

Human Rights Education at the Dawn of the 21st Century

by Dennis N. Banks 2(2)

What is human rights education (HRE)? What actually are human rights? Human rights have been defined as “generally accepted principles of fairness and justice” or “the universal moral rights that belong equally to all people simply because they are human beings” or “the basic standards without which people cannot live in dignity” (O’Brien, 1996; Flowers, 1998). Simply put, human rights education is all learning that develops the knowledge, skills, and values of human rights.

The United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) defines human rights education as training, dissemination, and information efforts aimed at the building of a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the molding of attitudes which are directed to:

- (a) The strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- (b) The full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity;
- (c) The promotion of understanding, respect, gender equality, and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples and racial, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups;
- (d) The enabling of all persons to participate effectively in a free society;
- (e) The furtherance of the activities of the United Nations for the Maintenance of Peace.” (Adapted from the Plan of Action of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education, 1995-2004: 2).

Education

Education in human rights is itself a fundamental human right and also a responsibility. According to the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), “every individual and every organ of society” should “strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms.” Although news reports refer to human rights every day, human rights literacy is not widespread in the United States. Students of law and international relations or political science may study human rights in a university setting, but most people receive no education, formally or informally, about human rights. Even human rights activists usually acquire their knowledge and skills by self-teaching and direct experience. People who do not know their rights are more vulnerable to having them abused and often lack the language and conceptual framework to effectively advocate for them. Growing consensus around the world recognizes education for and about human rights as essential. It can contribute to the building of free, just, and peaceful societies.

Human rights education is increasingly recognized as an effective strategy to prevent human rights abuses. According to United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, “Today, such programmes are more important than ever. Clearly, we need to use education to advance tolerance and understanding. Perhaps more than ever, international understanding is essential to world peace - understanding between faiths, between nations, between cultures. Today, we know that just as no nation is immune to conflict or suffering, no nation can defend itself alone. We need each other as friends, as allies, as partners, in a struggle for common values and common needs.”

In the 2000 Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the mid-term global evaluation of the progress made towards the achievement of the objectives of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education, human rights education is seen to: “involve more than the provision of information and should constitute a comprehensive life-long process by which people at all levels in development and in all strata of society learn respect for the dignity of others and the means and methods of ensuring that respect in all societies.” (UNGA, 2000: 4) A large number of countries already incorporate HRE in pre-school, primary and secondary curricula, either as a cross curricular theme, an optional course or as “attainment targets” in the overall curriculum. In many countries there is also a continuous stream of activities regarding human rights issues, initiated by human rights NGOs and individual schools and teachers (Elbers, 2000).

For example:

1. As part of the National Plan of Action, the Croatian government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and teacher training institutes organized a series of seminars for teachers and principals, developed text books and

manuals in order to introduce human rights education as a cross curricular theme and an optional subject in all kindergartens, primary, and secondary schools.

2. In Austria a special Service Centre for Human Rights Education supported by the Austrian government was established as part of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education. The HRE Service Centre offers training courses and an advisory service for teachers and others engaged in HRE activities; it also develops educational materials and is actively creating an information network among Austrian teachers.
3. A massive human rights education project was initiated in Cambodia in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and with funding from UN agencies and other donors. The Human Rights Teaching Methodology project aims to train all of Cambodia's 71,000 teachers in how best to teach human rights to their students.

United States Role

Missing from this discussion is any involvement from the United States, except in the instances of NGOs or human rights organizations that are headquartered here. However, there has been movement in K-12 education. Several state legislatures have mandated various levels of human rights education within their schools. The New York State legislature in 1995 amended its Education Law with regard to instruction on human rights violations, genocide, slavery, the Holocaust, and the mass starvation in Ireland. A review of programming at recent Annual Meetings of the National Council for the Social Studies indicates a growing number of presentations on the broad topic of human rights education.

Currently, forty percent (20) of the states indicate that human rights education is within the state mandated curriculum. The specific terminology of where this mandates lies varies greatly. Fourteen of these states (including New Jersey and New York) indicate that human rights education is part of their state standards; Connecticut, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey and New York list legislative mandates or resolutions. These mandates are often in a very focused area that falls solely within the definition of historical human rights education such as the Connecticut legislation to provide guidance in teaching about the Holocaust and Irish famine or Indiana resolutions for multicultural (1991) and Holocaust (1995) education. On the other hand, New York legislation mandates instruction in "human rights issues, with particular attention to the study of the inhumanity of genocide, slavery, the Holocaust, and the mass starvation in Ireland from 1845 to 1850..." The New Jersey legislation indicates that instruction on the Holocaust and genocides shall take place throughout the elementary and secondary curriculum. This instruction "shall enable pupils to identify and analyze applicable theories concerning human nature and behavior; to understand that genocide is a consequence of prejudice and discrimination; and to understand that issues of moral dilemma and conscience have a profound impact on life." The vast majority of states that mandate human rights education consider their mandate to extend to all grade levels. In New York, however, the legislative mandate is restricted to students age 8+.

No mandate in the world can assure student learning without the active involvement of classroom teachers. When social studies teachers and their students, as well as activists, the media, politicians, and others in everyday life begin to refer to problems in the U.S. such as racism, women's issues, children's rights, poverty, police brutality, international trade, unemployment, the death penalty and gun control as human rights issues, we will see an important shift in human rights education. Only when we understand that at different stages of our lives, we are all victims and perpetrators of human rights abuse, will Human Rights Education attain its rightful place within the K-12 curriculum.

References

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High School Level Activity (Prepared by Laura Pearson and Kenneth Dwyer)

1. Human Rights Abuses in the Modern World

Directions: Read the based-on-fact case studies that follow. What human rights abuses can you identify in each case study? Explain why you consider them human rights abuses.

1. Ashique is an 11 year-old boy and has been working in a brick kiln in Lahore, Pakistan for the past six years with his father and three brothers. His father borrowed 20,000 rupees (about \$600) to pay for his sister's marriage and they work to pay off this debt. Ashique and his family work every day except Sunday. They work from 2 AM in the morning, before it is light, until 6 or 7 PM in the evening. Ashique and his brothers have no time off to play or to attend school. The group is paid 30 rupee (90 cents) for every 1,000 bricks they make. Together, the five of them make between 2,500 and 3,000 bricks in a day which earns them about \$2.50. However, 50 percent of their earnings is subtracted to pay for the interest on their loan.
2. Issaka is a 13 year-old boy living in Niger in west Africa. He is the 12th child of a subsistence farmer. The land is deteriorating in quality and the available fields are miles from the family's village. Issaka has never been educated. The nearest school is too far away for him to walk there every day and the family does not have enough money to send him to live in the town where the school is located. Issaka and his father have decided that he should take a job at a cement factory in a nearby city. He will work seven days a week for 10 hours a day. If he misses one day of work he will be fired. Although he will make only \$1.25 per day, the pay will allow him an above average standard of living for his country. This will enable him to send money home to help support his family.
3. José is a small farmer who tried to grow onions as an off-season cash crop. He borrowed money to buy onion seeds and equipment from a large factory farm at the start of the planting season. An insect invasion followed by a flood wiped out the entire crop. José made no money and was unable to repay the loan. The owner of the factory farm demanded that José leave his small farm to work for him for a year until the debt was repaid. The owner threatened to take over José's small plot of land if he did not agree.

2. Slavery in the Modern World

Directions: Read the section that follows and write a letter to your local newspaper expressing your views on the problem of slavery in the modern world. To learn more about the topic, visit www.trocaire.org or www.saltdal.vgs.no/prosjekt/slavrute/slavtoday.htm.

For most people, slavery brings about images of African people shackled in overcrowded cargo ships crossing the Atlantic Ocean. We think of it as something that happened in the past. However, the grim reality is that slavery in different forms still thrives in our changing global economy. There are approximately 27 million enslaved people in the world today who generate an estimated 11.5 billion dollars in profit for slaveholders. Today's slaves are not bought and sold at a public auction and their "owners" do not hold legal title to them. Yet they are just as surely trapped, controlled and brutalized as the enslaved people we read about in history books.

Examples of slavery in the world today:

Women are brought to Europe from Africa to serve as house servants, receive little or no pay and cannot return home. To avoid starvation, poor families are forced to sell their children to be prostitutes in Thailand and the Philippines. Islamic tribesmen from northern Sudan imprison Christian tribesmen from the south. Children work in factories, on farms and in mines to pay off inherited family debts across southern Asia. Undocumented immigrants work without pay in restaurants and sweatshops in the United States in order to pay back the cost of smuggling them into the country.

