Developing Agency for Global Citizenship through the Implementation of Human Rights Education

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**Abstract**

The world we live in today is one in which we can communicate to people on other continents instantly through Skype, Email, Facebook, and even by telephone. We have more cross-cultural encounters presently than in any other time in the history of our planet through the means of industrialization that in turn, has now manifested into globalization. Through this notion of globalization, our world is really only a couple of decades old. Upon the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Soviet Communism, our new existence was conceived. This conception resulted in the mass overhaul of what it meant to be a citizen. No longer were we participants in a nation-state infrastructure, but instead, we became participants of the world. Everything we do affects individuals world-wide. Consumerism, communication, and other daily tasks and choices we make expose us to global contact though we are often not cognizant of it.

With this being said, our education system is set up to promote national citizenry instead of this novel concept of global citizenry. Gaudelli & Fernekes (2004) describe this idea of global citizenship as being “contingent with a process of imagining the world in new ways that transcend a nation-state fixation while embracing peace, diversity, complexity, and temporal awareness” (p.17). Internationally, the United States is falling behind in promoting this idea of global citizenry, as other post-industrial and first world nations have already adopted this concept into their curriculums. There is resistance to this curriculum, naturally, since it involves major changes which could pose a threat to the state. However, curriculum developers and policy makers must be conscious of how outdated the nation-state fixation lens is in our compulsory education. Our goal as educators is to prepare our students for the problems of tomorrow that they will inherit. These issues are no longer confined to the borders of our nation, but extend from both poles, north to south, and from the prime meridian to the equator. The problems of tomorrow are global problems that will affect us all as members of the human race.

Inherent to this idea of global citizenry is human rights education. Gaudelli & Fernekes state that human rights education “is a core element of the transcendent move toward a global civic culture, establishing a foundation for fairness and justice that is potentially universal” (p.17). Central to our role as citizens is knowing our rights, and as global citizens we must know our human rights since these are universal and applicable to all nations.

In my capstone, I will address the necessity for human rights education through a historical analysis of how this globalized world formed and its caveats that we must prepare our students for, the inadequacies of the current education infrastructure in promoting global citizenry, and how human rights education promotes global citizenry. I will then discuss the practical application of human rights education, considering the ways in which teachers must teach the subject, and the realities of implementing such a curriculum. Finally, I will discuss the validity in promoting global citizenry through human rights education.

**Introduction**

Though human rights education and human rights themselves are a modern construct that directly resulted from the atrocities of the first half of the 20th century and World War II, the universal themes of this novelty are now widely adhered to in our global society. In a globalized and post-conflict world, societies of the 21st century have witnessed a paradigmic shift from a world where nationalism, nation-states, and national citizenship were held to the utmost degree, to one in which global solidarity and individual empowerment are essential. The rights and responsibilities of the individual still endorse national citizenship, however, now they are also de-territorialized and endorse the rights and responsibilities of a citizen of the global community. According to Meyer, Bromley and Ramirez (2009), “This expanded status takes its form in a greatly enlarged vision of the world as a collective community whose rules take precedence over the formerly more absolute sovereignty and primordiality of separate national states and societies” (p. 112). Human rights are central to this new idea of global citizenship, and must be maintained in order to continue human existence on our planet through the means of education. Because of its essentiality, human rights education must be mandated in our schools despite our hesitation to shift from the antiquated practices of the nation-state fixation of the previous century, to one in which the human person’s status is legitimized on a worldwide basis.

**Necessity for Human Rights Education**

The solution of education to uphold human rights and, in effect, sanction global citizenship, is the most viable one for empowering individuals, disbursing agency, and potentiating participation in the ongoing conversation involving human rights. This idea is expressed by Martha Minow (2002) with the following statement.

Education offers the chance to shape minds, hearts, and behaviors of succeeding generations. Educational responses express this hope. If only we educated young people to respect others, to understand the costs of group hatreds, to make friends, not stereotypes; to know tools for resolving disputes, to choose to stand up to demagogues, to be peace-makers, then we could hope to prevent future violence and future atrocities (p.2).

Education has always played a key role in supporting social change and human development, but never in history has it been so indispensable for the continuation of our existence. There are many explanations for this fact; however, most poignant of these is the increase of contact among varying cultures and nation-states through the means of globalization. In a response to this and the continuation and rapid expansion of a globalizing world, education in the 21st century must integrate human rights as a staple in compulsory education. After all, as holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel once said, “…for the dead and the living, we must bear witness” (2007). If we collectively do not heed Wiesel’s advice, the world will become vulnerable to a reoccurrence of the atrocities of the past, inciting the 21st century to outstrip its violent predecessor.

Currently, we are at an exciting time of enhanced public awareness and interest in human rights. Human rights education is a trending topic among international curriculum developers, and is increasingly becoming more standard in educational doctrine worldwide. However, the United States has fallen behind other nations in its incorporation of this new curriculum. The U.S.’s bureaucratic measures of inciting schools to produce good national citizens is outdated and must advance beyond that goal to produce not only good national citizens, but good global citizens. As a leader in the free world and signer of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United States must uphold the mandates of the UDHR. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights identifies the right to education and more significantly the right to an education directed toward “the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (United Nations, 1948). Denying students an education involving their universal rights as humans is not only a violation of the UDHR, but it only perpetuates the narrowed mindsets of the previous century which accumulated two World Wars as a result of this same nation-state fixation. Consequently, “Students who only study rights and litigation in the United States, without considering the rights in other national and global contexts, are left with a series of misunderstandings, not the least of which is that the United States has few, if any, violations of human rights or that people living in other societies have few if any rights” (Gaudelli, p.16). Students in American schools with no explicit human rights curriculum are under a veil that is ethnocentric and could possibly endanger them or the lives of others, thus stunting their growth in global citizenry.

**Human Rights Education as a Radical Idea**

The United States’ hesitancy to adopt an explicit human rights curriculum may be a result of the fact that human rights education is revolutionary and often collides with the interest of the nation-state. Sonia Cardenas (2005) expresses this idea with the following:

While in principle virtually everyone takes for granted the benefits of human rights education, such endeavors can be potentially costly from the perspective of the state. Human rights education is inherently revolutionary. If implemented effectively, it has the potential to generate social opposition alongside rising demands for justice and accountability (p.363-364).

The emphasis on individual rights as part of an international community found in human rights education may be perceived as a direct challenge to the state. After all, “Human rights education represents a dramatic shift from national to world society in conception of legitimized social membership and in part undercuts the legitimated ultimate sovereignty of the national state” (Meyer et al., 2009, p. 112). Similarly, because human rights education, when implemented successively, boosts mass support for human rights and acts as a catalyst to encourage individuals to pressure authorities to protect human rights (even if that authority is their own nation), governments are resistant to adopt such a radical curriculum. Education is a decolonizing, insurrecting, heretical, and emancipating act which often meets resistance from those who cling to the past. The United States, historically, has been one of the most radical in adhering to these benefits of education. To continue this tradition and to remain a leader of democracy and the free world, the U.S must adopt a human rights curriculum, or its decline is inevitable.

**Defining Human Rights Education**

As previously mentioned, human rights, and more specifically human rights education, are novel concepts. The trajectory of human rights over the post-World War II decades has expanded and changed dramatically. Initially these rights were seen as akin to older conceptions of the rights of citizens of the nation-state. Overtime, however, with the weakening of the legitimacy of the nation-state as the ultimate authority, human individuals became more and more autonomous and sovereign while rights’ claims became stronger (2009, p.113). Because these rights were not established until 1948 through the United Nations with its conception of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international audiences are not well versed in what these rights are and how to uphold them. Especially in recent post-conflict societies like Sudan and Rwanda, these rights are alien. Though these rights are documented and easily accessible today, the modern human rights tradition envisions human rights as natural rather than entirely legal in character. This attributes to the discrepancies across societies in how human rights are observed, their approaches to maintaining these human rights, and their use of human rights education to address these challenges (Tibbits, 2002, p.160).

Today, the human rights organization Amnesty International has defined human rights education as follows.

Human Rights Education can be defined as education, training, and information aiming at building a universal culture of human rights through the sharing of knowledge, imparting of skills, and moulding of attitudes directed to:

1. The strengthening of human rights and fundamental freedoms;
2. The full development of the human personality and sense of its dignity;
3. The promotion of understanding, tolerance, gender equality, and friendship among nations, indigenous peoples and racial, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups;
4. The enabling of all persons to participate effectively in a free and democratic society governed by the rule of law;
5. The building and maintenance of peace;
6. The promotion of people-centered sustainable social justice (2012).

With this comprehensive definition of what qualifies as human rights education, designing a curriculum that addresses these prerequisites presupposes and attempts to activate a wider world of common humanity where individuals are given the agency to autonomously act and protect their rights.

**Human Rights Education is Problematic**

Despite the apparent benefits and essential nature of human rights education, several problems arise in the implementation of such a curriculum. These issues include: appealing to diverse audiences, standardization, and power relations. First, because the United States has the most diverse learner population in the world which includes refugees, English language learners, homeless youth, victims of domestic abuse, and underserved populations, appealing to such a population requires careful planning and really knowing who the classroom audience is. As a result of this variation in the learner populace of the U.S., different types of rights are emphasized to appeal to those learners’ context and the perspective of the institution offering the curriculum (Flowers, 1998). While the incorporation of this form of rights education is necessary to promote social justice, universal human rights may be upstaged by civil and political rights. “Human rights education is affiliated with different sectors in different societies, but often it means different things to distinct individuals and entities promoting it” (Bajaj, 2011, p.8).

Because of the variation of learners in the United States along with the various models and ideologies behind human rights education, it is extremely difficult, if at all possible, to standardize such a curriculum. Even if one were to standardize this curriculum nationally, wouldn’t there need to be international standardization in order for students worldwide to uphold human rights? Therefore, in order to enact such a curriculum, it would have to be specialized to certain populaces while maintaining the underlying themes and goals of human rights at the global level.

Additionally, due to the interest of the state or local authority enacting a human rights curriculum, not all injustices may be exposed to learners or certain viewpoints may be indoctrinated in students that counteract the goal of human rights education. Bajaj mentions this idea with the following, “The concern with power and asymmetries in power relations translates into an analysis of how human rights norms and standards are often selectively respected based on communities’ varied access to resources, representations, and influence” (2011, p.4). This may ultimately result in the de-politicizing of the human rights curriculum and consequently the stifling of social justice.

**Goals of Human Rights Education**

The overriding goals of implementing a human rights curriculum is obviously to maintain and protect human rights at home and abroad, but such a curriculum has other beneficial goals which contribute to the full development of the human. Amnesty International touches on some of these pervasive goals below:

Human rights education is a deliberate, participatory practice aimed at empowering individuals, groups, and communities through fostering knowledge, skills, and attitudes consistent with internationally recognized principles…its goal is to build a culture of respect for and action in the defense and promotion of human rights for all (2012).

The personal empowerment goal is one which is of course universal, but to individuals who are former victims of human rights violations, this is especially poignant. Not only are these individuals granted the means to heal from their own victimized past and to stand up for themselves and their rights in the future, but they are also given the means to enact social transformation and stand up for other victims locally or internationally through such empowerment.

The goal of social change or social justice is interrelated with the personal empowerment goal of human rights education. In fact, both social change as an outcome, and learners becoming agents of this process of claiming their own rights and defending these rights are key to human rights education (2012). The proactive nature of human rights education incites a willingness among its learners to act with or on behalf of victims to bring human rights violators to justice (Bajaj, 2011). Thus, social activism is a crucial goal of human rights education.

Additionally, human rights education maintains the goal of human development skills. Among these skills is the ability to recognize one’s own biases, accepting differences, accountability, taking responsibility for the defense of the rights of others, and mediation and conflict resolution (Tibbits, p.161). Students who are granted a human rights education also develop a critical human rights consciousness which is beneficial to everyday social interactions. This critical consciousness may include:

1. The ability of students to recognize the human rights dimensions of, and their relationship to, a given conflict—or problem-oriented experience;
2. An expression of awareness and concern about their role in the protection or promotion of these rights;
3. A critical evaluation of the potential responses that may be offered;
4. An attempt to identify or create new responses;
5. A judgment or decision about which choice is most appropriate;
6. An expression of confidence and recognition of responsibility and influence in both the decision and its impact (Meintjes, 1997, p.68).

Such skills are not only necessary to maintain human rights, but also for everyday social interaction. Thus, the goals of a human rights education provide far reaching benefits that permeate beyond the realm of human rights and are useful in any social capacity.

**Implementation of Human Rights Education**

To implement this type of curriculum successfully, instructors in the United States specifically must aim to authentically engage their students and make the curriculum relevant to their students through their utilization of content and process. Students must be able to identify themselves in the curriculum in order for human rights to gain legitimacy in the realm of education. School-based programs should be age and developmentally appropriate. Similarly, school-based programs must take into account any sensitivity issues pertaining to their student audience so that appropriate pedagogy is employed. Likewise, need and opportunity must be considered when endorsing human rights education. To clarify, educators must be cognizant of how the education program he or she is planning to implement will support a movement towards a more fully realized human rights culture in their students’ community (Tibbits, p.168-169).

Engagement is vital to a successful pedagogical approach to human rights education. To properly engage students, instructors must relay to their students that issues do exist, that there are actions one can take to alleviate inequality and suffering, and that one can be knowledgeable enough to talk about what is going on the in world (Schafft, 2010). The learner must be interested in the topic and one way to achieve this is through selecting content that is relevant to the lives of the learners. Human rights education should speak to the daily life of the student and correspond in a way that localizes their advocacy for human rights in their own community. Only once this connection is made, can the student begin to understand the relevance and salience of human rights as a global or universal concept.

In addition to engagement, students must undergo a certain amount of introspection for a human rights program to be legitimate. Learners need to be asked to consider the ways in which they and others they know have both played the role of victim and perpetrator in a human rights abuse. In doing so, students are able to diminish the “us” versus “them” mentality, and gain insight as to how human rights violations are instigated. Once this is accomplished, these same students are “positioned to recognize and protect their own rights and those of their primary reference group” (Tibbits, p.167). If there is no catharsis involving this exercise, then the students must undergo a historical examination or case study on a specific instance involving one or many human rights violations. An example of this could be the examination of the Holocaust where students examine a plethora of contrasting primary documents that navigates the causes, duration, and effects of such a horrific event. Historical discourse is a natural outgrowth of examining human rights especially when viewing human rights violations. In doing so, students must strive for an objective approach in their investigation methods. Education scholar Peter Lee pushes the notion that:

An important part of understanding what appears strange is the disposition to recognize that we must try to understand the situations in which people found themselves and the beliefs and values they brought to bear on their problems. (2005, p.71)

By obtaining such a pluralistic examination, students garner a deeper understanding of how human rights are endangered, what factors or attitudes led to this endangerment, and retrospectively how this endangerment could have been avoided.

The ultimate goal of human rights education is to promote the preservation of human rights, and what better way to endorse this goal than to facilitate social activism. Teachers must model this behavior and provide scenarios where students can get involved locally, nationally, or internationally in a cause that promotes human rights. To do this, specific and tangible objectives must be made explicit. Also, both the students and teacher must be politically aware enough to be beneficial to their selected cause. Finally, students should be able to walk away from the experience with some sense of accomplishment that encourages them to continue to pursue social activism and to uphold human rights for themselves and others.

In approaching this subject, a balancing act is implicit for the facilitator to be successful. They must be sensitive to the needs and psychological limitations of their students while fully engaging their students with materials that stimulate a full understanding and awareness of the nature of human rights violations so that their students may, in turn, be incited to act against such injustices in their developing roles as global citizens.

**Suggestions**

As an instructor of a curriculum involving human rights education to a diverse student populace in the United States, I must make the following suggestions. Engagement must be greatly emphasized in how you approach this form of instruction. As previously mentioned, engagement involves the selection of content and the process that you involve your students in to facilitate their understanding and empowerment. One must also be cognizant to include a hopeful outlook despite the horrifying nature of exposing the atrocities and injustices of the world. A caveat of teaching this subject is its depressing nature that can leave one feeling powerless which can, in turn, manifest into apathy. Therefore, “teachers need to strive to communicate a hopeful message to avoid having students turn away from these challenging issues” (Gaudelli, p.19). With my classroom full of diverse learners, all of whom were English language learners as well as refugees, it became immediately evident that differentiation of content and instruction was necessary for their understanding and to accommodate their sensitivity to some of the content discussed. Finally, I would suggest that students undergo some form of historical inquiry to uncover the derivation of human rights violations. In doing so, students are better equipped to notice and prevent factors which may lead to such violations.

**Conclusion**

The relevance of a human rights curriculum in the education of American students is undeniable. Human rights education is a reform that is necessary in our schools, and the resistance to such a curriculum is antiquated and fails to recognize the far-reaching benefits of this form of education. As discussed above, human rights education can be specialized to meet the needs of a specific community or population so that social justice is promoted at the local, national, and eventually, the international level. With the exponential growth of the world population, it is becoming increasingly essential that coexistence is emphasized in education. As a major tenet of coexistence, the ability to tolerate and live peacefully with those different from ourselves, human rights education is pertinent to our lives and even more so to the lives of future generations.

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