is no longer simply to present geographical information, but to ensure that the knowledge pupils gain will stimulate openness, understanding and a positive evaluation of society and nature.

Curriculum renewal in pursuit of these aims has been carried out by geographers over the past decade, and is still in progress. One starting point was the need to synchronise geographical education in Slovenia with the directives of the Commission for Geographical Education, which works under the International Geographic Union (IGU). A main task was to "develop international direction of planning the geography curriculum, the education of teachers and geographical study aids" (IGU Charter on Geographical Education, 1992, 2). The Commission said that geographical education should "stimulate understanding among all nations, races and religions" (ibid), and proposed seven thematic aims linked to

... learning about people of other cultures and different ways of living in different provinces. In this way geography education contributes to the fundamental ideas of the United Nations Declaration of Children's Rights, which establishes that a child should receive special protection. Legal possibilities and other opportunities should be provided so that a child can develop in a physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially healthy way and in conditions of freedom and dignity. (ibid, 9)

The Commission suggests that geographical education contributes to international education as described in the Recommendation on Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace, and also to education about human rights and fundamental freedoms (IGU Charter on Geographical Education, 1992).

The overall aims of the geography curriculum for both the eight-year (ZRSŠŠ, 1993), and the nine-year primary schools (ZRSŠŠ, 1998) emphasise a stimulating, active, scientific and comprehensive content, and the need to acquire and develop basic geographic knowledge and abilities. Among the eleven global educational aims of geography for the three-year subject level (6th to 8th grade) in eight-year primary-school and thirteen global educational aims of geography for the four-year subject level (6th to 9th grade) in nine-year primary-school are recognising, understanding and forming views on human rights. These aims include respect for nations and cultures different to one's own, tolerance of difference, international co-operation, and endeavour towards the common goals

of mankind, such as world peace, the preservation of natural and cultural heritage for future generations, and consideration of human rights.

Understanding and valuing human rights can thus be translated into concrete educational aims on local, regional and national levels (Slovenia, Italy, Hungary), as well as on European and global levels.

Adaptations of geographical education on the nationally mixed areas

The right to learn the geography of one's native nation, and that of the nationally mixed areas, is addressed in the agreed curriculum adaptations for geography in primary and secondary schools.

In the primary curriculum there is no differences in content for the minorities, because both are included. But there are differences in organisational approach. The Italian minority uses Italian geography textbooks in its schools, chosen by the teacher from a list of approved textbooks provided by the Geography Counsellors of the RS for Schools and Sport. Geography teachers attend seminars in Italy and tend to form a separate subject group: they are relatively rarely included in the work of other geographers in the region. In the Hungarian community Slovenian geography textbooks are mostly used, because of the bilingual educational policy referred to above, but Hungarian texts are an additional resource, and the teachers are more actively connected with the work of geography subject groups.

In secondary schools the Slovenian Examination Committee for Geography prepared and established changes and adaptations (RIC, 1995, 2001) for members of the Italian and Hungarian minorities in nationally mixed areas. All these changes were made to the existing curriculum, so there was only a unification of didactic documents. Within the 35 lessons on the theme of the domestic landscape, topics such as "the geography of Italy" or "the geography of Hungary" are being discussed. When studying for the national examination, members of the respective minority communities are able to use geographical literature in Italian and Hungarian (RIC, 1995).

In the nationally mixed areas students also have the right to choose which language - Slovenian, Italian or Hungarian - they will use in their matriculation examination. This means both that the examinations papers are in these languages, and that the content is adapted to the language (RIC, 1995, 23-26). Representatives of the minorities are members of the Subject Examination Committee for Geography and actively co-operate in forming the syllabus and in composing and marking matriculation examination papers.

The external examination was introduced in 1994, and by 2001 the right to both education and examination in an alternative language had been made by 51 Italian graduates and 38 Hungarian graduates in geography (oral source – RIC, 2000).

Research: opinions of geography teachers

In 1999-2000 a short anonymous written survey of the views and experiences of geography teachers about educational content on human rights was conducted, in the schools/gymnasia that prepare pupils for national examinations. There were 270 teachers of geography in Slovenia in 1997-1998 (oral source: Ministry of Schools and Sport). Questionnaires were sent to a sample of 50 of these, and 38 responded (although not all of them answered all the questions). The respondents had on average 17.4 years of work

experience, and at least three years' experience in teaching for the national examination. The questionnaire had 15 questions organised around three areas of content, one of which was linked to the area of human rights.

Survey questions and results

Write down two educational aims linked to human rights that, in your opinion, should be mastered by all Slovenian secondary school pupils. (31 responses)

- rights of national minorities: pupils should be able to enumerate them and compare their execution in different countries,
- right to one's own language, culture: pupils should know demographic characteristics.
- right to a clean environment: understanding of the meaning of conservation
- right to one's own historical truth or understanding of the historical processes that has influenced the formation of the pupil's own nation,
- right to be different: to be educated in a spirit of tolerance toward difference,
- respect for differences between neighbours,
- ecological problems: understanding that pollution does not recognise state borders,
- equal rights for everyone, the need for harmony and co-operation,
- right to a life worthy of a human being,
- right to healthy food: knowing the reasons for and consequences of uneven distribution of food in the world,
- right to live in peace, knowing the reasons for the emergence of different war zones in the world and the consequences of war.

Even though these teachers were able to enumerate diverse areas of human rights, many of them still think that knowledge of geographical data, definitions and laws is the basic and primary topic for learning. Their definitions of the educational problems concerning human rights were not concrete, and tended to keep within the area of ecology and minority rights (an issue in Slovenia). Children's rights were not mentioned, even though the teachers' professional life is linked to these.

Most teachers chose 'partially' in all three questions, showing indecision about making firm standpoints, and this is confirmed by the large proportion who stated that they did not know. Six (15%) of those surveyed could identify clearly defined educational aims about knowing and understanding human rights, but the same number admitted that they do not know, and 30% indicated that they could not identify these aims.

Give your view of the meaning of geographic education for pupil's knowledge in of human rights. Circle only the statement that best describes your opinion. (38 responses)

Statement	yes	partially	no	don't know
a The curriculum clearly defines an educational aim that geographical education should enable knowledge and understanding of human rights.	6	14	12	6
b Upbringing and education in human rights is a conscious and important orientation of your school and is present in all school subjects.	9	25	4	0
c Do you stimulate/enable your pupils to be open-minded 'citizens', able to objectively evaluate human rights, with an understanding of the geographical background to individual situations and decisions?	9	12	10	7

That geography teachers do not pay enough attention to the human rights component is also seen in the answers to the third question. Only a quarter of the schools surveyed pay conscious and serious attention to the upbringing and education of their pupils in human rights.

This analysis demonstrates the importance of including the topic of human rights in all school subjects, and not only in the geography curriculum.

Conclusion

Responsibility for the improvement of international understanding and communication and the acknowledgement of individual human rights is no longer confined to a few individuals, educational institutions or countries. The challenge has been taken up by pedagogues, psychologists, and historians - and a great deal can also be contributed by geographers. In the revised Slovenian school programme geographers have included educational goals directed toward forming professionally-based relations, opinions and values toward each human being and his rights that derive from respect of different races, religions, ethnicity, linguistic and cultural heritage.

This paper offers an example of adapting geographical education in nationally mixed areas, for pupils from minority national groups, but it is not sufficient to enumerate particular content (for example, the fight for human rights), and to form a catalogue of aims confined to a single discipline. The results of our survey among geography teachers show that the issues of human rights need to be present in all school subjects, including geography.

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Republic examination centre – Subject examination catalogue for national examination – Geography 1993, 1995/1996, 1998, 2000, 2001, Ljubljana

Statutes of Republic of Slovenia (RS)

- Statute on primary-school (1994)
- Statute on gymnasiums and other grammar schools (1994)
- Overview of the most important regulations on special rights of Italian and Hungarian national community in Republic of Slovenia (1994)