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# HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

By Felisa Tibbitts, HREA<sup>1</sup>

## I. DEFINITION

Human rights education (HRE) is an international movement to promote awareness about the rights accorded by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related human rights conventions, and the procedures that exist for the redress of violations of these rights (Amnesty International, 2005; Tibbitts, 1996; Reardon, 1995). Decades ago, the United Nations and its specialized agencies formally recognized the right of citizens to be informed about the rights and freedoms contained in the documents ratified by their countries – the right to human rights education itself (UNESCO, 2005). Since then, numerous policy documents developed by United Nations UN)- affiliated agencies, international policymaking bodies, regional human rights bodies and national human rights agencies have referenced HRE, proposing specifically that the treatment of human rights themes should be present in schooling (Pearse, 1987).<sup>2</sup>

The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 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 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, tolerance, 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. (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1997).

This definition is not specific to the schooling sector and, in fact, the United Nations proposes human rights education for all sectors of society as well as part of a “lifelong learning” process for individuals (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1997). The human rights referred to cover a broad range, including those contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as related treaties and covenants, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,

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<sup>1</sup> Tibbitts, F. (2008) “Human Rights Education”. In Bajaj, M. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Peace Education*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> During the 1990s, several important international documents on human rights education were elaborated. These were the World Plan of Action on Education for Human Rights and Democracy (Montreal, 1993), the Declaration and Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy (UNESCO, Paris, 1995), the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), Guidelines for Plans of Action for the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education 1995-2004 (1995). These refer to the relevant education articles of international treaties and place informal pressure on national governments to co-operate.

the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, among others<sup>3</sup>. Which human rights are addressed in learning situations, and how, has become of increasing interest as the worldwide human rights movement has grown.

## **II. The Expansion of Human Rights Education in Schools**

Although still a developing field, there is increasing evidence that HRE is emerging in the work of non-governmental organizations working at the grassroots level as well as in national systems of education (Buergethal and Torney, 1976; Claude 1996; HREA, 2005; IIDH, 2002; Elbers, 2000). The only study on this subject indicated that the number of organizations dedicated to human rights education quadrupled between 1980 and 1995, from 12 to 50 (Ramirez et al, 2006). These numbers are likely to be much higher as the secondary sources could document only those organizations that had either an Internet presence or were already networked in international circles. An International Bureau of Education (IBE) study that examined the number of times the term “human rights” was mentioned in their documents, found a mean of .70, .82 and .64 for countries within the regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and the former USSR and Latin American and the Caribbean, respectively (Ramirez et al, 2006). Interestingly enough, the lowest means were for Asia and Western Europe and North America at .11 (Ramirez et al, 2006), although the range of response rates across regions – from 31% to 74% - suggests that these results are approximate at best. A review in 1996 showed that through the cooperative efforts of NGOs and educational authorities, human rights courses and topics had been introduced into the national curricula in Albania, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Norway, the UK and Ukraine (Kati & Gjedia, 2003; Tibbitts, 1996). The IBE study and other less formal data gathering suggests that the number of educational systems including human rights in their formal curricula is now higher.

Hundreds of human rights-related teaching materials have been developed worldwide for use in classrooms and schools, and many of these are widely available free of charge on the Internet, for example through the On-Line Resource Centre of Human Rights Education Associates (HREA) and other on-line resource centers (HREA, 2005; IIDH, 2005; ARRC, 2005). Moreover, bibliographies and descriptive databases of human rights education materials are available through key human rights organizations as well as United Nations-related agencies (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2005; Amnesty International, 2005; HREA, 2005; Council of Europe, 2005).

During this same period, non-governmental organizations, which have traditionally spearheaded human rights education efforts, also gathered to develop human rights education action plans that had influence on their own work and cooperation with others (Amnesty International, 1996; Netherlands Helsinki Committee, 1996). In the last five years, national and regional HRE networks have been established in many parts of the

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<sup>3</sup>The full set of human rights documents as well as related General Comments can be found on the website of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org) .

world (HREA, 2005). In 2005, with the conclusion of the UN Decade for HRE, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights launched an on-going and more focused World Programme with a Plan of Action for Human Rights Education (UN General Assembly, 2005), which promises to elicit improved cooperation from governments, as well as cross-cutting support from UN bodies (Amnesty International, 2005). The first phase of the World Programme is focused on promoting human rights education in schools.

### **III. Rationales for HRE**

The broad normative framework of human rights education and the wide spectrum of potential learners have resulted in a great deal of variation in the ways in which human rights education has been implemented. Although human rights education is defined by the universal framework of the international, and sometimes regional, standards, the specific topics and their application will depend upon local and national contexts.

Human rights education in post-conflict or post-colonial countries tends to be associated with the rule of law and authorities trying to establish their legitimacy. Among groups that experience a high amount of discrimination and within countries that are highly repressive and undemocratic, HRE tends to be focused on popular empowerment and resistance in relation to these issues. Human rights education in countries that are democratic but struggling with development can be oriented towards the infusion of human rights principles within sustainable development (Yeban, 2003). In countries that enjoy both democratic and economic development, HRE is often focused on issues of discrimination, for example in relation to migrants, minorities or women. Of course, in any country at any given time, HRE can take on different forms and purposes depending upon the context of the program.

Several explanations have been proposed for the increased presence of human rights education in schools since the 1990s. One explanation relates to increased globalization, a term still being defined, but recognized as one emphasizing “world citizenship and the strong assumption of personal agency required for global citizenship” (Suarez, 2005). Moreover, authorities are increasingly calling on schools to promote respect among peoples, democratic governance and viable civil societies.

Democratic citizenship, including human rights education, has been seen by regional human rights agencies as a way to “manage diversity”, with human rights education incorporated into processes such as the Graz Stability Pact in South Eastern Europe (Council of Europe, 2001; South House Exchange, 2004). In contemporary Europe, education for democratic citizenship, including human rights education, has been seen as a way of promoting young people’s active participation in democratic society, in promoting social cohesion and in fighting violence, xenophobia, racism, intolerance and aggressive nationalism (Froumin, 2003).

In 1978, human rights education was already promoted by UNESCO but linked with disarmament (UNESCO, 1978). In 2005, human rights education has been linked in inter-

governmental circles with a variety of global phenomena, including development and poverty, religious freedom, and globalization in general (UNESCO, 2005). Europe's regional human rights agency, the Council of Europe, is working on developing a "culture of religion" subject that takes an "ethics" and "human rights" based approach to religious teaching, in order to provide an alternative to governments that currently offer required religion classes that can be a source of division and ethnic nationalism, as in Serbia-Montenegro (Tibbitts, 2003).

Non-governmental organizations from different countries and regions periodically initiate meetings in which they identify strategies for applying the human rights framework to global challenges. One such symposium, which took place in South Africa in 2001 in a meeting organized in concert with the World Conference Against Racism, identified human rights education in schools as a key strategy for combating racism (Flowers, 2001).

#### **IV. Pedagogy of HRE**

Since 1995, further elaborations by the UN and other agencies has clarified that human rights education and learning has components of knowledge, skills and attitudes, which should be consistent with recognized human rights principles and which should empower individuals and groups to address oppression and injustice (Amnesty International, 2007; Asia-Pacific Regional Resource Center for Human Rights Education, 2003).

Human rights education has both normative and a legal dimensions. The legal dimension incorporates sharing content about international human rights standards as embodied in the UDHR and other treaties and covenants to which countries subscribe. These standards encompass civil and political rights, as well as social, economic and cultural. In recent years, environmental and collective rights have been added to this evolving framework. This law-oriented approach recognizes the importance of monitoring and accountability in ensuring that governments uphold the letter and spirit of human rights obligations.

At the same time, HRE is a normative and cultural enterprise. The process of human rights education is intended to be one that provides skills, knowledge and motivation to individuals to transform their own lives and realities so that they are more consistent with human rights norms and values. For this reason, interactive, learner-centered methods of are widely promoted. The following kinds of pedagogy are representative of those promoted by human rights education advocates. These methods are advocated for across all kinds of HRE but are most comprehensively implemented in adult, popular education learning models.

- *Experiential and activity-centered*: involving the solicitation of learners' prior knowledge and offering activities that draw out learners' experiences and knowledge
- *Problem-posing*: challenging the learners' prior knowledge
- *Participative*: encouraging collective efforts in clarifying concepts, analyzing themes and doing the activities

- *Dialectical*: requiring learners to compare their knowledge with those from other sources
- *Analytical*: asking learners to think about why things are and how they came to be
- *Healing*: promoting human rights in intra-personal and inter-personal relations
- *Strategic thinking-oriented*: directing learners to set their own goals and to think of strategic ways of achieving them
- *Goal and action-oriented*: allowing learners to plan and organize actions in relation to their goals (ARRC, 2003).

Human rights education in school settings is adapted to the age of learners and the conditions of national/local educational policies and schools. Developmental and conceptual frameworks for HRE have been developed by the United Nations and several NGOs. These frameworks assist in setting goals for HRE, illustrating both what it shares and what it adds to other educational approaches that address values such as social justice.

**Methodologies: Development and Conceptual Framework for HRE** (Flowers, 1998)

Levels	Goals	Key Concepts	Specific Human Rights Problems	Education Standards and Instruments
<i>Early Childhood</i> <b>Preschool &amp; Lower primary Ages 3-7</b>	Respect for self	Self	Racism	Classroom rules
	Respect for parents and teachers	Community Responsibility	Sexism Unfairness	Family life Convention on the Rights of the Child
	Respect for others		Hurting people (emotionally, physically)	
<i>Later Childhood</i> <b>Upper primary Ages 8-11</b>	Social responsibility	Individual rights Group rights Freedom	Discrimination/prejudice	UDHR History of human rights
	Citizenship	Equality Justice	Poverty/hunger	
	Distinguishing wants from needs from rights	Rule of law Government Security Democracy	Injustice Ethnocentricism Passivity	Local, national legal systems Local and national history in human rights terms UNESCO, UNICEF
<i>Adolescence</i> <b>Lower</b>	Knowledge of specific human rights	International law	Ignorance	UN Covenants
		World peace	Apathy	Elimination of

<b>secondary Ages 12-14</b>		World development	Cynicism	racism
		World political economy	Political repression	Elimination of sexism
		World ecology	Colonialism/imperialism	Regional human rights conventions
		Legal rights		UNHCR
		Moral rights	Economic globalization	NGOs
			Environmental degradation	
<i>Older Adolescents and Adults</i>	Knowledge of human rights standards	Moral inclusion/exclusion	Genocide Torture	Geneva Conventions
	Integration of human rights into personal awareness and behaviors	Moral responsibility/literacy		Specialized conventions Evolving human rights standards

Human rights themes and content in schools can be found as a cross-cultural theme within educational policy or integrated within existing subjects, such as history, civics/citizenship education, social studies and humanities. Human rights education can also be found in the arts and in non-formal clubs and special events that take place in the school setting.

In addition to taking place in schools, HRE is organized in higher education settings; in training programs for professionals such as the police, prison officials, the military, social workers; for potentially vulnerable populations such as women and minorities; as part of community development programs; and in public awareness campaigns.

#### **IV. DEVELOPMENTS AND THE FUTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION**

The human rights education field shows signs of continuing development and evolution. At the international level, the United Nations through its various agencies continues to encourage governments to develop formal plans of action for human rights education and to provide reports on its internal HRE activities as part of its regular treaty-based reports to the United Nations. International and national networks of educators, institutes and organizations continue to dialogue and share resources on the content, standards, and methodology of human rights education and learning. Research in the field, although currently sparse, is beginning to increase.

Within the educational sector, the human rights normative system is increasingly being proposed as the ethical framework for cultural globalization. Within the human rights sector, the “human rights based approach” that the United Nations has advocated for all development programming has begun to trickle down to the education sector. Thus HRE, which has primarily focused on teaching and learning, may eventually be seen as part of an overall “human rights based approach” to schooling, which calls attention to overall school culture, policies and practices related to human rights values.

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