

## **Mainstreaming Human Rights Education – A New NCSS Community Looks Forward**

**Rosemary Ann Blanchard**

**Chair, National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Human Rights Education Community.**

---

This article will introduce the Human Rights Education Community within the National Council for the Social Studies and highlight some of our initial efforts to make Human Rights Education (HRE) more visible in the core social studies canon that students encounter in their public school education. It concludes with a look at the next steps that will need to take place if NCSS' recent support for HRE is to manifest in genuine instructional change.

### **A Look at the Problem**

Efforts to bring human rights (HR) and international humanitarian law (IHL) into the mainstream of social studies education in the United States often encounter roadblocks and digressions that are difficult to understand from outside the arena of US public education. Educational standards, curricula and core practices in U.S. public schools combine to create a formidable structure for educators who want to assure that no child completes public school without experiencing human rights friendly education and encountering HR/IHL course content. Even treaties, signed and ratified by the United States, which call for dissemination of HR/IHL content to the civilian population, have had surprisingly little impact on the content and methods of U.S. public school education. Both the principles of HR/IHL and the stories of U.S. involvement are often totally unknown to all but a small minority of students in U.S. schools. Typically, this favored minority have either learned from a committed teacher who takes individual initiative to incorporate HR and IHL into their lessons or have had the luxury of taking non-mandatory elective courses in high school and have chosen HR/IHL related classes because of non-school influences (family, church, etc.).

My own passion for human rights and human rights education (HRE) began at around age five, on the living room sofa at a favorite aunt's home, where she read to me from a small picture book called "Your Human Rights", with an introduction by Eleanor Roosevelt, my aunt's hero. After that, despite a liberal arts education and more than one graduate degree, my knowledge of human rights and humanitarian law was largely self-taught and acquired in my late 40s and beyond. Back in the 1950s and 1960s when I was a kid in public school, there weren't many electives, even for the fortunate, and the concepts of human rights and international humanitarian law were not even on the radar.

My professional background is not in curriculum or in K-12 education. I have worked the world of education from the policy perspective—as an attorney, a consultant and a university educator. Human rights became relevant to the indigenous language preservation activities of American Indian educators I represented and IHL forced itself upon me in the aftermath of Abu Ghraib. Clearly HR and IHL were important elements of the legal and sociocultural landscape for the United States and the world generally. Their absence from most school-based education was and is symptomatic of a serious problem. As a professional in educational policy, I was increasingly drawn into the world of social studies standards and curriculum, the venue where the study of HR/IHL belonged.

### **Social Studies Content Standards Development – A Perilous Place and a Perilous Process**

A few forays into the contested world of state level content standards development in the social studies, one in New Mexico, and one in California, taught me what a tough neighborhood social studies development really is. Decision making is both decentralized and highly concentrated at the same time. States have the power to set standards and the standards approval process is essentially state-by-state. Nonetheless, the textbook publication process is more national and, increasingly, the funding incentives are national. Furthermore, the entire field has been marginalized because of the focus on testable core skills in language arts and math. If it's not on the test, it's not likely to be in the classroom. In addition, battles about the proper scope of social studies education (Symcox, 2002; Evans, 2006) are compounded when they become battlegrounds for cultural wars about what is "American" and what is subversive (Zimmerman, 2002). In this environment, subjects like history and civics continue to provide a highly visible target for the politicization of educational content and delivery.

To navigate these dangerous waters, state committees and commissions often look to national professional communities of experts to define the field(s) for which the standards are to be written and to provide some support in dealing with both the politicization of their discipline(s) and the national push for a common core of educational content measured by a common set of assessments. Therefore, national professional communities of educators like the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) are important ports of entry for HR and IHL education into the social studies canon. NCSS has a comprehensive set of social studies standards, broader in scope than the discipline-specific standards in history, civics, economics and geography, which it developed as a resource for standards development by the states. However, these standards were first developed in 1994 (NCSS, 1994); the landscape of U.S. standards-based education has changed radically since then.

At the beginning of 2010, NCSS and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) announced their plan to jointly develop Common Core State Standards for Social Studies, modeled on the Common Core State Standards in language arts and mathematics just approved by CCSSO and the National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices (NCSS, 2010a). This initiative was at first widely touted on the NCSS website as a participatory process whose working group would seek input from educators and experts in the field. As the process developed, however, it became a great deal less participatory as an appointed taskforce approved by the two organizations settled in to an essentially embargoed process of standards development in which task force members agreed not to divulge their work-in-progress "prematurely." NCSS and CCSSO assured their public, however, that the semi-final result would be open to comments.

By the time the document which NCSS and CCSSO developed was sent out for comment within their respective organizations, the much anticipated social studies "standards" had undergone a significant transformation. NCSS and CCSSO had opted to create a "Framework," not "Standards." The Framework, known as the College, Career and Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies Standards (NCSS, 2013), is a guide meant to accompany state-approved standards; it is not a set of standards itself. As a framework, it seeks to avoid most decisions on content altogether. In addition, the Framework addresses only such state standards as fit under the headings of Civics, Economics, Geography and History, a far narrower range of study than that included in NCSS' own definition of the Social Studies:

the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence.... drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology,

economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences . . . (NCSS, 1994).

In limiting the joint NCSS/CCSSO proposal to a framework, the taskforce and its sponsoring organizations may have hoped to better negotiate the political environment. A similar diversionary strategy was employed several years earlier by the state of California, which developed a social studies framework before it had even adopted social studies standards and has limited its revisions to the less visible framework ever since (California SBE, 2005).

### **Human Rights Education in the C3 Framework and Within NCSS Culture and Structure**

The phrase “human rights” appears four times in the C3 Framework, a considerable achievement given the circumstances. However, it is nowhere defined, nor is the term expanded upon in such a way to provide context. Neither the phrase “humanitarian law” nor “Geneva Conventions” appear in the document at all, nor does the word “humanitarian.”

The framework, taken alone, might raise questions about NCSS’ sensitivity to the importance of Human Rights Education and International Humanitarian Law in the social formation of children and youth in the United States. In other forums within NCSS, however, a very different and more hopeful picture emerges. NCSS, in its flagship journal *Social Education*, has frequently published articles regarding human rights issues and the teaching of human rights content. *Social Education* devoted a large special section of one issue to articles about teaching International Humanitarian Law, using the ICRC and American Red Cross curriculum, Exploring Humanitarian Law (EHL) (NCSS, 2010b).

The problem for relevant inclusion of HRE/IHL appeared as soon as NCSS became involved in the development of a standards-related document to be included under the aegis of the Common Core State Standards. Thus, human rights educators both within and outside NCSS had to consider what other route besides standards development might be more productive for obtaining a visible NCSS commitment to HRE/IHL in the social studies core.

Like many large professional communities, NCSS encourages the development of special interest groups or special interest communities within its overall structure. So, the first step toward testing the NCSS waters began in 2011, as this author encouraged other human rights educators to join NCSS, read its publications, join the nearest state affiliate, participate in the annual conference and pursue the establishment of an official NCSS Human Rights Education Community. At the time, NCSS had communities around related topics like civics and social justice, but they did not have a specific HRE focus. A Human Rights Education Community would appear on the NCSS website under “Special Interest Communities;” other NCSS members could join it. An HRE Community could network with other Communities, Affiliates and Assemblies within NCSS.

Any NCSS community is guaranteed a session at the annual conference and a representative in the NCSS House of Delegates. A HRE Community, through its membership in the House of Delegates could propose resolutions – for instance, a resolution reaffirming NCSS support for human rights education. And, importantly, an official NCSS Community could reach out to independent nonprofit civic organizations, such as the recently formed Human Rights Educators USA, to connect with their network of HRE-friendly members among whom were sure to be members of NCSS.

The 2012 President-Elect of NCSS, Steven Armstrong, visited the state affiliates of NCSS prior to the 2012 NCSS Annual meeting, where he was more accessible to local educators than is possible in

large national meetings. He was very supportive of the idea of NCSS officially endorsing HRE and IHL in the social studies core. In a brief meeting during the New Mexico Council for the Social Studies annual meeting, he encouraged me to move the project ahead with diligence: get the petition to form an HRE Community in right away; plan to attend the next annual conference; as soon as the HRE Community was approved by the NCSS Board, recruit members and propose a resolution on human rights education. What he proposed was a whirlwind of forward momentum. It worked.

The proposed HRE Community was allowed to have a business meeting at the 2012 conference, even though our application to be approved as a community had not yet been filed. HRE USA sent out a call to its membership to help NCSS launch the NCSS HRE Community. The inaugural meeting of the proposed HRE Community was well attended, and included NCSS Board members. HRE USA members who were NCSS members put the word out in their state communities to join in the petition to form the HRE Community. This brought together many interested NCSS members who could not attend the first annual meeting. The application for community status was filed and approved in April of 2013.

### **The Human Rights Education Community Gets Up and Running within NCSS**

By the 2013 NCSS Annual Conference, the HRE Community had a business meeting, a HRE Community Scholar presentation on the conference agenda (with pictures of our speakers, making it more visible to the rest of the NCSS membership), a seat in the House of Delegates and a resolution for the HOD calling for NCSS support for human rights education. We had an executive committee and officers. Continuity of membership and activity, however, proved to be a problem.

NCSS is an organization primarily made up of public school teachers, curriculum specialists and other educators. It has some university members, but the main thrust is toward the practitioner, as it should be. The annual conference is a special event that teachers may not be able to attend each year. Public education has been squeezed since the early days of the Great Recession. HRE Community board members experienced salary furloughs, layoffs and crises when their schools went into program improvement. To make matters worse, they had no time. External human rights education advocates, like the members of HRE USA were enthusiastic about the HRE Community within NCSS, but most were not NCSS members. Only NCSS members can join an NCSS Community.

NCSS membership is not free and most of what NCSS does is not about HRE. So, the challenge in developing this or any professional community of practice is to link up committed insiders and outsiders, to nurture school-based practitioners while recruiting more freelance professionals who may actually have the time to do the organizational work of building a presence. And the linkages between these two communities of participants must be tenderly maintained so that neither the classroom practitioner nor the freelance academic or advocate feels out of place.

The HRE Community's first resolution, calling on NCSS to endorse HRE/IHL as part of the social studies core, went before the NCSS House of Delegates (HOD) during the 2013 annual meeting. On its way to the floor, it gained the co-sponsorship of several state affiliates of NCSS and other special interest communities. In the end, the HOD unanimously approved the HRE Community's resolution, declaring

education about human rights and humanitarian law [to be] an essential component of democratic citizenship and civic education, supporting the ideals and principles embedded in the Declaration of Independence, the U. S. Constitution, constitutions

of the states, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Geneva Conventions,  
[and calling upon. . .] the National Council for the Social Studies [to] incorporate into its expectations for social studies education, comprehensive programs of human rights and humanitarian law education” and “adopt an official position statement endorsing human rights education for all students and supporting the goals of the World Programme for Human Rights Education . . .

Despite the unanimous approval by the HOD, the HRE Community’s resolution was not yet the official policy of NCSS. HOD resolutions are advisory only and must be adopted by the NCSS Board of Directors (BOD) to become official. The NCSS Board of Directors considered the HOD resolution at its Spring 2014 meeting and unanimously adopted it. There was yet another step, however, on the way to a formal NCSS position on human rights education.

The resolution merely asserted that HRE was a necessary part of the social studies core. It was not a detailed position statement about human rights education. Therefore, the NCSS BOD asked the HRE Community to prepare a draft position statement. The new executive committee of the HRE Community now included a mix of human rights education academics, advocates and school-based educators. This made it more possible to draw on the time and expertise of the academics and advocates while incorporating the situated knowledge and experience of the school-based practitioners.

A team of HRE advocates, researchers, specialists and others collaborated on a draft of the HRE Position Statement, using the NCSS format. School-based practitioners contributed their suggestions and review, but simply did not have the time to fully participate in the drafting process. This division of skills and availabilities highlights an ongoing dynamic working inside a professional community of practice like NCSS—the practitioner members don’t have the time and in a specialized field like HRE and IHL often don’t have the expertise. Those with the expertise are not school-based practitioners and often do not share the experience and familiarity with the practice environment of the classroom teachers. It is all too easy to get stalled because nobody has time to do the work or to proceed in directions that don’t fit with classroom realities. In any area involving educational policy that affects practice, it is absolutely essential that classroom practitioners, academic scholars and field advocates build a very open and egalitarian team in which everyone’s expertise is equally valued and any final product is as acceptable to the school-level practitioner as to the theoretical researcher or the policy advocate.

In the end, the NCSS Position Statement on Human Rights Education was vetted through the HRE Community and sent on to the NCSS BOD. The Board unanimously approved it in September of 2014, in time for the November 2014 NCSS Annual Conference. The Position Statement is available on the NCSS website at [http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/human\\_rights\\_education\\_2014](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/human_rights_education_2014). The HRE Community is developing a two-page executive summary of the statement to aid in its dissemination to a broader, more general audience.

The statement introduces the concept of HR-friendly education and links it to positive school climate practices. It stresses the linkage between HRE and US history, between HRE and foundational documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights as well as international documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Conventions and the various Conventions, Covenants, Treaties and Declarations that implement the principles of both. This dual emphasis is intentional, serving both to “domesticate” the perception of human rights and

humanitarian law and to identify niches in existing required social studies units where the HR/IHL story can be told.

The statement incorporates both human rights and international humanitarian law into the adopted position and recommended practices. The NCSS HRE Community concluded that school districts and state boards of education are more likely to embrace the whole field of HR/IHL education if it is presented as a combination of these related fields.

### **Next Steps in Institutionalizing Human Rights Education into Standards, Curricula and Practice**

Everything that has been achieved so far through the National Council for the Social Studies is preliminary in nature. NCSS has created a platform within the mainstream world of U.S. Social Studies to begin effecting change in the visibility of HRE education in the United States. NCSS is clearly willing to provide a venue for members who share a strong interest in and commitment to human rights education, so that they may advocate for and inform others about HRE. The position of the HRE Community within NCSS provides a mainstream credibility when communicating with state departments of education as they revise their social studies standards, school districts as they define their curricula and learning objectives, and trade and textbook publishers as they determine what content and perspectives will be reflected in their publications. The HRE position statement provides a comprehensive overview for integrating HRE into social studies education at every grade level. While it is only a starting point, it is an important step toward the institutionalization of HRE/IHL into the core of the U.S. social studies canon.

Nothing that has happened so far, however, provides any guarantee that even one more child will learn about human rights and humanitarian law or go to school in an HRE-friendly environment. The existence of the HRE Community and position statement will not, on their own, change the preparation of future teachers.

Human Rights Education must continue to be a visible strand within the NCSS portfolio. This means introducing resolutions on HR-related themes, negotiating for position in the schedule of the annual conference in regard to highlighted speakers and sessions, and submitting and publishing articles in NCSS' practitioner-oriented publications. The NCSS HRE Position Statement will be published in the May/June issue of *Social Education*. It will be accompanied by an introduction, the executive summary and an article on practice. This article introduces the existence of the HRE Community and the HRE Position Statement to another group within NCSS. These intra-organizational exchanges are essential if the work done so far is to become reflected in actual educational outcomes.

NCSS publishes bulletins for practitioners, addressing a single issue. The HRE Community, relying on the expertise of its insider and outsider friends and related groups, needs to publish at least one bulletin on "How to Teach About Human Rights." The articles need to align with the C3 Social Studies Framework that NCSS considers a signature guide to social studies practice. There need to be regular journal articles in NCSS-related publications for elementary, secondary and postsecondary educators on HRE strategies and themes.

Even if HRE becomes a staple theme in NCSS publications, this presence alone will not alter state social studies content standards, school district curricula or teacher education program expectations. The disconnect between the relatively polite world of professional presentation and the tough neighborhood where standards are defined and enforced, textbook content is determined and standardized tests are composed is still an underlying reality of social studies education in the United States.

A publication by the British Red Cross promoting its own IHL curriculum offers several reasons why schools and educators should use their materials. One reason could not be argued in any state or school district in the United States:

IHL is included within the examination specifications of all of the major examination boards. (British Red Cross, Allen & Overy, 2009)

HR and IHL content are not “included within the examination specifications” of the major social studies assessments used by states and school districts in the United States. The legitimacy NCSS gives to HRE education in its professional community portfolio must be used as a springboard for institutionalizing HRE.

For example, HRE must be acknowledged as an essential component of civic education in the United States. This means that programs promoting HR and IHL and the methods of HRE will have to be incorporated into the major civic education professional communities in the U.S., particularly the Center for Civic Education (CCE), a professional community:

dedicated to promoting an enlightened and responsible citizenry committed to democratic principles and actively engaged in the practice of democracy in the United States and other countries.( <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/the-campaign>)

The Center for Civic Education does not have “communities” like NCSS. It does however sponsor and support “programs,” such as Project Citizen, and the Campaign to Promote Civic Education (CCE website: <http://www.civiced.org/programs> ). These programs should be approached to see which are willing to incorporate an HRE component into their core activities. Ideally an HRE program should be referenced in the Center for Civic Education’s list of programs. The next time CCE revises its National Standards for Civics and Government, human rights and humanitarian law need to be included in the civic competencies required by the standards. The current edition (current to 2014) does not include the phrase “human rights” in its glossary of key terms (<http://www.civiced.org/standards> ).

The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools is another gatekeeper professional community of practice, self-described as

a coalition of over 70 national civic learning, education, civic engagement and business groups committed to improving the quality and quantity of civic learning in American schools. (<http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/the-campaign> )

The Campaign’s list of policy makers and partners includes many groups whose focus relates to areas compatible with HRE, but no HRE-specific organization is identified on the site and the term ‘human rights’ does not appear in the defining categories on its website (<http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/policymakers/links> ). The NCSS position statement and the continued existence of the HRE Community are good starting places from which to secure a definition of civic education that includes human rights, humanitarian law and the practices of HRE.

The NCSS position on HRE needs to be represented in every instance where a state is revising its social studies standards or specific social studies-related components of its

standards such as its standards for history and for civics. Human Rights Education professionals and supporters need to engage with the state level affiliates of NCSS and with other educational and advocacy organizations at the state level. In some states, state legislatures pass legislation regarding particular content that must be included in the social studies core (e.g., the Armenian genocide, Cesar Chavez, etc.). In these settings, friendly legislators should be asked to sponsor legislation adopting the NCSS position on HRE or making a comparable statement. It is important to realize that in the federal system of education within the United States, the approval of national gatekeepers is important, even necessary, but the real change in the social studies core requires a change in the state-mandated content standards.

The mainstream legitimacy accorded to HRE by NCSS needs to be negotiated with trade book publishers in the social studies. Human rights-friendly authors need to write trade books and chapter books for use at all grade levels in the schools. Materials used in elementary education need particular attention. HR/IHL content needs to be incorporated into the products of the social studies textbook-testing conglomerates, where increasingly the same company or consortia of companies may be publishing the textbooks and writing the standardized tests. One can argue about the appropriateness of this entire textbook-testing-industrial complex. But as long as it holds such powerful sway over school curricula and state testing regimens, HRE needs to be incorporated into the core offerings produced within this system.

And, of course, the programs that prepare teachers will need to prepare them to integrate HRE/IHL into the subject matter of social studies and to incorporate HRE-friendly teaching strategies into their practice. This preparation is particularly important because it involves both content and methods which too often were not part of the educational experience of these future teachers when they went through the public schools. It will take at least one generation before new teachers will be teaching a curriculum they experienced as young students when they teach about HR and IHL.

In the long run, for Human Rights Education to become an institutionalized part of the core educational experience of every child in every public school in the U.S., something agreed to in treaties, declarations and yes, in the NCSS Position Statement, there will need to be system-wide institutionalized support for HR/IHL education and for the development of human rights- friendly schools. The support of such a major professional community of practice as the National Council for the Social Studies creates an opportunity to move that institutionalization forward. Each advance of HRE into the mainstream creates a platform for the next step forward.

## References

- British Red Cross, in partnership with Allen & Overy. (2009). *Justice and fairness: Exploring justice and fairness as part of international humanitarian law*. Introductory pamphlet. Curriculum available online at <http://www.redcross.org.uk/What-we-do/Teaching-resources/Teaching-packages/Justice-and-Fairness>
- California State Board of Education. (2005). History-social science framework for California Public Schools. Accessed from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/documents/histsocsciframe.pdf> . Retrieved 09/06/2008.

- Center for Civic Education (1994, 2003, 2010). *National standards for civics and government*. Available in print and online: <http://www.civiced.org/standards> and <http://www.scribd.com/doc/53858149/National-Standards-for-Civics-and-Government>
- Evans, R.W. (2006). The social studies wars, Now and then. *Social Education* 70(5), pp. 317-321. <http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/publications/se/7005/700506317.pdf>.
- National Council for the Social Studies. (1994). *National curriculum standards for social studies: A framework for teaching, learning and assessment*. Washington, DC: Author
- NCSS. (2013). *College, career, and civic life C3 framework for social studies state standards: Guidance for enhancing the rigor of K-12 civics, economics, geography, and history*. Available at <http://www.socialstudies.org/c3>.
- NCSS. (2010a). Climb aboard! The common core state standards initiative. *The Social Studies Professional* (TSSP), No. 216, March/April, 2010. <http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/publications/tssp/TSSP216.pdf>
- NCSS. (2010b). Special Section: Exploring Humanitarian Law. *Social Education*, 75(5), October, 2010. <http://www.socialstudies.org/publications/socialeducation#gsc.tab=0>.
- Symcox, L. (2002). *Whose history? The struggle for national standards in American classrooms*. New York: Teachers College Press. Nearest library access available from <http://www.worldcat.org/title/whose-history-the-struggle-for-national-standards-in-american-classrooms/oclc/231965467>. Retrieved 12-02-2010
- Zimmerman, J. (2002). *Whose America? Culture wars in the public schools*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.