

# Human Rights Education: The United Nations Endeavour and the Importance of Childhood and Intelligent Sympathy

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*School is the major vehicle for humanism, which is, in essence, respect on human nature. Human Rights Education is important for the existence of human society in the modern globalising era. Education can function as a unifying factor and produce informed and active citizens of an interdependent world. It can provide the tools for advocacy and resolution of conflict that are necessary for the maintenance of peace between nations and people. United Nations initiated in human rights and peace pedagogy. Social and individual amelioration may start from elementary school, taking advantage of children's pro-social behaviour as the agent of change. John Dewey introduced the concept of 'intelligent sympathy' in a democratic classroom aiming at personal growth, for considering new ways of thought, and creating a peaceful society.*

Human rights, United Nations, Prosocial behaviour, Childhood, Intelligent sympathy

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of human rights abuse and advocacy advances the imperative of educating children in a democratic way for humanistic growth. John Dewey based his philosophy of education on the belief that humans and their surroundings are living in unity, within a transactional process. Alienation and dehumanization appear when people can not see this unity in their every thought and action, but set the dualisms of 'I-You', 'Us-Them'.

Historically, some of the most horrific abuses of human rights have occurred under regimes and conditions that systematically demonize and degrade certain targeted social groups or people. This type of us-them dualistic thought and ideology is often associated with a glorification of violence, which equates brutality with heroism, and social devastation with divine kill.

Stanley Milgram's experiment in 1968, proved the crucial role of authority in the perpetration of violence, and found that ordinary people were all too commonly complicit in the injury of another human being when prompted to do so by an authority figure. A reason for this is that there is a diffusion of responsibility involved in the process of following the orders of an authority, so that individuals do not feel personally accountable for their own action, no matter how fatal the results might be. Another reason is that there is a special trust given to the authority, so that many people assume that the authority figure knows better than they themselves do, and because of this they are willing to defer their own judgement to that of another person. Upon conclusion Milgram hoped that, despite people seem like puppets controlled by the strings of society, they have perception and awareness, which might prove the first step to their own liberation.

What we need today is a re-evaluation of the philosophy that social institutions enshrine, which lay the foundation for people's dehumanization through uncritical obedience, passivity, and adjustment to authorities and rules imposed upon them. Modern society needs reflective citizens

and intelligent inquirers, who promote social understanding, cooperation, and peace. Human rights education aims at that target.

In 1946, the United Nations Charter mandated to promote and emphasize human rights. The principles of human rights education aim to promote dignity, tolerance and peace, by educating individuals and groups to respect, defend and advocate for their rights. These rights are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which made human rights a global responsibility (United Nations, 1948). The preamble of the Declaration states clearly, that respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are to be advanced through teaching and education. Articles 26 and 28 of the Declaration affirm that education about our rights is the foremost right that leads to the full and free development of the person.

### **THE ENDEAVOUR OF THE UNITED NATIONS**

The United Nations declared the years 1995 to 2004 as the Decade for Human Rights Education. During this decade nations are called upon to promote and implement human rights education in all sectors of their society. The importance of human rights education was also reinforced by several World Congresses. For example, the World Conference on Human Rights, in 1993, called on states and institutions to implement human rights education within their formal and informal learning sectors. The International Congress on Education for Human Rights and Democracy adopted the World Plan of Action on Education for Human Rights and Democracy, which also called on states to develop specific programs of action, with special emphasis on the rights of women.

Human rights education is defined by the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights as those training, dissemination, and information efforts that aim at building a universal culture of human rights. According to the plan of action of the United Nations program for the Decade for Human Rights Education, for the materialization of this goal is essential the training on particular skills, the acquisition of knowledge and building of those attitudes that, altogether, would: strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, facilitate the holistic development of human personality and human sense of dignity, promote understanding, respect, gender equality and friendship among nations, declare equality of indigenous people and of racial, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups, enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, and expand the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of world peace.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in conjunction with the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in 2000, undertook a mid-term global evaluation of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education. Nations were surveyed on the progress made toward implementing national human rights educational programs. The evaluation revealed that states had ratified treaties and proclaimed their support to human rights education, but few, if any, had developed or implemented relevant national programs (United Nations, 2000). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) proved that they had played an important role in disseminating information about human rights and developing plans of action. The evaluation called for increased support and collaboration between Non Governmental Organizations, Inter Governmental Organizations, and Human Rights Commissions.

The obstacles and needs that were identified in that mid-term evaluation of the human rights education decade were mainly financial. The lack of financial resources prohibited the development and carrying out of educational plans. Another obstacle identified was the lack of clarity and real understanding of human rights issues within organizations.

The most common obstacle, often, is that while educational institutions or organizations adopt the rhetoric of human rights their operation is not consistent with that rhetoric, because they are usually shaped by diverge forces that are also present in larger society. The hierarchy and power relations in a society are always reflected in the operation of schools. Finally, the existing educational programs on human rights pay emphasis more on understanding and awareness than action. As such, these programs, usually, choose neutrality as their main feature of operation, in an effort not to offend people of other cultures. However, a life-long effect can come only through a social, mindful action component of educational practice.

The practice and the goals of human rights education are commonly misused and misunderstood. The goals include teaching about human rights as well as working for human rights. The overly academic treatment of human rights lacks action, hence, it does not challenge the *status quo* or social powers to act as agents of social change in larger society. Human rights educational programs ought to educate students and adults about their rights and empower them to stand up for them, in order to take control of their own lives and of the decisions that affect them.

In the present world, full of conflicting interests, needs and purposes, human rights' principles provide a universal standard in working towards peace and justice for more people. Human rights education aim to engage people at a deeper level than mere knowledge, to the level of critical reflection and action that is required for social change, as Dewey had visualized.

The contemporary resurgence of religious, national, racial and cultural conflicts shows that school mechanisms can serve as a main partner to the generalized efforts for establishing new means for the expansion of universal wisdom and experience, effective in the elimination of humanistic havoc. According to the statement by the Secretary General of the United Nations, education is of major importance in the promotion of international peace and security and forms the critical communication channel among nations.

In under-developing and developing countries, where the need for basic amenities and lack of infrastructure are dominant, a human rights education might seem superfluous to other more pressing needs. Nevertheless, a human rights education ensures that genuine development takes place in these countries and, in turn, fosters empowerment and realization of human rights. At present, the *Human Rights Watch World Report 2000* indicated that the scope of the world's human rights problems has far exceeded the capacity to address them. This happens despite the fact that most nations and signatories to international treaties have adapted to International Law and have adopted more democratic and humanistic approaches to their governance and policy. There is clearly a gap between rhetoric and practice.

### **THE SIGNIFICANT CHILDHOOD**

Human rights education is an effective mean to educate children from a very young age to develop respect for self, for other people and humanity, appreciation of diversity, valuing of freedom, equality, and justice, determination, intelligent inquiry and a critical independent mind for reflective citizenship, upon global, moral, civic, and multicultural concerns; all of which compose the basis of a democratic society and humane citizenry.

Personal experiences, family and cultural backgrounds influence the formation of ideas, interests, character, and attitudes of children from a very young age; thus they affect their receptiveness and reaction to anything that school will try to implement. Nevertheless, even if children may come to the learning environment with pre-existing attitudes, an education that touches them personally can still make the difference.

Elementary school is the appropriate level for educating on human rights and training children for good individuals and good citizens. Childhood years are a critical period for the development of attitudes and formation of personality. It is the period of increased and important developmental changes with a rapid growth in cognition. Politically relevant attitudes such “as empathy and solidarity, a sense of freedom and a feeling for right and wrong”, are implanted at that age (Schmidt-Sinns, 1980, 178).

Childhood is an important period for the formation of the growing self. Children have a particular openness, an increased concern and interest for other people, and particular receptiveness to social information, their attitudes are open to influence, they are willing to learn and inquire naturally about everything around them, develop strong friendships, they are interested in fairness, and can take up responsibilities according to their developmental stage.

Peer interactions are of much importance for healthy, mature, and interpersonal relations. By associating and socializing with peers, children learn concern for others well being, obtain a sense of unity, and a responsibility towards other people. Friendship in childhood provides companionship, stimulation, physical support, and opportunities for social comparison. This interaction is essential to children’s understanding of fairness, self-esteem, for their tendencies toward pro-social behaviour, and the acquisition of role-taking and communication skills. Friendship is a site for the reeducation of human soul and mind, since it is an integral part of sympathy, where the desires, aims, interests and modes of response of other people become an expansion of our own being, in order to understand them. Friendship is when “we learn to see with his eyes, hear with his ears, and their result give true instruction, for they are built into our own structure” (Dewey, 1934b, 339). It is through friendship that we gradually rediscover our self, and acquire the courage to express our individuality and our inner spirit.

Relationships with peers start from being one-sided and egocentric to becoming more reciprocal and encompassing other’s perspectives. An early human rights pedagogy can contribute to inhibiting students from adopting egocentric and ethnocentric views of rights upon other people. As Dewey argued, friendship is the site for reeducation for soul and spirit, wherein the person discovers his self. Friendships, at this period, are chosen for their personal attributes and temperament, characterized by equality, similar interests, and reciprocity, in contrast to the convenience that characterizes those at adolescence. Children tend to choose friends of the same age, who live in proximity, and have similarities. The most important feature of friendships of that age is conformity to peer cult, in the sense of sharing norms and rules.

Among the various instances of preadolescent friendships, for example, assistance, talking, playing, laughing, studying, conflict are also present. Both conflict and cooperation are important in childhood and preadolescent peers relationships. Cooperation, particularly, contributes to the maintenance of children’s friendships and their outcome. Conflicts and violations of the norms of friendship are very often, either leading to resolution strategies or disagreement. Preadolescent children, also, spend much more time in negative evaluation conversations, than younger or older children, perhaps because they are insecure about their social position and guard against rejection.

Children understand the interdependence, can develop reasoning and intelligent sympathy, and have an increasing capacity for analysis and critical judgement. During pro-elementary and first elementary years, the most important features associated to the developmental stage of children, that could form the basis for a human rights training are mainly friendship and self. In the middle years of elementary school, students behave more pro-socially than elementary first graders. For, they have the feeling of ‘we’ that “involves collaboration in the sense of adjustment to others’ needs in pursuit of mutual interests” (Higgins, 1983, 25).

Pro-social behaviour, that is being built during childhood, is a complex phenomenon, which is affected by many factors including age, personality, motivation, cultural factors, and surrounding conditions. That behaviour is tied closely to both social and moral aspects of children's lives, and is defined as that positive form of social behaviour which benefits others.

Piaget asserted that within the social context of egalitarian peer communication children develop their mentality that has a social character. The participation in essential social relationships offers the ground for cultivation and justification of global human values, such as responsibility, honesty, tolerance, and justice. Piaget identified stages in children's development of the concept of justice and claimed that egalitarian justice develops with age, in relation to solidarity, between children and in opposition to adult authority. As children mature and spend more time with their peers, they learn to cooperate and communicate effectively, shifting the nature of their respect from the respect for the adult authority to the reciprocal respect for their peers.

Most children during preadolescence believe that, being a good person means to be nice; this is important for others to think well of them, gaining their approval, while children can think well of themselves, building self-esteem. They begin to understand other perspectives that facilitate them in making moral judgements. Middle childhood, from about 9 to 11 years of age, is a period of awakening morality and conscience, when children care about other people and are considerate of their happiness, even though, sometimes what is fair and what is wanted are not clear inside them. Moral judgement and moral responsibility are wrought in us by the social environment. Hence, morality is socially conditioned (Dewey, 1922).

Children develop empathy and role-taking skills usually in accordance to the development of their pro-social behaviour. In that way, their care and concern may extend beyond their immediate situations to unfortunate people around the world. This has obvious implications for human rights instruction. Empathy is an affective attitude that children develop in form of emotional matching or experiencing a range of emotions consistent with those of another person. Thus, they can develop empathy for suffering distant others and be motivated to engage in pro-social actions driven by these feelings, bearing a charitable character. Role-playing, a skill associated with pro-social behaviour, is a capacity to look at a situation from another person's perspective, the ability to infer another's feelings, thoughts, perspectives, motives, and intentions. In essence, it is the pre-requisite of altruistic behaviour. Both skills, empathy and role taking, are important in pro-social development, but also depend on encouragement and motivation given by adults.

Young children have a more self-focused, hedonistic orientation of pro-social behaviour. During middle childhood they become more needs-orientated, and at upper elementary level they reflect on the approval from others. Few children may progress to the latter stage which is more self-reflective, to concern for others and for the consequences of their own actions.

The elementary classroom environment is an ideal learning and practice laboratory for pro-social behaviour, as peers and teachers can be effective agents of reinforcement for the acquisition and modification of humanistic ideals. However, for cognitive reasons, educators have to start from individual rights, which is always the starting point, and must select instruction topics that are age appropriate. Piaget had strongly advocated educators not to force students to repeat and pay attention to 'ready-made truths' of past facts, because they will hide the historically embedded significance of meaning, which is handed down in ideas (Piaget, 1976). Meaning is recognized in relation to the past, while values are embedded in experiences of the immediate present, and purposes are directed toward the future.

The development of humanistic values in the classroom, their real practice in school and in the near community are very important for students' personal and social development. The optimal

condition would be their identification with a teacher, who models positive social behaviour in practice and not only in principles, and who manifests altruism at classroom' life instances and school environment. It is especially important to teach human rights using the concrete experiences of our students (Torney-Purta, 1984). "In the learning process, the only person who really learns is he who is able to apply the appropriate learning to concrete existential situations", concluded Paulo Freire. Of the same importance is to allow students to become involved in designing the human rights curriculum, because that is the way of the democratic school, which will build in students more favorable attitudes toward social studies, school, and their peers, more constant behaviour and an effective social learning.

### **DEWEYAN CONCEPT OF INTELLIGENT SYMPATHY**

Dewey introduced intelligent sympathy as an important idea in the interpersonal understanding beyond differences, and one essential condition for creative democracy, which helps people overcome conflicts among diverse spirits. The term actually refers in a sensitive responsiveness to the interests and rights of others. It is the key to attain a common vision that extends its scope beyond the self "till it approaches the universal".

Sympathy is intelligent when it manifests impartiality and objectivity of moral knowledge. It occurs when we have learned to put ourselves in the place of another and see things from their standpoint and values-set; it is a consideration for another self-centeredness. In impartiality we do not focus exclusively on our own self or the other self. A person can attain this condition by forgetting oneself and transcending his or her narrow ego. Intelligent sympathy is the practical art of living. It reminds us that each one can, and should, be a moral prophet of humanity (Dewey, 1934b). Thus, intelligent sympathy can be neither altruistic nor self-loving, but caring for the self and others at the same time.

The hope of humanity lies in the fact that we can always abandon despair and depart anew along an unsettled path of living, only when we can detach from the old path, as the mean of full participation. In surrendering our ego to the broader sense of life, we receive something precious "We are carried out beyond ourselves to find ourselves...This whole is then felt as an expansion of ourselves." (*ibid.*, 199). By acquiring a certain mode of detachment, one does not lose oneself, but regains oneself, because each person becomes a part of the whole and belongs to the universe in which he or she lives.

The interpersonal relationship of intelligent sympathy is the educational center for individuality, and the social center from which democratic culture expands. Intelligent sympathy, as the nest of democracy, aims to educate the self from inside. People need to begin with criticism from within, because self-criticism is the path to the release of creative activity and the driving force of social action. In the conditions of social misery, oppression, and insecurity social change needs to be initiated from inside the self, carrying affection and desire for justice and security (Dewey, 1934a). Social justice, which does not emanate from the inner source of self and lacks the support of intelligent sympathy, is unreliable.

The social centre of intelligent sympathy helps in perfecting the directive criteria of growth in different dimensions of life, and contributes to the improvement of moral standards in a society. "The heart of reflective morality is reflection, and reflection is sure to result in critics of some matters generally accepted...Toleration is...positive willingness to permit reflection and inquiry" (Dewey, 1932, 230). Reflection is always an essential component of the pedagogic relation, for it continually questions the methods and aims of the teacher.

The moral progress of a society relies upon the level of understanding between its dominant and marginal elements. Dewey stated that toleration of difference during a moral judgement is a duty, which needs the intelligent art of being open-minded and imaginative to the opportunities offered for personal growth. The art of becoming tolerant is necessary in the contemporary era, because societies are developing into multicultural entities. In the societal playground, people from different cultural backgrounds associate in various ways and need to give attention to avoiding an attitude of indifference during interaction.

When people with different cultural backgrounds encounter others with diverse values, both parts have to practise the art and sensitivity to care, and prove their openness in actions and words. Relativistic attitudes built on the excuse of incommensurable cultural differences can never solve peacefully the problems occurring in multicultural societies. When people with different attitudes, cultures, and languages meet there is a greater chance for misunderstanding. In particular, indigenous people, either in society or school, should show more sensitivity towards those coming from other societies, in order to avoid conflicts. Attitudes of indifference or enmity can only arouse misunderstanding or violence among people of diverse cultures. By having the courage to revise our values in dialogue with outsiders we can benefit ourselves, as well as the others.

The educational centre of intelligent sympathy plays a significant role in the arena of international and intercultural communication, because it forms a common standard for the testing of a common vision. The mutual understanding among different cultures and values is not merely a political matter, but involves the real life and individuality of people. Intelligent sympathy is like an eye to look below the surface of things and overcome ignorance and prejudice. Communication among different cultures in a society, as well as within one culture, requires the ability to become impartial from within our partiality, to detach and self-transcend, which gives us hope for building a common vision in value conflicts.

## CONCLUSION

Experiencing intelligent sympathy and practising human rights as a component of democracy in classroom, involves students in inquiring, making arguments, deciding, cooperating, evaluating, sharing, and living according to the ideal they want to reach. The exploration and practice of human rights that are ideal in the classroom are essential for democratic citizenship requirements, and for the development of individual abilities to deal with personal circumstances. Educating for human rights allows children to stand up for their own rights, and to work for the rights of others, from school mates to people in the community and world, "if a student emerges from a course of study with a blinkered view of my rights as an individual or our rights as a group or country, the crucial appreciation of the reciprocity and universality of rights may be totally lost" (Heater, 1984, 2).

Pedagogical tools for teaching children about human rights are stories and books about human rights issues, for they highlight peaceful solutions to difficult problems, and make the issue understandable in very personal ways, which scholarly articles or factual reports can not communicate (Branson-Stimmann, 1982). It is important to acknowledge the discomfort, which can be raised by human rights issues on violations, and to give students an opportunity to reflect and share their feelings. Open discussion is an important strategy along with journal writing. Using these means, students can explore their understanding of issues, share concerns, and note questions that may not have answers or conclusions. Many educators stress the importance of providing students with the opportunity to take their thoughts, concerns, and feelings into an action project. Action projects could involve conducting interviews, writing letters to organizations, public officials, doing volunteer work in their community, or fundraising for an aid organization, as well as expressing artistically in a form of theatre or song. Moreover, students can

work on human rights projects in their schools, by improving conditions for the physically challenged, protecting the rights of young children on the playground, or speaking out against their immediate social evils, for example, racism, discrimination, violence and injustice. Action-related education, personal contribution, and energetic participation are particularly necessary for the younger elementary students who are still concrete thinkers. Children can better understand and support human rights issues if they associate them with experiences from their lives at home, school, or with friends.

The explicit human rights education program pervades almost all of the co-developing contemporary educational programs, such as global education, peace education, multicultural education, development education, environmental education, anti-racist education, moral education and civic education. The United Nations with their Human Rights Education campaign aims at educating reflective and active citizenry for the human community, and for an interdependent world.

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