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Dialogue and Dignity – Linking Human Rights Education with Paulo Freire's "Education for Liberation"

Viewed in the context of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004), it is clear that Paulo Freire's "Education for Liberation" and Human Rights Education (as it develops), have two core concepts of participation and empowerment in common. Participation is seen as the active involvement of individuals and groups in social, economic or political activities, while empowerment is viewed as the strengthening of individuals and groups and their liberation from oppressive conditions which crush human dignity.
This article examines the development of Human Rights Education (HRE) which grew from UN International Human Rights Conventions, and which resulted in a common understanding of and basis for HRE.
Not many authors (e.g. in Europe or the United States of America) currently involved in the development of human rights education rely on Paulo Freire's work as their main source of inspiration. In Latin America, however, the work of Paulo Freire is well-established and is referred to in current education discourse and practice. This article endeavours to link some of the core concepts of Freire's work to human rights education with a view to understanding education as a process of liberation involving dignity, dialogue and dissent. To this end, Paulo Freire's work is examined from the perspective of the German educational theorist and philosopher Gottfried Mergner who developed a theory on the social limits to learning and critically discussed Freire's work.

1 Introduction: Human Rights Education – A Success Story

At the second UN World Conference on Human Rights Education[1] held in 1993 in Vienna/Austria a powerful new movement for human rights began to emerge. Building on previous meetings and conferences, the Vienna

Declaration and Programme of Action (arising from the conference) strongly focussed on the promotion of human rights education as a strategy for preventing human rights violations and for fostering respect for human dignity and human rights.

In the course of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) some countries and regions took the initiative of developing comprehensive strategies for human rights education including the development of national plans of action for HRE. In other countries, like Germany, for example, Governments decided to promote HRE in a less structured fashion and, as a result, did not develop HRE action plans or comprehensive HRE strategies.

Today, within the international HRE movement, there exists a certain degree of shared understanding around HRE and a common ground for its promotion. The most comprehensive sources for HRE are, of course, rooted in the Conventions and Declarations on Human Rights, which themselves have emerged from a process of continuous learning. It is noteworthy that the Preamble to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), translated into more than 300 languages, makes the first call for HRE, by stating:

"(…) every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance (…)."[2]

Although the preamble talks generally of "progressive measures" for the promotion of respect for human rights without detailing specifically what these measures are, a specific reference is made nonetheless to the role of both "education" and "teaching". The authors of the UDHR text clearly understood the importance of learning processes in the fostering and promotion of human rights globally.

A second source which HRE practitioners and researchers can refer to is the Right to Education; a human right enshrined in both article 26 of the UDHR and Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR). In 1999 the Committee to the CESCR issued a General Comment on the Right to Education, which offers a basic definition and explanation of this right which comprises the core tenets of HRE.

Katarina Tomaševski, the former UN Rapporteur on the right to education, explains the core concepts of the right to education in the "4-A-Scheme:"[3]

Access: no child should be discriminated against in education. Free and compulsory education should be available for all school age children. In addition, the right to education is defined as a progressive right, in other words, where possible, Governments must also ensure access to post compulsory education for children.

Availability: the various dimensions to the right to education are elaborated upon under "Availability". Education is seen as a civil and political right. Governments must allow institutes of learning to be established. As a social, economic and cultural right, Governments must ensure that free and compulsory education is available to all school children.

Acceptability: here the qualitative aspects of education are discussed. For

example, certain standards for health and safety are stipulated, also teachers are required to meet professional criteria. Other important aspects dealt with include, the prohibition of corporal punishment, attention to language of instruction (with a special focus on indigenous and minority languages).

Adaptability: Education must be in the child's best interest. In other words, schools must adapt to the needs of learners and not the other way around. This is where human rights education comes in - education based on indivisible and inter-dependent human rights involving all three dimensions to learning: (1) learning about, (2) learning for and (3) learning through human rights.

In addition to outlining the core elements of the right to education, these four criteria focus on the key concepts of "participation" and "empowerment" both of which are central to human rights education. Guaranteed access to education, free from discrimination must be provided to ensure the equal participation of learners. Additionally, to be both inclusive and empowering, HRE must be linked to learner needs (adaptability). To achieve this, the teacher and student must both be empowered to analyse, develop and contribute to the form and content of education in general, and to human rights education in particular. The two concepts of "Acceptability" and "Adaptability" comprehensively encapsulate both the aims and goals of education so much that many educational scientists and human rights activists today refer to the right to education as a right to human rights education.

Paulo Freire whose life and work will now be discussed did not use the rights discourse much in his work. Nevertheless, he did develop a method which takes people's needs as a basis for human rights.

2 Paulo Freire: Education for Liberation

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) is one of the world's best-known and most influential philosophers and educators from the South. Born in Recife (Brazil), in 1921, he grew up in a lower middle class family and, as a child, did himself experience hunger, malnutrition and poverty. By the age of 16, while still a student himself, he began to work as a grammar teacher. He often referred to his father as one of the first and best teachers he had ever had. Later, his first wife Elza was also to have a tremendous influence on him. As a primary school teacher and language instructor she had much experience of illiteracy and witnessed people losing their literacy skills once left school. Today his second wife, Ana Maria Araújo Freire, is dedicated to further developing and promoting her late husband's work.

Freire began his career as a lawyer but abandoned this profession a year later to study education. He went on to become a teacher and later, a professor of education. His first book "Education for Liberation" was published in Uruguay as he had fled Brazil in 1964 having been arrested and prohibited from teaching. He spent his time then in exile in Chile. He commented that he was not sent to exile because he developed a theory of

education but because of his revolutionary approach to education:

"Our way of educating served the interests of the oppressed and not the interests of those in power. It was dangerous and I, subversive. Education is always interlinked with power. The more I saw of this inter-connectedness in my country, the clearer the necessity for replacing domesticating education with a liberating one, became for me" (Freire cit. in Simpfendoerfer 1989, 5; translated by the author, C.L.).

Garth Meintjes, one of the few current theorists who relate Freire's "Education for Liberation" with HRE generally supports this idea. This liberation processes can be equally relevant to a classroom in any city of the "developed world", just as it is to the "third world".

For today education, and especially school based education, is a global reality. School based education all over the world has developed more or less comparable formats, with directors, teachers, students, school lessons of circa 45 minutes duration and grades at the end of the term. Irrespective of where or with whom this school based education is taking place, it promotes and/or conforms, to a greater or lesser extent to the prevailing power structures.

In support of his argument, Meintjes points to Richard Shaull:

"There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the "practice of freedom", the means by which man and woman deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Richard Shaull cit. in Meintjes 1997, 71).

Paulo Freire developed his literacy education methods while living among the rural communities in North-Eastern Brazil: "If I wish to teach the people, I must first become a student" (cit. in Simpfendoerfer 1989, 6; translated by the author, C.L.) Living amongst these communities, Freire discovered that many people having learned to read and write soon forgot the words and how to use them. Freire later referred to this "poverty" of language and words as the culture of silence. He knew that to break the cycle of oppression each and every individual needed to be able to speak and to "name" the world, because only those who could, would be able to become authors, rather than subjects of the transformation of reality. It is within this framework that Freire developed his core educational concepts and ideas which are still valuable today; concepts such as dialogue, thematic universe or the generative words (words generated directly from the real life practices of the students). These words are important to and have a meaning for the students because they are words used daily by them. It is precisely because these words mean something to students, that they are able to see and experience the impact of learning. They will not forget words they have learned but will instead use them to actively intervene in and alter their own life situations.

An alternative understanding of literacy is a curriculum based approach which focuses on teaching the alphabet so that students learn to read and write for, as it were, the sake of learning to read and write. But why should people learn? For Freire, learning and literacy are a means to achieving greater freedom. If people learn, then they must understand why they are

learning and what benefit this knowledge acquisition will bring. If the learning process is not serving the interests of the student, it is of little benefit and will not create a basis for sustainable learning.

3 Gottfried Mergner: Reflections on Paulo Freire

Across the globe, since the 1980s critical reflection on and historical pieces dealing with the reception of Paulo Freire's work and ideology have appeared in many different languages. I will focus in what follows now on Paulo Freire's work from the perspective of Gottfried Mergner (1940-1999), the German philosopher and educator. Mergner was born in Würzburg in the South of Germany in 1940. Both his parents were National Socialists and, like many others of his generation, he too became actively involved in politics and in the students' movement in the 1960s. At an early stage in his academic career, Mergner began to reflect on societal learning processes. In his view, learning is a process involving barriers and successes, a continuous process which can never be finalized or completed. Questioning the social limits to learning was one of Mergner's main research interests.[4]

By exploring the thoughts of other philosophers - namely Ernest Jouhy and Hannah Arendt (Mergner 2002), Mergner criticises Freire's work and examines his ideas. In what follows I propose to examine three significant concepts: (1) the inalienable human dignity of the person, (2) the role of dissent in dialogue and (3) the reasoning behind solidarity; combined these form the basis of what will later be explored as core elements of human rights education namely participation and empowerment.

"The dignity of a person is bound to the context"[5]

Each and every individual is "equipped" with human dignity which is intrinsically linked to the uniqueness of the individual. This is expressed in the Preamble to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

"recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world".[6]

Mergner is not content to just accept this prerequisite. He asks how we are to understand human dignity, how it is to be maintained and what mechanisms, structures and actions undermine a person's dignity. These questions are most pertinent to the education process.

For example, in addressing the issue of human dignity with groups of students, it becomes clear that while there is often a general kind of "feeling" for what dignity is, naming these feelings with words proves difficult for students.

Sometimes children or young people relate dignity to a religious understanding of the word; for them, human beings have dignity because they are similar to God or because they were created by Him. When young people are asked to depict dignity with a symbol or image, many chose to draw an old man, with a long white beard, sitting on a cloud. For adults, the

understanding of dignity is, naturally, a more abstract one, and, in the learning process can be described through symbols, pictures or via the medium of drama. It is striking that for adults there are many questions surrounding the concept of human dignity. For example, in adult education, discussing the concept of dignity brings forth a variety of questions including: Why dignity is said to be inalienable, when the dignity of a person is violated daily? Is there a start and an end to dignity? Does the unborn child have dignity? Is the dignity of a person lost when he or she dies? When human rights violations occur, whose dignity is affected? - The dignity of the violator or the dignity of the victim or both?

Human dignity is bound to the context - this is central in Mergner's work. For Mergner, dignity is the approval of the uniqueness of a person. This uniqueness is to be understood in context, i.e. consideration must be given to the specific location, period, prevailing social circumstance which shape the social and historical context into which a person is born.

Referring to Hannah Arendt[7], Mergner pronounces that implicit in the decision to accept one's own dignity is the moral decision to accept the dignity of the other (every other!) (Mergner 2002, 106). In education in general, and in human rights education in particular, this implies that as educators we must find meaningful ways of learning about, and in, dignity. In other words we must identify what helps students to become conscious of their own human dignity; what the obstacles to be overcome in this process are; and how can we, as educators facilitate societal learning processes towards action in solidarity with those fighting for human rights and a life with dignity?

Dialogue and Dissent

Dialogue is one of the central elements of Freire's pedagogical method. Mergner, on the one hand is critical of how Freire partly derives his concept of dialogue from a somewhat mystified and undefined relationship between people themselves and between people and their leaders - a relationship which appears to be based on love and solidarity (Mergner 2002, 107). On the other hand, Mergner then follows Freire in developing a pro-active concept with dialogue taking place where people come together to communicate their needs and interests in order to "name" and to change the world (contrary of the culture of silence, see above). Dialogue is possible when people coming together have respect for the dignity of all. This respect derives from the fact that the I and the Not I are inter-linked but not identical. (Here Freire's thoughts are similar to the thinking of Martin Buber.) Nevertheless, as human beings, is important that individuals see, respect and accept the Not I in every other person. Mergner combines this notion with the concept of dissent. Accepting the notion of Not I necessitates fundamentally accepting the notion that dissent exists - this is the starting point for dialogue. The challenge is to find productive ways of dealing with dissent through dialogue. Although dissent will remain, the prerequisite for dialogue is the active participation of all individuals and groups involved in the learning process. Dissent will remain as a constitutive element of dialogue.

Seeing Reason in Solidarity

Freire was bound to a dialectical philosophy whereas Mergner extends a philosophy of ambivalence which he develops inspired by Ernest Jouhy[8]

(ibid. 105 f.). Unlike the dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, ambivalent thinking involves 'dirty cleverness' (Mergner) and the people's simple will to survive - a will bound to the individual's claim to dignity. In this context, ambivalence refers to linking of critical reason to real life situations and to the contradictions entailed in solidarity. Ambivalence is the simultaneous operation of key factors i.e. (a) reflection on necessary change, (b) will to actively participate in change, (c) development of contradictions and dissent which sometimes pose barriers to learning and to change. Nowadays, individuals' perspectives on life as well as the quality of peoples' lives are under threat as the world witnesses massive destruction to the planet, great poverty and faces the danger of pandemic diseases (e.g. HIV/AIDS, the war against terrorism, etc.)

People are increasingly directly affected by unlawful actions and behaviour and have their human dignity violated or endangered. Referring again to Hannah Arendt, Mergner (ibid. 107) identifies three possible reasons for resisting what he defines as "the moral of a good life" - some will want to hold on to the good habits they are accustomed to, others of a more sceptical nature will wish to make up their own mind, while others again are only too aware that they will have to live with themselves for the duration of their lives. With this notion therefore it is clear that human beings have a vested interest in living a "good life" which is always to be understood in the historical, social, political context in which individuals have been born and raised. Armed with this insight people are able to see the value of solidarity since they are inter-connected with one another in pursuit of a common goal - the goal of a "good" and responsible life. Again, the prerequisite is the respect for the dignity of all human beings as well as their empowerment and active participation in the shaping of families, communities, societies and the world.

4 The Core of Human Rights Education: Participation and Empowerment

Empowerment and participation ought not to be empty phrases in human rights education, drawn upon as buzz words to define the aims and objectives of education. Article 26 of the UDHR defines the overall goals of education as the "full development of human personality and … the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms". This definition ought to be further qualified to ensure that these goals are firmly based in a conscious understanding of human dignity.

Empowerment needs to be based on a constructive dialogue on human dignity with a learning group in which the 'teacher' assumes the role of moderator actively involved in sharing his or her views just as other participants do. Empowerment is directly linked to participation. Empowerment cannot occur without the active participation of individuals learning to express their individual and collective needs. This approach, (availing of the conscious articulation of needs and desires), can reveal what Freire refers to as 'revolutionary potential'. It may be unusual for some

groups of learners to express their "real" needs rather than "consumer" needs. It seems that 'our' needs and desires for peace and a world with dignity and human rights for example, are overtaken by "consumer" needs (e.g. fancy sport shoes and fashion, mobile phones, cigarettes) pushed at us (especially at the young) by large transnational companies. One of the big challenges for human rights education is to foster a process enabling students to distinguish between 'life needs' and consumer needs.

Still, in the end a lot of questions remain unanswered. Freire believed that the oppressed would liberate themselves and in the process would also liberate those in power. This belief has been widely criticized. Mergner's approach sees the liberation process in a different light - a process involving both bottom-up and top-down movement motivated by mankind's interest in, and need for a life in dignity.

Change can only come about through shared responsibility, but the process of change is slow. Hence, it is more likely that messages expressed in dignity and not those shouted loudly will offer perspectives for change. As a social movement, Human Rights Education has the potential to be a vital learning tool for enabling change.

Notes

[1]All United Nations documents can be found on the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights homepage: http://www.ohchr.org/english/.

[2]http://www.un.org/rights/50/decla.htm downloaded - June 28, 2005.

[3]Katarina Tomaševski. 2003. Education Denied - Costs and Remedies. London: Zed Books, 51 f.

[4]Mergner's work is not well known outside Germany. A recent publication of a collection of his articles which has been translated into English and edited with an introduction by Marcel van der Linden will help to make his insights and theories available to a wider audience: Mergner, Gottfried. 2005. Social Limits to Learning - Essays on the Archeology of Domination, Resistance, and Experience. New York, Oxford: Berghan Books.

[5]Mergner 2002, 106; translated by the author, C.L.

[6]http://www.un.org/rights/50/decla.htm downloaded - June 28, 2005.

[7]Arendt, Hannah. 1990. Was ist Existenz-Philosophie?. Frankfurt . In: Mergner 2002; Arendt, Hannah. 1989. Nach Auschwitz. Berlin (ibid.).

[8]Jouhy, Ernest. 1996. Bleiche Herrschaft - Dunkle Kulturen. Essays zur Bildung in Nord und Süd. 2. überarbeitete Auflage. Frankfurt am Main (in Mergner 2002).

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