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Practices of Integrating the Earth Charter into Education Activities in German Federal States of Hessen and Rheinland-Pfalz

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Abstract

The integration of Earth Charter into everyday practice of schools in Germany has to be combined with the curriculum development in different subjects. Two states of Germany started this process by organising inservice training for primary and secondary teachers. Additionally they translated and adopted the Earth Charter Teachers Guidebook to improve the integration of Earth Charter ideas and content in German schools.

Keywords: Earth Charter, teacher education, competences, curriculum integration, teachers guide book, inservice training

BACKGROUND: GERMAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

Responsibility for the German education system lies primarily with the *Bundesländer* (Federal States) while the federal government only has a minor role. Optional kindergarten education is provided for all children between three and

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six-years-old, after which school attendance is compulsory for about 11 to 12 years. All students attend school from the age of six to fifteen or sixteen. The system varies throughout Germany because each Bundesland decides on its own educational policies. However, most children start with attending Grundschule (Primary school) from age six to age ten or twelve. Secondary education includes four types of schools based on a pupil's ability as determined by teacher recommendations:

- the *Gymnasium* includes the most gifted children and prepares students for university studies and finishes with the final examination *Abitur* after grade 12 or 13;
- the *Realschule* has an emphasis for intermediary students and finishes with the final examination (*Realschulabschluss*) after 10th grade;
- the *Hauptschule*, designed for the least capable students, prepares pupils for vocational education and finishes with the final examination *Hauptschulabschluss* after grade 9; and finally,
- the *Gesamtschule* (Comprehensive school), created during the educational reforms of the 1970s, to replace the traditional three way division of schools mentioned above with a single system. Pupils have the chance to learn a subject at a level appropriate to them; for example, if their lack of ability for mathematics has meant they cannot go to a Gymnasium, they may still study languages to a high level at the Gesamtschule.

These developments of different structures are still going on. Some federal states are on the way to a system which is based on only two types of schools: Gymnasium as described above, and a school type called '*Stadtteil-Schule*' (local school) or '*Regelschule*' (Comprehensive School). These types of schools will offer all types of examinations.

DESD IN GERMANY

Very soon after the official launch of the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) in 2005 the German Parliament unanimously adopted a resolution to create the German Commission for UNESCO (DUK) to implement the Decade in Germany with the support of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. The implementation process of the DESD in Germany is being carried out under the patronage of the Federal President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Horst Köhler.

The German National Committee for the UN Decade awards recognition to official Decade Projects to reward examples of good practice and create models worthy of imitation for other projects. Successful and innovative projects in education for sustainable development have the opportunity to apply for recognition as an 'Official German Project for the UN Decade'. These awards help make the Decade's concerns more visible throughout Germany. At the same time, the awards also support the local individual ESD stakeholders. The results of this initiative have surpassed all

expectations: nearly 800 Official Decade Projects and nine municipalities have already received this recognition since the beginning of the Decade. Recognition is being given to:

- Official German Projects of the UN Decade
- Contributions to the UN Decade
- Cities and Local Authorities of the UN Decade

INTEGRATING EARTH CHARTER INTO THE DESD ACTIVITIES

The educational value of the Earth Charter systemic approach to the diverse challenges of the modern world and its apparent potential as an ethical framework for advancing the implementation of the DESD in Germany has attracted the interest of German educators for several years. However, it was only in 2007 that the inspired group of educators involved in implementation of the DESD in Germany as senior advisors to Federal States' institutions of school development and teachers' training, got together with representatives of different NGOs in an attempt to integrate Earth Charter values and its holistic framework into the school system of the two German states: Hessen and Rheinland-Pfalz.

In cooperation with the programmes for education for sustainable development in Hessen and Rheinland-Pfalz, the German partner of the Earth Charter International 'Ökumenische Initiative Eine Welt' (Ecumenical Initiative One World) in collaboration with *Soka Gakkai International Deutschland e.V.* (SGI-D) and with the assistance of the Hessen State Institute for Teacher Education and the Pädagogisches Zentrum Rheinland-Pfalz (Pedagogical Centre of Rheinland-Pfalz) developed a systematic program to integrate Earth Charter-related activities in schools.

1. The first step was to organise an in-service teacher training seminar to inform about the Earth Charter text, its principles and philosophy and introduce the methodological possibilities of integrating the Earth Charter in teaching different subjects at school. More than 50 teachers from different schools worked together with NGOs in several workshops to develop ideas of how they could integrate the Earth Charter in their day-by-day lessons and also in the long-lasting school projects. This in-service training took place in 2007 at the wonderful and inspiring building of Soka Gakkai, Villa Sachsen, in the centre of Germany.
2. The next step of the consortium of partners was the translation of the Earth Charter Teachers Guidebook developed by the Earth Charter Centre for ESD and its adaptation to the German realities of noncentralised school systems and the existing practice of four different types of secondary schools. The Guidebook was mainly translated by Rainer Tempel from PZ Rheinland-Pfalz and is now available both as an electronic pdf file and as a printed version. Due to several workshops and teacher training seminars more than 500 hard copies of the Guidebook were ordered by the teachers of the two German States.

PLANNING NEXT STEPS

Inspired by their success with the first stage of their Earth Charter project, the consortium of committed partners decided to expand the integration of the Earth Charter in school systems of the two federal states. As their next step they chose to incorporate the Charter into lessons of religion and ethics. To fulfil this goal they have launched a discussion with different stakeholders in order to develop a special detailed in-service training for teachers of these subjects. Religion and ethics are core subjects in all German schools, and therefore it is very important to familiarise the teachers of these subjects as well as teacher trainers with the Earth Charter and offer them methodological support in using the document as a teaching resource. The federal structure of Germany in the field of education is based on a standing conference of the 16 Ministries of Education. As one of the efforts in implementation of the DESD in Germany, this body has developed a 'Cross-curricular Framework for Global Development Education, in the context of Education for Sustainable Development'¹

- It is a conceptual framework for the development of syllabi and curricula, for designing lessons and extracurricular activities as well as for setting and assessing requirements for specific subjects and learning areas;
- It offers inspiration for school profile and full-day school program development, for cooperation with external partners and for teacher education;
- It offers concrete methodological recommendations and suggestions for the interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary organisation of instruction and offers classroom materials (for vocational schools as well), to work out interconnected global development issues (see page 2 of the condensed English version).

Most of the schools in Germany are now at the stage of adopting this new framework curriculum. Taking into consideration the importance of the 'Cross-curricular framework' for the successful implementation of the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development in the German educational system, the consortium of partners see this process as a new starting point and opportunity to expand integration of the Earth Charter in German schools.

Note

- 1 Available at <http://www.schuleundgesundheit.hessen.de/themen/umweltbildung-bildung-fuer-eine-nachhaltige-entwicklung/material/global-entwicklung.html> (accessed 24 June 2010).