Empowering Our Youth Through Human Rights Education: The International and National Promise of Whole-School Approaches

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Abstract

This article addresses the vital role human rights education can play in formal education not only as a means to reach the standards and objectives of 21st century curricula but also to empower youth. Firstly, I highlight the characteristics of human rights educational programmes and examine how the potential of this approach is embedded in participatory pedagogical methods and the concept of transformative learning. I likewise demonstrate that implementation challenges can be overcome by the adoption of whole-school human rights education models. This discussion, partly based on empirical knowledge, culminates with a recommendation for a more systematic integration of human rights education in Bermudian schools.

KEY WORDS: *: Human rights education, student empowerment, transformative learning*

Introduction

One cannot start exploring human rights education without considering the various interpretations of this multifaceted topic. The term is subject to conflicting perspectives and overlapping definitions, which often "differ in their formulation of goals and principles" (Flowers 2003, 2).

While governmental bodies regard human rights education as a tool to maintain security and prevent anti-social behaviour, this discussion will focus on the values and principles enshrined in the human rights framework (Flowers 2003, 3 and 5) and consider human rights education as an emancipatory tool with the ultimate goal of protecting and defending human rights (Amnesty International n.d.).

Despite the discrepancies in conceptual interpretations, the fundamental role of human rights education in the defence of human rights is endorsed by the international community at large. This endorsement is reflected in the adoption of treaties and conventions such as the 2011 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training, under which human rights education became a right in itself (OHCHR 2011). Similarly, at grassroots level, human rights education has acquired strategic importance for international non-governmental organisations such as UNICEF or Amnesty International and for local philanthropic agencies such as the Centre for Justice, CURB (Citizens Uprooting Racism in Bermuda), or the Human Rights Commission, to name but a few. However, if numerous initiatives have proven successful in empowering vulnerable adult groups in non-formal settings, the full potential of school-based human rights education has yet to be unleashed (Lee 2015, 8). Although the promise of human rights education in schools is inherent in such an approach, it often remains untapped because of a lack of vision by states or problems of implementation. A more systematic and consensual integration of human rights education in schools through models that adopt a whole-school approach to it could address these issues and impact our youth positively.

Characteristics of Human Rights Education

Human rights education programmes differ from others not only in their objectives but also in their content and methodology.

Philosophical considerations

One of the prerequisites of a human rights education project is that those responsible for delivering it be acquainted with and adhere to the human rights legal framework, which includes the principal normative instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989), or international agreements specific to youth rights (Campbell 2012). This acceptance also involves an understanding of the basic principles of universality, indivisibility, participation, accountability, and non-discrimination, all of which are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These elements must be explicitly and clearly conveyed to learners by the human rights educator. Similarly, learners should be made aware that such principles are not embraced by all. For instance, philosophers from cultural relativist schools criticise the concept of 'universality,' which in their opinion ignores regional belief systems. They regard the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a form of cultural and political imperialism (Perrin 2005). In his recent publication, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (2013, 13), Stephen Hopgood goes even further, comparing the human rights movement to a secular religion that has created a "market of suffering" by using liberal capitalist mechanisms.

In addition to discussing adhesion to the human rights legal framework, familiarisation with the main legal instruments, as well as with issues of respect, rights, and obligations should form the starting point of any human rights curriculum. However, the content of any programming will be largely influenced by the methodology used in that field.

Methodology

Traditional education tends to rely on the 'expert model,' whereby the learning starts with the teacher who presents herself as a role model to students. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2000, 72) criticised this model, which he described as "narrative education" or as a "banking concept of education," regarding it as an attempt by the "oppressor" to maintain the status quo and keep the "oppressed" under control. Inspired by French existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre (Sartre 1948) and feminist Simone de Beauvoir (de Beauvoir 1953), Freire supports the idea that education should, instead, be liberating and based upon problem-solving (Freire 2000). The teacher becomes facilitator and catalyst for dialogue. In this context, individuals "teach each other mediated by the world and their own experience in this world" (Freire 2000, 32). In the field of human rights education, the participatory approaches advocated by Freire and his followers prevail. Everyone teaches and everyone learns in a collective process of creating knowledge. The process that leads to the transformative experience (see Table 1), which was applied to adult education by John Mezirow (1991), was subsequently transferred to the classroom for the teaching of human rights in schools (Cranton 2006).

In the school system, these methodologies require interactive techniques such as brain-storming, role-play, and small group work, which facilitate the discussions (Amnesty International 2011). Additionally, participatory approaches are founded on a deep knowledge of the learner and the parameters which may influence the group dynamic.

Table 1: **Participatory approach in human rights**

Reflection		*Knowledge*	
	Instrumental	*Communicative*	*Emancipatory*
Content	What are the facts?	What do others say about this issue?	What are my assumptions?
Process	How do I know this is true?	How did I integrate other points of view?	How do I know my assumptions are valid?
Premise	Why is the knowledge important to me?	Why should I believe in this conclusion?	Why should I revise or not revise my perspective?

Source: Cranton *(2006):37*

Age, cultural and socioeconomic background, gender, status, or whether the learner is a victim of human rights abuse or a perpetrator are some of the elements which will have to be taken into account in such learning. Equally, the educator will need to confront her own prejudices and attitudes towards her students, and also consider relationships between students and the school environment. This individual is then responsible for providing a human rights atmosphere in the classroom (Claude 2012). In that sense, the involvement of personal identity is unique to human rights education.

Human Rights Education Curricula

In terms of content, one can identify human rights themes that derive directly from the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). For instance, in *Compass* (a manual for human rights education edited by the Council of Europe), the educator will typically find background information about religion and beliefs, discrimination and intolerance, or migration (Council of Europe 2002). The selection of themes will be dictated by traditional development theories and will have to be age-appropriate (see Table 2.) However, and most importantly, the content will have to respond to a problematic situation relevant to the learner. As a result, universal concepts and global issues have to be addressed from a local perspective. In a school scenario, human rights-based approaches have often been utilised to deal with bullying or discrimination (Amnesty International 2012). Because human rights education is embedded in reality, a 'one size fits all' human rights programme would be self-contradictory. Human rights curricula will be as diverse as the learners involved in the process.

Table 2: **Developmental and conceptual framework for human rights education**

LEVELS	GOALS	KEY CONCEPTS	PRACTICES	SPECIFIC HUMAN RIGHTS PROBLEMS	EDUCATION STANDARDS & INSTRUMENTS
Early Childhood • Preschool & lower primary school • Ages 3 to 7	• Respect for self • Respect for parents and teachers • Respect for others	• Self • Community • Responsibility	• Fairness • Self-expression • Listening	• Racism • Sexism • Unfairness • Hurting people (feeling, physically)	• Classroom rules • Family life • Community standards • Convention on the Rights of the Child
Later Childhood • Upper primary school • Ages 8 to 11	• Social Responsibility • Citizenship • Distinguishing wants from needs from rights	• Individual rights • Group rights • Freedom • Equality • Justice • Rule of law • Government • Security • Democracy	• Valuing diversity • Fairness • Distinguishing between fact and opinion • Performing school or community service • Civic participation	• Discrimination/ prejudice • Poverty/hunger • Injustice • Ethnocentrism • Passivity	• UDHR • History of human rights • Local, national legal systems • Local and national history in human rights terms • UNESCO, UNICEF
Adolescence • Lower secondary school • Ages 12 to 14	• Knowledge of specific human rights	• International law • World peace • World development • World political economy • World ecology • Legal rights • Moral rights	• Understanding other points of view • Citing evidence in support of ideas • Doing research/ gathering information • Sharing information • Community service and action	• Ignorance • Apathy • Cynicism • Political repression • Colonialism/ imperialism • Economic globalisation • Environmental degradation	• UN covenants • Elimination of racism • Elimination of sexism • Regional human rights conventions • UNHCR • NGOs
Older Adolescents and Adults • Upper secondary school and adult groups • Ages 15 and up	• Knowledge of human rights standards • Integration of human rights into personal awareness and behaviours	• Moral responsibility/ literacy	• Participation in civic organisations • Fulfilling civic responsibilities • Civil disobedience • Community services and action	• Genocide • Torture	• Geneva Conventions • Specialised conventions • Evolving human rights standards

Source: Table adapted from the United Nations Document, ABC: Teaching Human Rights (2003, 9-10).

Potential of Human Rights Education

The contribution of human rights education to our students' success is felt on two levels.

The participatory and transformative strategies employed in human rights education promote a skill-set sought after in 21st century education: communication, critical thinking, cooperation, and problem-solving. For instance, such education perfectly matches the attributes of the International Baccalaureate Learner profile (International Baccalaureate Organisation 2013). Furthermore, it involves intrinsic motivation, which results in 'deep learning,' the guarantee of better retention of material learned (Marton 1976).

However, where for general education success is measured in terms of skills, for the human rights practitioner it is measured in terms of attitudinal change and level of activism. Consequently, the positive impact of a human rights educational programme can only be felt when students are not only taught *about* human rights but also *through* human rights (by exemplifying human rights values) and *for* human rights (with action as an outcome) (OHCHR 2011: Art. 2, para.2).

Challenges

One of the main challenges is precisely achieving this multidimensional and thorough process within schools and creating a culture of human rights.

Internationally, as well as in Bermuda, human rights education is often delivered in the form of outreach programmes offered by charities or non-governmental organisations. Bermudian organisations such as CURB, Centre Against Abuse, Women's Resource Centre, and Two Words and a Comma, to name a few, have always acknowledged the importance of educating our community about human rights in their respective fields of action. Educational materials and consultative activities by the Bermuda Human Rights Commission (Bermuda Human Rights Commission 2009) and Centre for Justice (Centre for Justice 2013) outline the premise of school-based human rights education. School curricula adopted in Bermudian schools (GCSE, IB programme, or the Canadian Alberta Curriculum) lend themselves to the inclusion of human rights lessons into existing subjects such as history, Personal-Social-Health-Education (PSHE), or global citizenship. However, access to public school programmes is controlled by the Bermuda ministry of education, and if the vision is not apparent in this government department, individual schools have little latitude. The result is a piecemeal approach to human rights education, which often becomes the norm both locally and in the rest of the world (OSCE 2009, 16).

This reluctance to go any deeper may be explained by several factors. In times of economic recession, educational systems are results and exam-driven and dedicate little time to developing and empowering students as individuals (Helsby 1999, 78). Valuable educational projects that deviate from this norm are often discarded as too idealistic or impractical.

When governments or school heads are open to offering human rights education to students, resistance may come from teachers or parents. Teachers may feel uncomfortable teaching issues often considered controversial and which require them to "leave the realm of abstract concepts to become personal, therefore emotional" (Davis in Ellwood 2012, 149). Moreover, as Henry Hepburn notes, teachers avoid 'the hot potato' of human rights because they feel incompetent in this subject, which is not part of their teacher training. Some, overlooking the fact that with rights come responsibilities, consider that "children have already too many rights and that teaching them about human rights would compound this" (Hepburn 2015:14). From a parent's perspective, human rights education may be frowned upon because it may tackle issues they consider taboo.

Overcoming Obstacles through Whole-School Human Rights Education Models

However, human rights educational models such as the Human Rights Friendly School project developed by Amnesty International (2012) or the Rights Respecting Schools (2004) model inspired by UNICEF offer solutions to the obstacles mentioned earlier. Both offer a whole-school approach to human rights education, thus enabling more comprehensive integration of human rights values and practices into the life of the school in place of a piecemeal approach (Tibbits 2002). As the local coordinator of the Human Rights Friendly School pilot project launched in Bermuda in 2012 (Arandjelovic 2012), I witnessed the potential of such a programme and the impact it could have on students when implemented properly. During the introductory phase, schools are invited to gauge the human rights friendliness of their school with reference not only to the curriculum but also the style of school governance, the nature of interpersonal relationships, and the school environment (Amnesty International Education Team 2012). An action plan for the school is developed based on the findings of this preliminary survey in consultation with all stakeholders. The fact that parents, teachers and students are included allows for an open dialogue and creates meaning for the whole school community, thus eliminating the type of resistance described previously. Furthermore, teacher and student training in participatory methodologies is an integral part of this model, empowering all to deliver a tailor-made human rights content. In the context of our pilot programme, for instance, issues related to Bermuda society or the school context were discussed. In a module about socioeconomic and cultural rights and the right to housing in particular, students were invited to draw parallels between the plight of the Romani in Europe and the housing crisis in Bermuda (Palau-Wolffe 2012, 7). At the school level, students drafted their own anti-discrimination policy and conducted tolerance and diversity workshops for their peers. This approach not only created awareness of human rights issues but helped us build a culture of human rights. The transformational impact of this model became evident when students spontaneously removed anti-gay expressions ("It is so gay!") from daily conversations, expressed compassion for victims of human rights abuses when participating in the 'write for rights' campaign, and when school management removed corporal punishment from the school handbook (Palau-Wolffe 2013, 3).

Similarly, the Rights Respecting Schools programme allows for sustained integration of human rights in all areas of school life through the development of an action plan and the creation of a personalised School Charter (UNICEF).

In addition to rigour and thoroughness, these models offer flexibility and can be adapted to various school scenarios. Moreover, institutions that commit to their implementation benefit from the support of expert human rights education practitioners and the organisations behind these programmes. These latter characteristics can help local or international authorities develop a vision for integrating of human rights education much more widely in the world.

Conclusion and Recommendation

As Kofi Annan has stated: "Human rights education is much more than a lesson in schools or a theme for a day; it is a process to equip people with the tools they need to live lives of security and dignity" (Annan 2004: para. 4). In the context of formal education, equipping students with an adequate human rights toolkit requires maximising the promise of transformative learning by adopting comprehensive and sustainable approaches to human rights education such as the Human Rights Friendly School project or Rights Respecting Schools.

However, although efficient educational models to draw on are available and the efforts of non-governmental organisations in Bermuda are genuine, the success of school-based human rights education cannot be achieved without cohesion or standardisation, especially in teachers training. As the Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training notes, it is the state's obligation to develop long-term national strategies to infuse human rights

education into its educational system (OHCHR 2011). These conditions have to be met if a culture of human rights is to develop and for students to emerge as human rights leaders concerned about social justice and the defence of human rights in their community.

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