**Symposium on Human Rights and Values in Education**

Riga, Latvia 7-8 June 2016

Remarks by Fred van Leeuwen,

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Dear colleagues and distinguished guests:

In the French newspaper Le Monde I came across an interesting article discussing education reform in ISIS occupied territories. According to the report, which is based on a memo of their "education minister", forty percent of class time is devoted to Islam and to the sharia. Human images have been banned from textbooks and classrooms. History has been abolished other than the life of Mohamed and the early years of Islam.

Many teachers have escaped Islamic State-controlled areas and some have become refugees. Those who stayed and wish to continue to teach are subject to “re-education” in centres that teach the sharia and make a determination as to whether educators are really remorseful and, therefore, “qualified”.

One former teacher indicated that, while earlier textbooks for young children started teaching simple arithmetic by asking pupils to count donkeys, they are now asked to count Kalashnikovs. The values being inculcated are not preparing future generations for life, but for death and war.

I thought of sharing this with you at the opening of our two day meeting, not with the intention of putting the problems in the Middle East on our agenda, but as an extreme example of how education, school systems and the teaching profession can be used, misused rather, to impose a religion, to protect an ideology, or to propagate a political view.

While I would not dare contest the right of democratically elected governments to determine educational goals and targets - on the contrary, that is their duty - those goals and targets are to correlate with, if not embedded in, the universal values inscribed in the United Nations charter and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These values were born of the experience of great struggles for peace, democracy and liberty. They were also the fruit of long and bitter experience. The experience of terrible wars, of horrible massacres, of bloody repressions and genocides. Those same values are inscribed in the constitution of Education International. They are our point of departure as well as our destination…They underpin our aims, our objectives.

[You may be interested to learn that in 1945 when the UN charter was established, my home country, The Netherlands, proposed an amendment to the UN Charter with the purpose of making it subservient to the Word of God, that is, their God, the God of the Dutch Reformed Church who in those days apparently held office in my country.]

Fortunately, they failed.

The UN Charter never became subservient to any religious doctrine, not to the Bible, nor to the Koran, nor to any other holy book. This independence is what makes the Charter and the Declaration applicable for all. Since they apply to all, regardless of belief and without discrimination, they must surely be considered as humanity’s highest authoritative documents. They affirm the most important gift to every individual human being: the gift of freedom.

These universal values are not in contradiction with cultural values or religious belief. On the contrary, the recognition of community values, cultural values, religious values, is also a human right. It is only when one set of values denies the rights of other sets of values that we have conflict. And that is the key.

I remember discussions with representatives of the white minority regime in South Africa who founded their policy of racism and apartheid on religious dogmas. I also remember discussions with school authorities using the very same dogmas to justify the dismissal of teachers in same sex relationships. On the basis of similar doctrines, or simply based on ignorance and fear, women and minority groups are still denied equal rights in too many countries today. Even when legislation, such as in Europe, has outlawed most forms of discrimination, racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, islamophobia, homophobia, has not been rooted out. Far from it. They still exist, covertly or openly.

We are living in what is an increasingly tumultuous period in Europe and elsewhere. A period when challenges confronting us are as numerous as they are complex. We haven’t had our values or our resolve tested like this in more than 70 years, which is precisely what makes these next two days so timely and important to reflect on our democratic and human rights values and on our duty to impart those values to next generations.

As educators, we cannot underestimate our role in promoting those values and the rule of law on which the European Union was created and continues to stand. But in many parts of Europe those core tenets are beginning to waver.

Knocked about by a wave of populist movements, preaching doom and gloom. If the refugee crisis doesn’t bring Europe to its knees, then surely a potential Brexit will. And we are led to believe that terrorists lurk behind every corner. What began as a vision of open borders and open minds is quickly reverting to a reality of locked doors and spreading suspicion.

One of the keys of course is education. Quality education for all. Quality education built upon values – universal values of understanding and tolerance, of seeing cultural differences as an opportunity rather than a threat. By education we mean something more than literacy, the ability to calculate, and learning a trade or a profession. We mean education in being a citizen, an actor in society, being a participant not a bystander, being able to assert ones’ own rights while respecting the rights of others.

In a word, we need education for life in diverse democratic societies. In our multicultural societies – and all our countries today are multicultural – which is the inevitable consequence of globalization – the question of identity is crucial. Pride in one’s own identity should go hand in hand with respect for the identity of others. Our schools should recognize the identities of each student, whatever his or her origin or background. Schools should be places where children and young people learn to live together, understanding the richness of diversity, because the societies in which they must live in the future will all be diverse, multicultural societies or - more accurately: multi-cultural democracies.

So education for democracy, human rights education, global citizens’ education, with pride in one’s identity and respect for the identity of others, yes, all this is imperative. But it is still not enough.

For our school systems to be successful in promoting dialogue and universal values they must be open, democratic, and publicly funded, that is, they must operate under supervision of democratically elected authorities. This is difficult if not impossible in countries where education systems have been outsourced to the private sector or where freedom and democracy are still distant goals.

Throughout modern history teachers, education workers and their unions have been in the forefront of the struggle for democratic change and social equity. Most recent examples of this we find in the Middle East with our colleagues from Tunisia even being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. And if we go further back in time, South Africa, Chile and Poland come to mind as other places where our unions played a crucial role in bringing about democratic change. Let me give one more example: the civil rights movement of the United States in the sixties of the last century in which education union activists played a prominent role.

We have one of them with us here at our symposium: Loretta Johnson, Secretary-Treasurer of the AFT. She will share some of her experiences and make the link to today’s human rights challenges. At EI’s World Congress last year Loretta moved a resolution on the promotion and protection of standards and values in the world. In 2018 we will convene a global conference to examine the role of education unions and the teaching profession to promote and protect democratic and human rights values and to better meet both the political and professional challenges facing us.

We will organize several sub-regional symposiums, of which this is the first one, to prepare for this world event. In the coming two days we will give particular attention to the professional challenge of delivering effective human rights education to our students. The question is not whether we need to impart democratic values but how to do this in the best possible way. Democracy and equal rights are part of our profession’s DNA.

Earlier this year I visited a school in Berlin, which, I was told, hosted a large group of refugee children from Syria. "How many refugee students do you have?” I asked the principal. “I have no idea,” she said. “We don’t count them.”

It then occurred to me that this is one of the characteristics, if not the very soul, of the teaching profession. The desire to build equity - in the classroom, in the school, and yes, in the society at large.

This brings me to my favourite point, colleagues. We need to re-gain control of our own profession. We should not allow outsiders, self-proclaimed experts, consultancy agencies, corporations or governments to (unilaterally) determine our professional standards. Neither should we accept politicians entering our class rooms and tell us what and how to teach. Our professional autonomy is recognized internationally. With that autonomy, however, comes a professional responsibility to impart the human values underpinning international standards, with or without the consent of education authorities. Our profession is our most valuable asset, our most effective weapon to realise democratic ideals and aspirations.

This symposium coincides with a significant year in the history of education, of teachers. On October 5th, World Teachers’ Day, our profession will mark the 50th anniversary of the ILO/UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Teachers.

Although written in a bygone era its foundation remains true to this day by which, and I quote, it recognises “the essential role of teachers in educational advancement and the importance of their contribution to the development of man and modern society.”

When adopted in 1966, the Cold War was red hot, this very country caught in a fight over ideological supremacy; the world’s population was half of what it is today; and we were still three years away from stepping foot on the moon. And teachers were seen as essential!

I would argue that this should be more true today. As we enter the so-called ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution, at a time of important geo-political shifts, at a time when extremism is on the rise and in a world where international standards are too often ignored, we need a highly qualified, highly motivated, strong teaching profession to lead our young people into a liveable and sustainable future.

Quality education is no longer a domestic issue, it has become a global challenge. Last year the international community agreed on a path to create a better, just world. The Sustainable Development Goals reflect the world we want. When I look through all of the 17 Goals, from gender equality, to clean water and the eradication of poverty, I see the education Goal as a central component in all of them.

From the earliest age to advanced university and tertiary studies, education is an equaliser, it lifts people out of poverty, and it fuels innovation. But above all, our school systems are the place, sometimes the only place, where democratic and human right values are instilled in the minds and hearts of future generations. We are certain that the pathway to democracy, human rights and a sustainable future, travels through the classroom. And it begins with us, with you.

Thank you.