

Third Report on Good Practices Center for European Studies ActEuR Jean Monnet Module

Education on Human Rights and Good Practices

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1. Premise

As stated in the **First Report on Good Practices**¹ by the staff of the Jean Monnet Activating of EU Rights (ActEuR) Module, one of the main objectives pursued by the Module is to actively engage civil society representatives in a discussion on the potential and limits of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, in order to bring out their Good Practices at local and national level. This is a transversal objective of all ActEuR JM Module activities. In other words, it is about: a) creating a space for reflexivity in which to bring out the needs of civil society actors in their indispensable work for the defence of fundamental rights and, above all, b) understanding how they encounter the European dimension in the actions they implement. Indeed, one of the main difficulties accompanying the process of constitutionalising fundamental rights in the EU is that of making the European dimension of rights effective.

If in the first report (**Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Good Practices**)² the results of a questionnaire research on the main difficulties that civil society actors encounter in putting into practice a European dimension of fundamental rights are brought to attention, in the second report (**Human Rights activists: practicing “mild courage”**)³ a qualitative in-depth study of the themes that emerged from the research is presented. It focuses on the issue of what it means “to be an activist today”. Within this framework, the report is conceived as a working document, useful for keeping track of the transformations that are taking place in the experiences of activism aimed at the protection of fundamental rights.

¹ Center for European Studies, ActEuR Jean Monnet Module (2023), *Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Good Practices*, University of Salerno (IT), DiSPS. Available at: www.centrostudieuropei.it/acteur.

² First Report, *Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Good Practices*: <https://www.centrostudieuropei.it/acteur/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ActEuR-JM-Module-Research-Report-2022--EU-Fundamental-Rights-and-Good-Practices.pdf>.

³ Second Report, *Human Rights activists: practising 'mild courage'*: <https://www.centrostudieuropei.it/acteur/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ActEuR-JM-Module-Research-Report-2023--Human-rights-activists--practicing-mild-courage.pdf>.

In this third and last Report, **Education on Human Rights and Good Practices**, the results of three years of meetings on Human Rights (JM Module ActEuR - Roundtables) in secondary schools in Salerno are brought to attention, as well as the outcomes of a research, so far initial, conducted through Focus Groups on the ways of teaching Human Rights (Human Rights Education) in secondary schools, with a particular focus on the difficulties encountered by the teachers interviewed in teaching and finding information and working materials on Human Rights and Fundamental Rights of the European Charter of Rights.

The choice of the focus group as research technique is linked to the exploratory nature of our study and the particular nature of the research object. The focus group, centred on dialogical confrontation, is a particularly suitable survey instrument in cases where the research topic is particularly relevant but little treated/discussed such as that of Shared Good Practices in Human Rights Education. In fact, this technique pushes the participants - in this case the teachers - to seek clarification within themselves and the formation of a subjective opinion, captured by the researcher in nascent form, in relation to the opinion of the participants.

2. Focus Group: Education on Fundamental Rights

Teachers from secondary schools in the Salerno district take part in the Focus Group. As envisaged by the Ministry of Education Guidelines, the teaching of Civic Education includes the theme of Human Rights and is intended as a transversal subject. Participants in the Focus Group are teachers of Law, Literature and History and Philosophy.

Question: What is your experience in teaching human rights?

Teacher 1: My training has been very varied, I have also had experience abroad, in even extreme situations abroad. I have also taught in prisons. So in short, let's say that the subject of human rights is of particular interest to me. The subject human rights is a value that we often do not consider. We have it but sometimes we do not know what we have compared to so many other realities; in fact, I was talking about abroad, which I experienced on my own skin and in returning to my country.

Teacher 2: I teach law. My career path did not start in the school, it started at the Court of Auditors and then within the school I had a break at the Administrative Court. Human rights, about which we never know enough, let's say that they should be our daily bread and I must say that they are very often the subject I am asked about by the children who do Catholic Religion as an alternative subject. (...) There is one [student] who is currently working on how the Church deals with human rights.

Teacher 3: This is my nineteenth year of teaching in this school. (...) We are there on values, but I think, in my case, I have to change a bit, on methodologies, I have to find out which methodologies to use better for myself and for the children. At the moment I feel very much in crisis, precisely with respect to rights, precisely with respect to how we can make an impact. We may not have the problems that there are in Hungary, but we do have problems and we are in a difficult historical moment. (...) We have direct contact with the pain of the children, who sometimes know how

to express it, sometimes they don't, and that is even worse, but we have the problem of parental violence and this greatly limits the function of the teacher. I think that right now we need to think not only about how to present human rights to children but how to invent new things. (...) I therefore proposed to two of my students that they themselves should be promoters of new initiatives, new paths.

Teacher 4: I teach literature and Latin and the subject of human rights is being dealt with in a cross-curricular manner with my colleague in civic education. It was a pleasant surprise that my colleague introduced the topic of the right to life and therefore euthanasia and abortion. The students were very interested in these topics and I realised that interfacing with a colleague, not always being me, to talk about these situations, but the co-presence created a very positive feedback; in fact, immediately afterwards we did a topic and a test and worlds opened up. A focus opened up: those who had a purely Catholic idea, others who asked other questions. So, I think we need to talk a lot about human rights, because many times they are taboos.

Teacher 5: I teach history and philosophy. So, the issue of rights, the issue of rights is transversal, as you said. Obviously teaching philosophy, for me it is something important. We have conquered rights. The problem is that they are not fixed in time, we risk losing them and therefore we have to defend them with gritted teeth. And I notice that we are in a phase where some rights we have won are at risk, so I work a lot on this. But I notice that the young people on this issue are sleepy, they are not worried, and so when I present the subject, when I show that there is a risk of a drift, they do not shake, so they take it for granted; even in the face of the latest episodes in foreign policy, for heaven's sake they are interested, but they are not frightened, they are not anxious, anxious as a positive sentiment.

Teacher 3: They are not outraged.

Teacher 5: Exactly. This worries me. So now more than ever we have to insist on the importance of rights.

Question: What tools do you adopt in teaching human rights? Conceptual or experiential?

NB: they all answer 'both' but only talk about the experiential tools.

Teacher 4: You can start, for example this morning we read in class the newspaper article about the events in Pisa [clashes between students and the police in Pisa]. From this reading came the right to freedom of thought. Many did not really know what it meant. I was worried about this situation from a political point of view, from the point of view of the young people who have to be present in reality; I complain about too much virtual presence, too little associative presence, too little political awareness. This frightens me. I do not want politics to instrumentalise, in the most absolute way, but having an awareness of what is happening to us is more essential than ever.

Teacher 3: For example, last week, on the day of the school-family meeting, Giorgio Perlasca's son was here at the [Theatre] Ghirelli and so we thought of sending some students, a delegation of our pupils. [in the story it is stressed that many students, although invited to participate, declined to go] (...) That was an experience of listening, of meeting with a person who had experienced, logically indirectly, the violation of rights through the figure of the father. The problem is that most of the boys do not live the experience.

Question: Do you remember your students' comments on the experiences narrated?

Teacher 4: Yes. Just this morning some did not participate in the debate. Only a few merely said: 'well, teacher, you have to understand the motivations of the police and those of the boys'. Mine was a provocation that I created that was not taken up. I see, I notice, that there is also no awareness at home. So we can send messages but then they have to be grasped. So, I say there is a generation gap.

Teacher 1: I join my colleague. Unfortunately, after 7 October, after the tragedy, the triggering off of one of the many battles in the ten-year, if not multi-year, war between Hamas and Israel, with the other class at the other school, where there is a favourable humus, I launched a proposal. They did wonderful work. (...) We talked about human rights, populations, the Italian Red Cross. Because the class responded. It's true, it's a drop in the ocean, it's one class, perhaps out of many other classes.

Which I find much more difficult to propose in this school. We teachers can talk about these topics, open up, lead the children, but when the class responds.

Teacher 4: But even those who participated this morning I found a bit aseptic, as if it didn't belong to them.

Teacher 1: Yes sectoral. That moment is the school moment, then after school I have other things to think about.

Teacher 5: I would like to recall the experience related to Cortellesi's film [Title: C'è ancora domani]. The right of women, the right to vote. Obviously, the children were prepared before going to the event. Normally, when I accompany school groups to these events, they get distracted, they make a bit of a fuss, they make you angry. Instead, I noticed that there was an attention, a religious silence. It was a beautiful thing.

Teacher 2: Sorry to interrupt. I took the same class to see the film Oppenheimer, which is important for a science high school anyway, and I didn't get the same attention.

Teacher 5: I, however, wanted to conclude that beyond the silence and the attention, there is a boy in the class (...) who, once the film was over, came to hug me and started crying and thanked me because I had shown him this film. (...) I mean there is this sensitivity in children, it's all about cultivating it, finding the tools.

Teacher 3: Cortellesi has a weapon which is irony, lightness. I lack lightness in presenting topics. Two of my students told me we only do things that make people suffer. There are wonderful young people who do not participate in the debate, who do not express their ideas because they suffer and because they are demotivated.

Question: In your experience, in a hypothetical ranking, what is the main tool for teaching human rights in schools? Conceptual, experiential also understood as meeting the protagonists of events or representatives of associations working in the field of human rights?

Nb: everyone agrees that the first tool is the experiential one.

Teacher 1: Definitely, meeting with associations is also important.

Teacher 4: First, you have to show pictures, then the debate.

Teacher 2: Since they [the students] are children of images, the image must be strong, captivating. Then afterwards comes the discussion.

Teacher 5: Yes, then, one has to reflect.

Teacher 4: Yes, because if the concept is presented first, it is far from them.

Question: Do you know and/or have you ever used the Compass tool created by the Council of Europe for the teaching of Human Rights?

NB: all answer no.

Question: Do you know and/or have you ever used human rights education tools/programmes/kits developed by Research Centres, Associations or Institutes dealing with Human Rights?

NB: all answer no.

NB: In greetings, everyone spontaneously agreed that it was a constructive moment of confrontation.

3. Some Considerations

The interest underlying this initial research stems from the work we have done over the past three years with schools in the Salerno area. As presented in the Quality Report on ActEuR Jean Monnet Module Activities (Third Year 2024)⁴ in total, this third year alone we have met with around 300 students and 10 secondary school teachers. In the course of the three years of the Module, we have exceeded 1,000 students and numerous teachers have joined us and with whom we have also established a very fruitful cooperation. In general, after attending the seminars, the students were asked to submit a paper (power point, essay, video, concept map, etc.) on one or more of the topics discussed. Many students used their papers for their final diploma discussion, thus demonstrating their great interest in European Union and Human Rights issues.

We have thus become fully aware that the school is the place to take up the challenge of building conscious European citizens. These students, the 'native Europeans'⁵, if well guided and supported by teachers who are themselves enthusiastic and equipped with specific tools, can develop a critical and constructive attitude towards the European Union and the challenges it constantly faces.

Now, to move on to Human Rights Education in Italian schools, it is worth remembering that the subject is included in the Teaching of Civic Education and that the Ministerial Guidelines only provide a mere guideline in terms of competences and objectives to be achieved that are not immediately operational, so Italian teachers often need to rely on Human Rights Education programmes drawn up by other subjects and institutions. In the case question, however, all the teachers participating in the Focus opted for an experiential approach to the teaching of Human Rights: reading a newspaper, watching a film, a news event, a meeting with a witness, to be followed by a possible debate.

⁴ JM ActEuR Quality Report 2024:
<https://www.centrostudieuropei.it/acteur/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ActEuR-Quality-Report-2024.pdf>.

⁵ Benocci B., Verderame D. (2020). *Native Europeans and European Memories. The Building of a European consciousness among young people*. De Europa, vol 3, no 2/2020 pp. 91 -105.

The reason lies in the fact that all the teachers agree that their students are too addicted to social media and images and that they are not able to grapple with the concepts in the first place. Added to this is the idea shared by the participating teachers that their students take rights as given, so they do not feel the need to open a constructive discussion with their classmates. Only when faced with strong images, the teachers emphasise, do they seem to wake up. And again, although they recognise their role as teachers in human rights education as fundamental, they feel powerless or inadequate (*I think that right now we need to reflect not only on how to present human rights to children but how to invent new things*).

Another interesting and noteworthy aspect that emerges from the Focus, is the choice of these teachers not to use programmes or kits for Human Rights Education elaborated by Institutions and Associations, nor to seek their collaboration in the first place. In general, as emerges from the Focus, the training and information tools made available by the Council of Europe are little or not at all known.

The Italian school is therefore called upon to play a crucial role in the promotion and dissemination of Human Rights. Moreover, as both the COE and the United Nations have well emphasised, the school acts as a starting point for educating the new generations in equality, respect, dignity and awareness; through its daily action it ends up helping students to become aware adults and promoters of concrete changes in society. Currently, however, because of the way Human Rights Education is conceived in the Italian school, i.e. included in the Civic Education teaching, as a mere guideline and without operational aids, it ends up becoming the exclusive prerogative of the choices made by the teacher, who in turn is in difficulty in presenting students with such an important, articulated and diriment theme for the formation of individuals. It is, therefore, possible to conclude with the hope that it will be the teachers, on the strength of their experience, but assisted by experts and supported by the tools already existing on Human Rights Education, who will create the basis for a comparison, capable of starting the definition and identification of Good Practices in Human Rights Education for Italian schools.