

**Response to “The Shaky Legal Foundations of the Global Human Rights Education Project”**

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In this article, the author characterizes current practices of human rights education (HRE) as having an overriding agenda of activism, one that can draw on an ideologically-driven misinterpretation of international human rights standards. The author’s argument is based primarily on an example of an HRE program being carried out by the UK section of Amnesty International, which apparently presents same-sex marriage as directly supported in international human rights law (which it is not).

My first response is that HRE is a quite diverse field of practice, differing not only according to audiences and educational settings but also national contexts. HRE for pupils in the UK may look different than HRE carried out with students in India. There are already HRE programs that are heavily oriented towards international law and national protection systems, especially those taking place in law schools or for adult learners in professions such as law enforcement, the military and civil servants. No single HRE program, such as the one presented in this article, can be representative of the field as a whole.

Amnesty International’s work, specifically, is oriented towards the non-formal education sector and advocacy. Any educator using Amnesty resources will know this. HRE that is linked with Amnesty campaigning typically takes place outside of classroom hours, for example, in clubs. There are numerous HRE resources that have been developed for use in schools that are completely appropriate for the classroom. As with any materials used in the classroom, educators make choices, working within the curriculum standards that are established by educational authorities. This is not to excuse the misrepresentation of the content of human rights legal standards; this should not happen, of course.

The author states with reference to the Ramirez, Suarez and Meyer article (2007) that human rights-oriented content and values have become more prevalent in textbooks over the past two decades. This is true; however when it is present such content is generally thin and noncontroversial. References to human rights values overlap with many well regarded and generally uncontested ethical principles such as non-discrimination and equality. Teaching about human rights is generally restricted to topics such as the theory of human rights, human rights standards, and the establishment of the United Nations, human rights institutions and NGOs, human rights violations in past history or “in other countries”.

In conjunction with the spread of HRE in schools, the author suggests that HRE should have more of a law-oriented focus. I agree that students ought to learn about the international legal framework of human rights as well as national protection systems that link up the international standards with the local context of the learner. However, I see two challenges to this proposal. The first is that this seems to make HRE even less realistic for schools, as so few teachers are themselves familiar with the basics of the human rights system, let alone the legal framework. If HRE is to be delivered by ‘professionals with academic qualifications in law’ only a very small number of students would receive HRE, rendering it even less frequent in schools than it is now.

The second challenge is that the reduction of HRE to teaching legal standards would undercut its potential to fulfill its ultimate goal, which is to reduce human rights violations. The most recent definition forwarded by the United Nations in its Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training affirmed that HRE included “empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others (United Nations General Assembly, 2011). Empowerment is a contested and multi-faceted term but perhaps can be understood as the ability to influence one’s environment. Schools can promote empowerment through knowledge, such as the legal kind supported by the author. Classroom teaching can also facilitate empowerment through critical reflection processes, which might lead a learner to recognition that a personal experience of discrimination is shared by others or that his or her values are consistent with those in the international standards. As with human rights legal content, such teaching and learning processes require skilled educators.

I agree fully with the author that we should be wary of HRE that attempts to indoctrinate students. The ‘Values and Awareness Model’ of HRE for schools that I identified in an earlier article (2002) was not meant as an endorsement, but as a descriptive critique. I am wary of any educational process that is ideological, although we know that schools do socialize learners every day, whether explicitly or implicitly, about acceptable norms and behaviors. This concern to not have HRE contribute to a uniform, uncontested and non-reflective treatment of the human rights system has led some educators to coin the term Critical Human Rights Education (CHRE). CHRE reinforces the importance of infusing critical reflection throughout HRE – meaning not only in relation to the contrast between the ideals of the human rights standards and the realities of government behavior but also in relation to the human rights system itself. The proposal that human rights values are universal is a contested one. If human rights norms are to be personally meaningful ones for learners, then they must be de-constructed and processed accordingly.

A few decades ago, there were two kinds of HRE taking place: legal literacy and popular education. HRE as a field has been in the process of developing over the past 20 years a healthy hybrid that incorporates basic legal knowledge and the empowerment pedagogy of popular education. I believe that the author and I are in fundamental agreement that HRE should be taught in schools. However, the lack of teacher preparation and curriculum space for HRE are perhaps our greatest challenges. A commitment from educational leaders for a wider curriculum space would automatically generate dialogue – such as this one – about the integration of critical reflection and the appropriate mixture of human rights-related law, values, history and current events – both domestically and internationally.

## References

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