

***Exploring Developed and Developing World Human Rights
Education initiatives at the Primary and Secondary School Levels
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Introduction

Human Rights Education (HRE) can be defined as *the respect and promotion of human rights through educational efforts*. Our central purpose is to explore current initiatives in developed and developing countries, both at the primary and secondary school levels. Despite the indivisible nature of human rights,¹ our focus is not the current state of international human rights as a whole. Nor do we deal with the specificities, opportunities and challenges facing the promotion of education as a human right.

Drawing mainly from theoretical literature and research in HRE, we look at practical applications through public policy in country-based case studies, followed by policy recommendations to increase the potential and impact of HRE through public engagement. The focus on primary and secondary education comes from the primacy principle, which holds that human rights can and should be introduced early in the student's life. The focus on the developing world is based on the potential for HRE initiatives to *address* and even *prevent* the many social, political and economic ills affecting the vast majority of the world's population, while the focus on the developed world can be justified by a desire to explore the relationship between development, respect for human rights and their promotion through educational efforts. More subtly, such focus responds to historical claims about the monopoly of world superpowers over human rights

¹ The idea that all human rights are interdependent, and so is their promotion. In this sense, the respect and promotion of human rights is conducive to human rights education, and vice versa.

and the imperative for the people of these countries to avoid fulfilling their human rights by infringing upon the rights of citizens of the developing world (Henry: 420).

The Goals of Human Rights Education

“...that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms...”

From the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

“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.”

Article 26(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Human Rights Education aims to develop skills, the knowledge and a language of internationally recognized rights and responsibilities that enables students to challenge misconceptions and negative perceptions about the nature and scale of international human rights (Hicks & Holden: 2007).

At the **personal level**, HRE can help “develop the self-awareness and human dignity necessary to recognize and demand the inalienable rights attached to human existence” (Henry: 421). HRE has, therefore, the potential to empower individuals through

an understanding of concepts such as responsible citizenship and effective democracy at the local, national and transnational levels.

On a **public and societal level**, HRE encourages full and active participation in public matters and a sense of civic engagement required to effectively address the ills and contradictions of our political and economic systems.

✚ Developing World Specific: In the developing world, HRE aspires to identify, address and prevent rampant socio-cultural, political, ethnic and other forms of conflict and the massive human rights violations emerging from these, as well as to meet the special needs of disposed groups in terms of development, peace, personal and social security, justice and freedom.

The “HRE Balance of Empowerment”



Cartoon taken from Shan Herald Agency for News

Types and Current State of Human Rights Education Initiatives

Some national and international Human Rights Education initiatives, such as the United Nations Organization *World Programme for Human Rights Education (WPHRE)* focus on the cooperation between multinational institutions (like the UNO) and national governments primarily through the extension and coordination of financial and administrative resources, the creation and distribution of HRE materials, and teacher training and development.

✚ Practical Application: Through this initiative, Indonesia's nation-wide human rights education program, for example, has focused on "promoting the values that affirm human rights [through] extra-curricular activities and daily interactions in the classroom, integrating human rights education into relevant subjects such as social sciences and civic education (Inagaki: 279)."

Curricular initiatives are another increasingly popular type of HRE initiatives, through the design and incorporation of HRE materials and lessons plans into the formal curriculum. Research conducted by HURIGHTS OSAKA, the Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center, suggests that successful curricular initiatives at primary and secondary levels across Asia have often been the result of nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) adopting a leadership role over these. It is often the case that the only form of support that these initiatives receive is the authorization from national governments to implement them (Plantilla: 281).

✚ Practical Application: The Canadian Human Rights Foundation and Amnesty International provide useful examples of this. The former is a national non-government, non-partisan organization devoted to the incorporation of Human Rights Education into the Canadian primary and secondary school curriculum (Urman: 383). On its part, Amnesty international has recently begun a promising HRE in the developing world targeted at the poorer sections of the population in countries like India, Philippines, Nigeria, Senegal, Tunisia, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico (Henry: 422). The project will feature the establishment of regional resource and information centers open to anyone seeking support or educational materials translated to the local language.

Constraints for Human Rights Education

Just as today's neoliberal globalism is composed of mutually reinforcing factors such as individualism, consumer capitalism and inequality,² so are the threats that this type of globalization poses to current Human Rights Education initiatives. For one, there is the political threat that human rights education, with its potential to alter traditional power structures and relations, poses to the national sovereignty of an already weakened and declining model of the nation-state (Globalizing Morality). Consequently, governments of developed and developing countries alike may neglect efforts to incorporate human rights studies into the existing curriculum altogether, or may support such efforts only partially. Governments may even fake full support for HRE initiatives for strategic and political

² Kurthschai Ruthanne. Learning from each other in an Asian Century. CESA/CESHK Conference. University of Hong Kong (January 2007).

reasons (Plantilla: 281) that may grant non-state actors and civil society institutions a minimal or no role in designing and implementing nationwide HRE initiatives.

Cultural relativism is another major obstacle to the emergence of a global human rights culture that aims to regulate human behavior. One of the problems here is that the contradictions between human rights standards and socio-cultural norms of specific communities can make it difficult for students to connect issues and concepts of human rights with their own and their communities' daily life activities (Inagaki: 279). This problem is aggravated by the fact that many societies in the Islamic and East Asian World's, for example, see human rights (and the HRE objective of fostering effective democracy) as western values that dictate principles and standards by which these societies are unwilling to abide.

At the school level, the incorporation of HRE into the existing curriculum is hindered by a lack of adequate resources as well inadequate teacher training in human rights. In addition, the globalization of human rights has led to the monopoly of world superpowers and international organizations over the human rights education agenda. These actors' efforts are often inadequate to meet the needs of local dispossessed groups in the developing world.

✚ Developing World Specific: in the developing world, threats to HRE initiatives include greater political and economic imbalances within developing nations, poor enforceability of human rights due to weak legal systems, and the significant lack of resources to support HRE initiatives.

Opportunities for Human Rights Education

The globalization of human rights has also had a positive impact on Human Rights Education in that it has led to a greater awareness, coordination, flow of ideas and reach of the international human rights movement and its educational efforts. This is a process that has been aided by the strengthening of national and international human rights structures (along with increasing access to legal enforcement mechanisms worldwide).

The universality of human rights has meant that human rights can be studied by students of any age, anywhere in the world, which gives the dissemination of human rights education a critical advantage.

✚ Developing World Specific: Many developing nations such as Indonesia and the Philippines are currently undergoing great socio-political change towards democratization. In these countries, issues such as human rights, fiscal accountability and participation in public affairs have increasingly become matters of public deliberation (Inagaki: 279). This scenario provides virtually unlimited possibilities for civil society as the link between governments and their citizens to play a more decisive role in setting the human rights education agenda in the developing world. Also, and while human rights education can potentially be a threat to traditional power structures and national sovereignty, governments across the developing world have begun to recognize the dangers of not promoting the values of democracy, tolerance and non-violence fostered through HRE, and have begun to take important steps towards this ideal. Steps include a commitment to formulating and implementing national action plans for human rights, the majority of which place HRE at their core. Such is the case in Indonesia, where the Ministry of National Education and the National Commission for Human Rights have joined efforts with UNESCO to actively introduce human rights curricula in primary and secondary schools through the publication of manuals

and reference materials on human rights education. Because of the special needs of the developing world, it can be argued that HRE and the values fostered by it are perhaps more desperately needed in developing nations. If seen as an opportunity, such demand can provide HRE with the space it demands in the areas of curriculum and public deliberation.

Strategies and Suggested Course of Action for Increasing the Potential and Impact of Human Rights Education

Public engagement is critical to support the goals of Human Rights Education, and to enhance its opportunities and minimize its constraints. To do this, the following strategies and course of action are suggested:

1) At the local, national, and global levels, to raise public awareness of HRE initiatives through public advocacy. The research and case-studies presented here suggest that unless HRE becomes an issue of public concern, governments will often avoid their responsibility to promote HRE initiatives (or will only take on this responsibility to defend strategic and commercial interests), while the ability of non-state actors and civil society to do so is severely hindered.

2) At the institutional level, to revive the state as the main HRE authority (for the state might be the best suited actor for this task in terms of historical territorial claims, outreach and connections with all other actors) along with greater allocation of resources towards HRE initiatives through the adequate training of teachers, school administrators, researchers, NGO workers, and policy makers, and the production and dissemination of

HRE materials including manuals, teaching modules, lesson plans and other resources that are made widely available to teachers, students and the general public alike. This will ensure that the impact of HRE reaches all corners of society, as opposed to being contained within the formal school setting. Also, and given their position to promote HRE, grassroots, local, non-state actors and civil society should be allowed greater participation in devising the human rights education agenda.

3) At the curricular level, to develop relevant, context-based HRE curricular initiatives sensitive to the cultural diversity of our world, while in line with universal moral values of life, personal security and liberty and wellbeing, thus maximizing the prospects for a strong global human rights culture.

Conclusion

Our central purpose was to explore current developed and developing world Human Rights Education (HRE) initiatives at the primary and secondary levels of education. Through an analysis of theoretical literature and its practical applications thorough public policy in a variety of developed and developing countries, a series of curricular and institutional policy recommendations at the local, national and global levels were submitted to inform public engagement and action in the field of HRE.

HRE can be understood as a means for personal and societal empowerment. In light of the significant challenges facing HRE (namely, the political threat it poses to the institutions of national sovereignty and culture, the monopoly of world superpowers and international institutions over the human rights discourse, a clear lack of adequate financial and human resources, and the political and economic imbalances product of

neoliberal globalism), and the significant opportunities (including the globalization and universality of human rights, and the role and potential of HRE in maintaining national and global stability, peace and security), it is essential that we increase public advocacy so that HRE can become a matter of public debate and deliberation, thus enhancing HRE's impact and potential for empowerment, especially in the developing world.

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