

Human Rights Before and After Covid-19: Getting Human Rights Education out of Quarantine

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Abstract:

This essay explores the way in which the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened human rights conditions across the globe, particularly around the rise of authoritarianism, erosion of democracy, increase in hate crimes and racism, and deepening of economic inequality. We then advocate for the possibilities and significance of human rights education as a core component of every student's learning experience and provide suggestions and specific resources for teaching human rights during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

Speaking in 1966, Robert F. Kennedy offered a powerful metaphor of change in a country fraught with injustice. Touring apartheid-era South Africa, Kennedy declared that one person standing up for an ideal or taking action “sends forth a tiny ripple of hope” that ultimately joins with others. Together, these ripples create “a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance” (Kennedy, 1966). Today, the world continues to challenge us to confront injustice, combat hatred, and fight for human rights, a challenge deepened by the Covid-19 pandemic. If, as Kennedy imagined, justice requires empowered, courageous, and knowledgeable individuals acting alone and in community with others, education must prioritize human rights as a core element of the curriculum. This article explores how the Covid-19 pandemic, by inflaming human rights issues around the world, has created opportunities to center human rights education (HRE) and encourage ripples of hope on the troubled waters of our world.

Human Rights Education

The 2011 United Nations Declaration on HRE and Training established a global definition of HRE as encompassing “all education, training, information, awareness-raising and learning activities aimed at promoting universal respect for and observance of all human rights.” Broad and open-ended, this definition orients HRE toward the progressive advancement of human rights in practice. It aims to prevent “human rights violations and abuses by providing persons with knowledge, skills and understandings and developing their attitudes and behaviors, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights” (United Nations General Assembly, 2011).

HRE is understood to have three dimensions (United Nations General Assembly, 2011):

- Education *about* human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection;
- Education *through* human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners;
- Education *for* human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others.

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In U.S. classrooms, human rights are most often discussed in the context of the Holocaust and other genocides (Donnelly, 2006). Currently, 42 of 50 states in the U.S. include human rights topics in their social studies standards as either required or example content (The Advocates for Human Rights, 2016).

Many K-12 students view human rights issues as non-American problems that happen elsewhere, particularly in “third world” countries (Barton, 2019). This view is concerning because “[i]f students consistently think of human rights as problems that apply to other countries but not their own, then studying human rights may not only reinforce negative stereotypes of other regions but also blind students to the need to address such issues locally and nationally” (Barton, 2019, p. 214). Barton proposes that in order to transform students and schools in line with human rights principles, HRE must support students to develop related content knowledge. For students to take action on human rights, they need to learn what these rights are and how institutions and policies can protect human rights (Barton, 2019). In particular, Barton recommends that teachers focus on social context—students’ own experiences and the influence of sources like the news—and help students understand the local, national, and global policies and practices related to human rights. The Covid-19 pandemic provides an unfortunate but critical opportunity for U.S. students to evaluate how the pandemic is impacting human rights in their own communities.

Human rights can be difficult to teach and learn. HRE involves trauma, making it both affectively and conceptually difficult (Walsh, Hicks, & van Hover, 2017). The prevalence of anti-human rights ideologies makes teaching human rights increasingly fraught. Within the context of racially, economically, and politically diverse school communities, HRE is especially difficult, as the trauma is not confined to the past but endemic in classrooms and communities (Epstein, 2009). Some teachers are uncomfortable addressing difficult histories when society is divided, and could resist incorporating multiple perspectives or interpretations in their teaching (Zembylas, 2016).

Teaching Human Rights During and After a Pandemic

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, there was no shortage of human rights issues for students to explore. These include the erosion of democracy in the face of authoritarianism, increased racist and anti-Semitic hate coupled with persistent structural racism, and extreme economic inequality. Contemporary human rights challenges such as these are deeply rooted, and the pandemic is exacerbating the harms they cause, further exposing political, racial, and economic divisions. This context provides an opportunity for authentic inquiry and learning. Here we

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explore these contemporary human rights issues, how they connect with the Covid-19 pandemic, and ideas for including them in social studies classrooms.

The Erosion of Democracy in the Face of Rising Authoritarianism

Recently, human rights experts and advocates have watched with alarm as the post-Cold War democratic consolidation has given way to authoritarian politics across the globe (Applebaum, 2020). For example, the governments of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil retreated from democratic commitments with rhetoric and policies that explicitly reject human rights. The United States has joined this slide toward authoritarianism, with Freedom House, which is among the most respected human rights organizations in the world, noting that “[U.S.] democratic institutions have suffered erosion” (Freedom House, 2020a) and, under the banner of “America First,” the U.S. has all but abandoned its traditional role as a global champion for human rights (Freedom House, 2020b).

Authoritarian leaders have often exploited racial, religious, or other divisions to secure and maintain power. In India, for example, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s virulent Hindu nationalism inspires intense loyalty and has spurred violence against minorities, including vigilante attacks on Muslims. This strategy of extreme polarization relies on casting one’s political opposition as not merely opponents but enemies. With the heightened anxiety and social pressure generated by Covid-19, this polarization has led to a politicization of necessary public health measures—wearing masks, limiting large gatherings, staying at home—in ways that reinforce divisions, seed interpersonal conflict, and may ultimately worsen the human toll of the virus.

Table 1 provides potential learning goals for HRE around the issue of rising authoritarianism, proposes how to connect similar historical issues to today, and suggests relevant teaching resources. The goals described highlight teaching *about* human rights to help students develop a richer knowledge and understanding of key human rights histories, concepts, and challenges. There are a range of connections to the past, as the current rise in authoritarianism echoes similar trends from the early twentieth century. The suggested resources orient teachers to reliable information on the challenges Covid-19 presents to human rights in the context of democracy and authoritarianism.

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Table 1 HRE with Rising Authoritarianism

Learning Goals	<p>Students will:</p> <p>Identify authoritarian threats to human rights.</p> <p>Evaluate strengths and weaknesses of democracies in addressing crises.</p> <p>Compare and contrast the balance of civil liberties (i.e., privacy, free speech, right to protest) with public health and safety.</p> <p>Explore how identity is used to polarize society and compromise human rights.</p>
Connecting Past and Present	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Compare the factors that contributed to the rise of fascism in the 1930s with those contributing to the rise of authoritarianism today.● Analyze the role of propaganda and new media technologies such as the radio in the 1930s and the contemporary role of “fake news” and social media.● Contrast the debate about privacy vs. security surrounding warrantless wiretaps during the War on Terror with the debate about privacy vs. public health surrounding contact tracing during the Covid-19 pandemic.
Resources	<p>Websites addressing privacy and digital security during the pandemic. Includes information and monitoring on use of data, quarantine enforcement, tracking apps, etc.</p> <p><i>Privacy International:</i> https://privacyinternational.org/examples/tracking-global-response-covid-19</p> <p><i>Access Now:</i> https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/03/Access-Now-recommendations-on-Covid-and-data-protection-and-privacy.pdf</p> <p>Fighting misinformation and defending free expression during Covid-19: Recommendations for states. From Access Now. A detailed report focused on inadequate access to information and the rise of hate speech.</p>

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	<p>https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/04/Fighting-misinformation-and-defending-free-expression-during-COVID-19-recommendations-for-states-1.pdf</p> <p>Covid-19 Outbreak: Human rights defenders & civic freedoms. Includes websites that track government responses to Covid-19 that impact civic freedoms, freedoms for journalists, threats to prisoners, and more.</p> <p>https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/covid-19-coronavirus-outbreak/covid-19-coronavirus-outbreak-human-rights-defenders-civic-freedoms</p>
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The Increasing Prevalence of Racist and Anti-Semitic Hate and Persistent Structural Racism

Well before the outbreak of Covid-19, reports documented a rise in racist, anti-Semitic, and Islamophobic hate. Far-right terrorist attacks from Norway to New Zealand, the surge of hate speech in U.S. schools following the 2016 election, and the return of anti-Semitic tropes and conspiracy theories are all indicative of the enduring human rights challenge of racism and bigotry.

The spread of Covid-19 has led to an increase in anti-Asian bias, extending a pattern of scapegoating minorities for disease that extends back at least to the Black Death. Asian Americans have been subjected to harassment and intimidation, with one poll finding that 60 percent of Asian American respondents reported witnessing someone blaming Asians for the pandemic (Jackson, Berg, & Yi, 2020). These acts emerge out of a long history of xenophobia against Asians, from the Chinese Exclusion Act in the 1880s to the internment of Japanese Americans in the 1940s. They are also extensions of rhetorical efforts on the part of the media and political leaders to label Covid-19 the “Chinese virus” or “Kung-flu.”

While the Asian American community has been disproportionately blamed for Covid-19, Black, Native, and Latinx communities have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19 itself. Black, Native, and Latinx individuals are more likely to contract the virus and, once infected, more likely to die as a result (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). Unequal access to health care, exposure to environmental contaminants as a result of segregation, and the daily “allostatic load” of living

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with racism are just some of the reasons why people of color are at high risk for the comorbidities that make Covid-19 more deadly.

Table 2 provides potential learning goals for HRE around the issue of rising hate and systemic racism, connects similar historical issues to today, and suggests relevant teaching resources. The goals described below highlight teaching *for* human rights to help students develop values, attitudes and skills necessary to building a culture of human rights. We suggest a few sample resources relevant not only to the intersection of Covid-19 with race and ethnicity but also to the broader need to build racial equity into the curriculum.

Table 2 HRE with Increasing Racism

Learning Goals	Students will: Develop empathy and recognize racism/bias in themselves and others. Identify and evaluate various strategies for achieving social change. Critique the back-and-forth of progress and decline of legal and institutional racism in the United States
Connecting Past and Present	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Compare the tactics used and the impact of the African American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s to today's Black Lives Matter protests.• Examine the racism behind the Chinese Exclusion Act, Japanese internment, and today's anti-Asian xenophobia.• Connect centuries of anti-Semitism in Europe and the United States to a re-emergence of modern day anti-Semitism and hate crimes.
Resources	Racial Equity Tools. A comprehensive list of over 100 resources for learning and teaching about racial equity and social justice issues related to Covid-19. https://www.racialequitytools.org/fundamentals/resource-lists/resources-addressing-covid-19-with-racial-equity-lens Combating Bias and Stigma Related to Covid-19. Ideas from the American Psychological Association.

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<https://www.apa.org/news/press/statements/combating-covid-19-bias.pdf>

The human rights lessons from Covid-19: Equity requires economics and social rights protections. Good article from Just Security.

<https://www.justsecurity.org/69602/the-human-rights-lessons-from-covid-19-equality-requires-economic-and-social-rights-protections/>

The Covid Tracking Project. Volunteer organization with origins with *The Atlantic*. Data on the impact of the pandemic on people of color in the United States.

<https://covidtracking.com/race>

Extreme Economic Inequality

Racial disparities overlay broader inequality across a range of economic and social rights, including access to food and housing security, health care, and quality education. Economic inequality has expanded over the past three decades and is a key driver of global migration and human rights risks. Within the United States, the distribution of wealth has become so concentrated that just three individuals—Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffet—have more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of households (Inequality.org, n.d.). Inequality has been compounded by Covid-19. The shuttering of businesses led to the highest recorded unemployment rates since the Great Depression. These layoffs and furloughs have disproportionately impacted workers unable to telecommute, especially those in the hospitality, retail, and service sectors (Dey & Loewenstein, 2020). Predictably, food bank usage has surged. Mass foreclosures and evictions have been avoided only through timely legislative action. As schools moved to distance education, many in under-resourced districts found themselves cut off from meaningful learning opportunities. Many students fell through the cracks, particularly those with special needs or individualized education plans, without ready access to a computer or the internet, or whose home lives became more difficult.

Table 3 highlights potential learning goals, past-present connections, and resources for HRE connected to the problems of economic inequalities. The goals include those related to teaching *through* human rights to offer students an opportunity for authentic learning that promotes human rights in their own communities. In connecting with the past, students can explore how

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communities have worked to support each other in times of need. The selected resources provide contextual data on the economic impacts of Covid-19, as well as examples of “mutual aid” efforts.

Table 3 – HRE and Economic Equality

Learning Goals	<p>Students will:</p> <p>Analyze the ways in which economic inequality demonstrates the interrelated nature of rights to health, housing, food, and education.</p> <p>Investigate how education policy and practices promote inequities in schooling.</p> <p>Take informed action to support access to food, housing, and education within their own community.</p>
Connecting Past and Present	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluate past and present education policies and their impact on educational access (e.g., segregation, school choice, school funding, online learning/access to online learning).• Compare and contrast the economic impact (income, housing, health care, education) on African Americans and women during the Great Depression and during the 2020 pandemic.• Examine the treatment and rights of workers during industrialization to “essential” workers during the pandemic.
Resources	<p>Ten Equity Implications of the Coronavirus COVID-19 Outbreak in the United States. From the NAACP. Lots of resources consider the pandemic and racism, frontline workers, the impact on democracy and education, etc.</p> <p>https://naacp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Ten-Equity-Considerations-of-the-Coronavirus-COVID-19-Outbreak-in-the-United-States_Version-2.pdf</p> <p>School, District, and Student Education Resources to Address COVID-19. Resources and links compiled by the Southern Educational Foundation to</p>

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help communities address the challenge of equitable education during the pandemic.

<https://www.southerneducation.org/covid-19-resources/>

Lessons from Mutual Aid During the Coronavirus Crisis. Describes community-led responses to the Covid-19 epidemic as a model for supporting the vulnerable during and after the crisis.

https://ssir.org/articles/entry/lessons_from_mutual_aid_during_the_coronavirus_crisis

Triaging Trauma: Community Schools Tap Partners to Address Needs Made Worse by COVID-19. Article exploring the role of community schools, which provide a range of services beyond just classroom instruction, in addressing the pandemic.

<https://www.educationdive.com/news/triaging-trauma-community-schools-tap-partners-to-address-needs-made-worse/576746/>

Conclusion

Society continues to struggle with protecting human rights, particularly for those marginalized based on race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and other identities. These strains are magnified by the Covid-19 pandemic. Teachers have a responsibility to teach about past and current human rights issues. The connections between these past events and society today, particularly in light of the pandemic, makes this responsibility especially urgent. Human rights education can transform students into ripples of hope.

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Appendix

Additional Resources for Teaching Human Rights during and after the Covid-19 pandemic

Robert F. Kennedy Center comprehensive lesson plans on human rights at risk during the Covid-19 pandemic. "Our rights at risk in a public health crisis."

<https://rfkhumanrights.org/work/teaching-human-rights/lessons/drs-anthony-fauci-and-tedros-adhanom-ghebreyesus>

United Nations policy brief on Covid-19 and human rights. Emphasizes three rights at the frontlines of the pandemic and six key human rights messages to teach and that require action.

https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief_on_human_rights_and_covid_23_april_2020.pdf

Human Rights Watch: Covid-19: A human rights checklist. Includes 40 questions to consider in response to the pandemic that addresses the needs of groups most at risk, including people living in poverty, ethnic and religious minorities, women, people with disabilities, older people, LGBT people, migrants, refugees, and children.

https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/202004_northamerica_us_covid19_checklist2.pdf

COVID-19: How human rights can help protect us. From Amnesty International. A look at key rights during the pandemic including healthcare, access to information, rights at work, and fighting discrimination.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/coronavirus-how-human-rights-help-protect-us/>

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