



★ NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

European Conference

**Closing the empowerment gap through citizenship education
How to address educationally disadvantaged groups**

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Warsaw, Poland

Opening Address

by Thomas Krüger

President of Federal Agency for Civic Education (Germany)

Dear Mr Michalowski,
Dear Mrs Pacewicz,
Dear Mr Barber

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends of NECE

Welcome to this year's NECE conference on citizenship education in this very special venue here at Fabryka Trzciny. It's great to see so many known but also new faces here in the audience.

I am very honoured to now open this conference which we, Germany's Federal Agency for Civic Education, have organised together with our partners: the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts, and Culture; ProDemos from the Netherlands, and the Center for Citizenship Education from Poland.

Further cooperation partners are DARE - the network for Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe-, the Civic Education Center from the Czech Republic and the Polish Institute for Public Affairs. My special thanks to all of you!

Last but not least, I would also like to thank the Robert Bosch Foundation and the Erste Foundation for their ongoing precious support.

For the next three days we will focus on "Closing the empowerment gap through Citizenship Education: How to address educationally disadvantaged groups". This topic is very timely. We are just experiencing a time of re-politicisation. All over the world people are claiming back the streets fighting for their voices to be heard, and for their rights as humans and citizens.

This year the citizens in many Arab countries have shown us – in an impressive and powerful upheaval – their demand for political participation. Their mostly peaceful uprisings and revolutions were inspiring and moving for all of us. Nonetheless, they have also confronted us with the West's prejudiced images of Arab countries and peoples as being underdeveloped and not mature enough for democratic self-determination.



Also this year mostly young people from Madrid to New York, from London to Rome are protesting against their social and economic situation, and for new ways of making politics. The protesters call for more participation on all level of society: in the political arena, in the job market, in the field of education. And this time, it seems, this is not just an elite taking civil action – but a movement building on wide public support that crosses the usual social division lines.

But we have to take a closer look on who is actually protesting. Which social groups are really participating in the quest for more democracy? Are all people able to organise and articulate their interests? Are we open for new means of political participation, different from what we are used to know? As in other fields of life, we see that educationally disadvantaged groups are hardly participating in civil society at all. The gap between those who have the means for engagement, and those who consider themselves to be powerless continues to exist. This seems especially evident in the Western countries.

In Germany for example, we saw great protests against the rebuilding of a train station in the city of Stuttgart causing nationwide attention. It was considered as the beginning of this re-politicisation of society and change of the political culture. The protest finally led to the election of the first Green Party state prime minister in Germany. Everybody was fascinated by the fact that citizens were out on the streets - who, a few month before, would not have been suspected to do so. But surveys showed that the majority of citizens who protested against non-transparent decision-making were mostly well educated and experienced in democratic participation. They showed ongoing interest in complex mediation processes, and it's lengthy screening brought unprecedented audience ratings for the News Channel Phoenix. No surprise - less educated people were hardly involved here.

Thus, we have to look carefully whether new forms of participation, for example via the internet, do not only lead to more direct democracy but also widen the participation gap between well and less educated groups. If we want to tackle the growing social disintegration we have to find ways how to include educationally disadvantaged citizens in the process of re-politicisation, re-democratisation, and re-vitalisation of society. Our question is: how can citizenship education contribute to their empowerment?

This is of special importance with regard to the fragile state of the economy right now. The economic and financial crisis is far from being over. The question for the driving forces of the world economy – and the word itself – is still unanswered. Who are the market powers and the players behind it, who subordinate everything under the dominance of profits; who are the ones that make the decisions, which affect all of our lives? Aren't the democratically elected governments the ones who are supposed to find answers for these fundamental political questions? Throughout the last weeks we have seen a variety of concepts, which were almost impossible to understand and evaluate even for well-informed and educated citizens.

This shows the immense need for citizenship education in order to inform and enable us to take part in political decision-making. This is even more true with regard to citizenship education for people with special needs.

Let us be honest. At least for Germany I can say that we have not done enough to reach out to these target groups in the past. A study that evaluated institutions of political adult education (that was carried out in the early 2000's) exposed that a lot of educational institutions had actually given up to reach out for educationally disadvantaged groups. But we are learning. As for Germany, I can say that slowly these target groups are rediscovered. Consequently, we at the Federal Agency for Civic Education have established a special department that focuses on these target groups.

I am convinced that in the context of European networks we will rethink and change our attitudes towards these people as learners and citizens. To develop our democracy we must not leave them aside. We should stop focusing on the deficits but begin to see what they have to contribute. Their approach to education, to politics, to society might seem to us as not that erudite and sophisticated, but it is often much closer connected to their everyday world. As the Sinus Study “‘Invisible’ program of politics” – a study on political interest of educationally disadvantaged teenagers which we have commissioned – has shown: if we widen our definition of citizenship education to meet educationally disadvantaged groups on their terms we actually have a great chance to include them. Because they are clearly interested in what is going on in society, they have an attitude towards social, economic and political questions, and they are willing to take action. But the problem is: what we mean talking about *politics* is very different of what *they* think of connects to the term *politics*.

I would like to give you an example of a young man from this study. He was asked about his interest in politics and denied having *any*. He then was asked, “*Well, what are you interested in?*” He answered: “*Rap music*”. When asked to give an example of his rap music, he performed a song about the political situation in the Middle East. This shows we have to change a narrow definition of politics, which often discourages educationally disadvantaged groups in favour of a wider and more inclusive approach - not only in terms of content but also of methods.

This NECE conference offers us the opportunity to explore the challenges in our professional practice in Europe, to exchange ideas, share successes and learn from each other. And coming back to the beginning of my speech, I think, despite all the obstacles, the prospects for a new democratic movement are promising. We have to use this current wave of enthusiasm to foster the process with our expertise and help those to join in whose voices are not yet heard. And here I would like to quote Colin Crouch, the theorist of a post-democracy: “*I see hope, not so much in a renewal of electoral democracy and political parties, but in the growth of a strong civil society -- with alert citizens and social movements who challenge the misuse of political and economic power in a whole range of ways.*”¹

Having said this, I wish everybody a most interesting and inspiring conference! But before I end, I would like to express my very special thanks to Alicja Pacewicz from the Center for Citizenship Education here in Warsaw, one of our long-standing cooperation partners in the NECE network. Through her tireless commitment and great work she made this conference possible.

Thank you very much!

¹ www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,3617727,00.html