**Presentation by the Commissioner For Children Rights Mrs Leda Koursoumba**

**to the seminar**

*What does it mean to think historically? Promoting historical understanding in classrooms of mixed abilities and diverse backgrounds and developing channels of communication with the wider community"*

***Children’s rights and the work on history education in Cyprus:***

**Wednesday, 26/9/2012**

**Castelli Hotel**

SLIDE 1

It is with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation of the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus to deliver a presentation as the Commissioner for Children Rights in Cyprus to the Pestalozzi European Workshop under the title «What does it mean to think historically? Promoting historical understanding in classrooms of mixed abilities and diverse backgrounds and developing channels of communication with the wider community».

SLIDE 2

During my meetings with teachers and educators I grasp the opportunity to underline that the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) establishes a wide theoretical framework which can be used as the foundation for the development of innovative, future oriented and child-centered pedagogical approaches. It is so my firm opinion that the CRC, integrating an overall and interdisciplinary approach to childhood and the individual child can be proved, an excellent pedagogical tool for every teacher.

SLIDE 3

During the 20 minutes that I have for my presentation I will introduce briefly the CRC and elaborate a bit more on the right to education. After that I will discuss the implications that children rights may have for history teaching with reference to the relevant recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. I will conclude with a brief comment on the current situation of history teaching in Cyprus.

**CRC – A brief introduction**

SLIDE 4

The CRC, adopted by the UN General Assembly on the 20th of November 1989, marks an ideological shift in the perception of childhood. It re-conceptualizes the child, from being a vulnerable object in need of protection, to **an active subject of rights; and it recognizes children as persons in their own right entitled to inherent dignity and full respect.**

SLIDE 5

A hallmark of the CRC is the indivisibility and interdependence of its provisions. CRC, as any other human rights international instrument, is not a mere list of articles embodying divergent or independent principles, but a coherent and well structured text. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in an effort to secure a holistic approach to children’s rights, has identified four Articles which should be considered as “general principles” and taken into account in the implementation of all other provisions of the Convention.

These principles are:

* **N*on-discrimination* (Article 2**)
* **Best Interest of the Child (Article 3)**
* **The Right to Life, Survival and Development** **(Article 6)**
* **The right of the child to freely express his or her views and have them given due weight in all matters affecting the child (Article 12)**

SLIDE 6

(A) **Non-discrimination (Article 2**). Children*,* without any exception*,* should enjoytheir rights; no child shouldbe discriminated against or excluded from opportunities irrespective of “the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status”. **In relation to education, this means that, all children should have access to a “child-friendly, inspiring and motivating the individual child”[[1]](#endnote-1) education without discrimination. At the same time, Education should be inclusive and anti-discriminatory. Educational programmes should challenge all aspects of discrimination and prejudices and should promote an understanding and appreciation of the values enshrined in all human rights instruments, including respect for differences.**

**SLIDE 7**

**(B) Best Interest of the Child (Article 3).** The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions and decisions affecting children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies. **Thus, school curricula, rules and regulations, administrative and disciplinary decisions, among other, should primarily aim to serve the best interest of the child/children concerned**.

**SLIDE 8**

**(C)** **The Right to Life, Survival and Development** **(Article 6)**. State Parties recognize that “every child has the inherent right to life” and “shall ensure, to the maximum extent possible, the survival and development of the child.” In this context, **development should be interpreted in a broad sense to mean, not only physical health but also mental, emotional, cognitive, social, moral, spiritual and cultural development, and must be promoted thought education.**

SLIDE 9

**(D) The right of the child to freely express his or her views and have them given due weight in all matters affecting the child (Article 12) - i.e participation rights.** Children are **no longer** considered to be merely passive recipients of adult’s experience, simple consumers of adult’s opinions and ideas, but active social agents, purposefully engaged in their surroundings from an early age. **Participation is a human right for all children – and as such, it is not a gift or privilege bestowed by adults on children, but the right of every child capable of expressing a view.** The Committee on the Rights of the Child states that “the overall objective of education is to maximize the child’s ability and opportunity to participate fully and responsibly in a free society”[[2]](#endnote-2) and underlines that “the respect for the right of the child to be heard is fundamental to the realization of the right to education”[[3]](#endnote-3). **The modern pedagogical approaches, based on the values enshrined in the CRC, are linked to a democratic school-governance and a participatory learning environment, aiming at a child-cantered education that provides resources and possibilities for students to enjoy of their rights**.

**The right to Education**

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child clearly highlights that “[c]hildren do not lose their human rights by virtue of passing through the school gates”[[4]](#endnote-4). The right to education does not exist in vacuum, but is intrinsically related to the whole spectrum of human rights [[5]](#endnote-5) enumerated in the CRC. The particular right (right to education) has been globally recognised since 1948 with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This instrument, conceived as a ‘common standard of achievement for all people and all nations”, proclaimed education as a fundamental right. Article 26 of the Declaration provides among others the following:

SLIDE 10

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# “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace)”

# SLIDE 11

# The right to education since then has been enshrined in a range of international treaties including of course the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) . All Human Rights Instruments approach (tackle? / ) as an empowering right not only as a goal to be achieved for the whole population - a right in itself –, but also as *an indispensable means of realizing other human rights*.[[6]](#endnote-6) CRC makes this clear by devoting two separate articles to Education.

# SLIDE 12

# Article 28 of the CRC, affirms the right of the child to education and stresses the need for this right to be achieved “progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity”.

# *[States shall make primary education compulsory and free to all children, and encourage the development of secondary education for all children as well. Authorities are also required to take measures to ensure regular attendance and reduce drop-out rates. This implies that, schooling needs to be perceived as a worthwhile experience and not a threatening or demoralizing one[[7]](#endnote-7). ]*

# *SLIDE 13*

# *Furthermore* Article 29 of the CRC is more extensive and specific with regard to the aims of education in relation to the development of a child’s personality. Education is about developing the full range of abilities and talents of young people, and carries a responsibility to encourage respect for the child’s family, cultural identity, language and values. It, also, specifically aims at developing ‘respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The school should help the child to prepare for a “responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin”[[8]](#endnote-8). Furthermore, Article 29 underlines that, Education should contribute to the development of respect for the natural environment.

# The Committee on Children Rights the UN body of independent experts that monitors the implementation of the CRC with its first General Comment which comes under the title The Aims of Education – a document that every single teacher should study carefully - stresses that “the education to which every child has a right is one designed to provide the child with life skills, to strengthen the child’s capacity to enjoy the full range of human rights and to promote a culture which is infused by appropriate human rights values. The goal is to empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence” (CRC/ GC/ 2001/ 1, par. 2). The Committee urges for a balanced approach to education “one which succeeds in reconciling diverse values through dialogue and respect for difference” (CRC/ GC/ 2001/ 1, par. 4) .

# SLIDE 15

# The Right to Education as it is secured in the CRC and clarified in the First General Comment of the Committee on the Rights of the Child addresses “child as citizen” (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p. 48) “a co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture” a child with agency, rights and responsibilities. The concept “child as citizen” emphasises the child as an equal partner in the learning process rather than a passive “recipient of traditional knowledge and skills whose shape and content are predetermined and transmitted by adults” (Mitchell, 2007, p. 2007).

# Human Rights Based Approach to History Teaching

# Neither CRC nor the Committee on the Rights of the Child discuss in any further detail the school curriculums, however it is right to assume that the wide theoretical framework they establish regarding children rights in general and the right to education in particular shall shape the school curriculums and it shall be reflected in any school subject’s aims, content and methodology including of course history teaching.

# SLIDE 16

# Adopting a human rights approach to history teaching presupposes a paradigm shift from the approaches that consider history teaching as a means of transmission to the next generations of an unquestionable national narrative, one that celebrates the glorious past of a homogenous nation that retains its essence unchanged through time. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, acknowledging the importance of history teaching for the development of a culture of cooperation in Europe based on the respect for the fundamental values of human rights, democracy and rule of law”[[9]](#endnote-9) has issued in 2001 recommendation on history teaching in twenty-first century Europe[[10]](#endnote-10). I copy here some of the aims of history teaching in the twenty – first century as are being given in the particular document. You can find and read the document on line.

# “History teaching in a democratic Europe should:

– **occupy a vital place in the training of responsible and active citizens and in the developing of respect for all kinds of differences, based on an understanding of national identity and on principles of tolerance**;

– **be a decisive factor in reconciliation, recognition, understanding and mutual trust between peoples;**

**– play a vital role in the promotion of fundamental values, such as tolerance, mutual understanding, human rights and democracy;**

– **be one of the fundamental parts of the freely agreed building of Europe** based on a common historical and cultural heritage, enriched through diversity, even with its conflictual and sometimes dramatic aspects;

– **be part of an education policy that plays a direct role in young people’s development and progress, with a view to their active participation in the building of Europe**, as well as the peaceful development of human societies in a global perspective, in a spirit of mutual understanding and trust;

– **make it possible to develop in pupils the intellectual ability to analyse and interpret information critically and responsibly, through dialogue, through the search for historical evidence and through open debate based on multiperspectivity, especially on controversial and sensitive issues**;

– enable European citizens to enhance their own individual and collective identity through knowledge of their common historical heritage in its local, regional, national, European and global dimensions;

– be an instrument for the prevention of crimes against humanity”.

**History Teaching in Cyprus Public School: A brief comment**

I don’t have the time but neither the expertise to enter to an in depth and comprehensive discussion on the current situation of history teaching in Cyprus public schools. I’ m sure that through this conference you will have the opportunity to do this as well. In this respect, I would like to conclude my presentation giving you some more food for thought in the form of inquiries.

History and history teaching often are perceived to have great value for the constructed national, ethnic and cultural identities. Therefor history and history teaching often become the topic of intense public debates throughout the world. It is not a coincidence of course that generally speaking what is at stake in these debates is what children are taught (content) and not how they are been taught about it (methodology and pedagogical setting). Those debates are formed by the socio-political and historical background within which they are taking place. Mostly they are held in political terms whilst the educational aspect of them is left aside. The central challenge of teachers and educators well as of all those who are involved in the Educational affairs is how to re-direct the focus of these debates to children and their right to education.

Any public discussion on history teaching in Cyprus is structured around the political situation of the country and namely to Cyprus as a country being geographically, ethnically and communally divided since the Turkish invasion in 1974. The question which is raised here is whether a human rights approach to history teaching – as been roughly described above – has a place and a role to play for the promotion of peace and reconciliation in a country like Cyprus. The question can be extended a bit in order to include another important aspect of our society today: Is such an approach appropriate to a school and a society that are becoming more and more multicultural?

From my perspective, as the Commissioner for Children Rights in Cyprus, the answer is simple and obvious. My only concern is that a human rights approach to history teaching presupposes not only a curriculum reform but also a comprehensive programme of professional development for teachers and the promotion of a culture of human rights in our schools and society.

1. See note ii [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See note ii [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. General Comment No. 12, 20 July 2009, Committee on the Rights of the Child. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See note ii [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See note ii [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. General Comment No. 13, 21st Session, 1999, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Osler, A. and Starkey H. (1998). Children’s rights and citizenship: some implications for the management of schools, *The International Journal of Children’s Rights* 6, 313 – 333. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. CRC, Article 29 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. http://www.coe.int/aboutcoe/index.asp?page=nosObjectifs&l=en [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. # Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, Recommendation Rec (2001)15 of the Committee of Ministers to member states  on history teaching in twenty-first-century Europe  (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers  on 31October 2001  at the 771st meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies)

    [↑](#endnote-ref-10)