

Human Rights Education Here and Now: U.S. Practices and International Processes

Dr. Felisa Tibbitts

Steering Committee, Human Right Educators USA

Founder and Senior Advisor, Human Rights Education Associates (HREA)

I have spent the better part of my professional life in the field of human rights education, which was a nascent one when I began working with ministries of education in post-authoritarian Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. That was a heady time for human rights, when we witnessed the movement towards democratic governance in both this region as well as South Africa. At the time I was working for a human rights group in the Netherlands, and I was surprised that educational leaders in these regions were so willing to embrace the concepts of “human rights” in national curriculum. As a U.S. national, I had been steeped in the language of civic education and peace education, but had not come across “human rights” and didn’t initially understand how these standards and the United Nations could have any bearing on curriculum and classroom practices, aside from a reference to the United Nations in social studies classes.

I have since come to understand and vigorously promote the unique place that human rights education (HRE) can play within a larger field of educational approaches that seeks to promote the human dignity of all members of the school community. Human rights are focused on the concept of justice and, by extension, the protection of those who are marginalized and abused. Human rights organizations familiar to us monitor such conditions. The framework is also a positive, aspirational one and not merely focused on human rights violations, as it is grounded in concrete descriptions about what it means to enjoy your human rights.

I recognize that educators may be confused at times about how HRE differs from citizenship education and other approaches such as intercultural education or peace education. There are certainly overlaps in goals and methodological approaches. I like to see these as collectively offering a kind of menu for educators in relation to the values and outcomes established within for schooling systems. However, HRE remains unique in that it is focused not only on values related to justice but the empowerment of learners to know and claim their rights. This is quite specific to HRE and goes beyond the “participation” goal that we find in citizenship education.

The UN defines the goals of HRE in the recent Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (GA, 2011) as:

[A]imed at promoting universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and this contributing, inter alia, to the prevention of human rights violations and abuses/ by providing persons with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviors/, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights.¹ (art. 2[1]).

HRE assumes that the relationship between citizens and governments can be a contentious one: governments can violate the rights of citizens.

There is another feature of HRE that makes its approach unique. This feature is the backdrop of the United Nations and international human rights standards. It's quite significant that we have an educational approach that is an offshoot of another area of social organization, and this is the UN human rights system. In the past, there has been almost no link between diplomatic work related to international human rights standards in Geneva and New York and public education, with the exception of some courses in law schools.

One of the remarkable outcomes of the advent of HRE since the 1990s is efforts to make human rights more of a layman's term. My assessment is that the term "human rights" is widely used and recognized but there is scant general understanding about the content and meaning of human rights. More significantly, very few of us understand how these norms can influence social movements or the laws and policies of our governments through treaty commitments.

The international HRE movement is populated by organizations and individuals who are committed to integrating this approach within schooling systems, taking into account national contexts, priorities and needs. Teaching about human rights content alone, however, does not constitute HRE. Given the agenda to forward capacities to protect and promote human dignity, there has to be much more than a transfer of knowledge. Based on good work carried out over the past 20 years, the United Nations has embraced a holistic definition of HRE that sets a high standard. In the Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, the UN General Assembly endorsed the view that teaching and learning processes for HRE should incorporate:

- 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.²

¹ United Nations, General Assembly, (19 December 2011). *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training*. GA 66/127, Art. 2, para 1. Geneva: United Nations.

² *Ibid*, Art. 2, para 2.

Guidelines for implementing HRE elaborated by the regional security organization, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, have gone into further detail. Examples of outcomes related to knowledge and understanding (education “about” HR) include:

- International human rights standards and principles
- Root causes of human rights violations (e.g. prejudice, structural inequality)
- Critical human rights challenges in our communities and societies
- How to take action against human rights violations.³

Sample outcomes related to HRE-related skills, attitudes and values (education “for” HR) include:

- Acceptance of and respect for persons of different race, color, gender, language, political or other opinion, religion, national or social origin, property, birth, age or other status, with awareness of one’s own inherent prejudices and biases, and commitment to overcoming these;
- Compassion for and solidarity with those suffering human rights violations and those who are the targets of attacks resulting from prejudice
- The belief that one person working collaboratively with others can make a difference in promoting human rights locally and globally, and an interest to do so
- The ability to locate information and sources on human rights relevant to one’s personal and academic needs and interests, including through the use of ICTs
- Skills to network and collaborate with others in advocating for human rights.⁴

Some outcomes related to HRE-related teaching and learning environments (education “through” HR) include:

- HRE takes place in environments that are youth-friendly, trustful, secure and democratic in atmosphere.
- Cooperation is facilitated and encouraged between secondary schools, parents and communities, including NGOs, youth organizations, local government agencies, media and businesses.
- Instruction and learning processes facilitate the inclusion of all students.⁵

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights continues to promote the implementation of HRE by making available technical resources. Curriculum and training resources and evaluation supports can be found in the HRE section of their website (www.ohchr.org). UNESCO and UNICEF have also offered guidance and support for carrying out HRE in schools.⁶

³ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) (2012). *Guidelines for Human Rights Education in Secondary Schools*. Warsaw, Poland: OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), pp. 24-25.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 25-27.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 33-34.

⁶ See UNESCO (19 November 1974). *UNESCO Recommendation concerning education for international understanding, co-operation and peace and education related to human rights and fundamental freedoms*. Paris: United Nations; UNICEF and UNESCO (2007). *A Human Rights-Based Approach to Education for All*. New York and Paris: UNICEF and UNESCO.

Since the mid 1990s, the United Nations has continued to evolve HRE norms and policies in order to encourage governments to take on the task of HRE in relation to their treaty commitments. In addition to passing the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training in 2011, the General Assembly authorized the ongoing World Programme on Human Rights Education (2005 -), which highlights the importance of HRE in schooling systems and teacher preparation in their Phases One and Two.⁷

These efforts from within the United Nations illustrate the importance that is being placed on education and training as foundational for the successful operation of the international human rights system. Think about it. If the human rights system is based upon citizens knowing and claiming their rights – especially those related to treaties that their own governments have voluntarily obligated themselves to uphold through ratification of conventions – then doesn't it make sense that citizens ought to know what their human rights are? In parallel, shouldn't those who are working on behalf of our governments, including our teachers, be similarly educated?

In the U.S. the Human Rights Educators Network (HRE USA) was established in 2012 in order to promote HRE in schools. This growing network already has over 400 individual and organizational members, including teachers, teacher trainers, teacher unions and civil society representatives. There are over a dozen regional representatives and several active Working Groups, including one oriented towards HRE Policy and Advocacy. One of the outcomes of the network was the adoption of an HRE Position Statement by the National Council for the Social Studies in October 2014.⁸

HRE USA also did something quite bold in 2014 in relation to HRE. It collaborated with another national network, the U.S. Human Rights Network, to render a report on the status of HRE in U.S. schools as a civil society contribution to the Second Cycle of the U.S. Universal Periodic Review (UPR). HRE USA thought, in addition to teaching about, for and through human rights, why not actually engage in a consultation related to a UN human rights mechanism?

The UPR is a process that requires every country to self-review every four and a half years, the status of their compliance with international human rights standards. Remarkably, these standards include not only the treaties that the government has signed, but also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which covers the full range of human rights). Governments are supposed to submit a report to the UN and engage in a peer review with other countries. It is possible for civil society organizations to consult with the government on their report and also to submit their own report, which is what HRE USA did in cooperation with the U.S. Human Rights Network, with additional support from HRE 2020, an international coalition dedicated to promoting HRE within UN human rights mechanisms.

HRE USA used its membership to carry out a modest but valid consultative process involving an online survey and meetings in the cities of San Francisco, New York City and Boston. The result was a report that presented problems, best practices and recommendations in relation to HRE in U.S. schools. This report was submitted both to the U.S. State Department and to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

⁷ United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2005). *World Programme for Human Rights Education*. Geneva: United Nations; United Nations, General Assembly (25 October 2005). *Draft Plan of Action for the First Phase (2005-2007) of the Proposed World Programme for Human Rights Education*. A/59/525. Geneva: United Nations.

⁸ http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/human_rights_education_2014

The key problems and recommendations were oriented towards three priorities: curriculum standards, teacher preparation, and the school environment. I anticipate that many of these issues will be similar for other school systems, so I am sharing these analyses from the report, which can be found in its entirety on the HRE USA website (www.hreusa.net).

Curriculum standards

Key problems:

- The federal government lacks coordination, leadership and oversight in supporting state-level implementation of HRE.
- At the state level, curriculum standards related to HRE are disparate and unregulated. Only 39 states even mention HR in their Social Studies standards and among them only 22 contain the UDHR (2014).
- Human rights are most often taught strictly through a historical lens without attention to contemporary application.
- Human rights are taught without attention to HR skills and attitudes.

Recommendations:

- The U.S. Department of Education should encourage, support (technically and financially) state and local efforts to incorporate HRE in legislation and departmental policies.
- HRE should be incorporated within the curriculum standards of key subject areas such as Social Studies

Teacher preparation

Key findings:

- The vast majority of teacher training programs do not require teachers to be proficient in HRE.
- The same is true for other personnel who work with children and youth in schools.

Recommendations:

- The U.S. government should work with legislatures and credentialing/accreditation entities to ensure HRE in education programs for teachers, administrators and other educational personnel working in schools that receive federal funding.
- Also with social workers, paraprofessionals, special education staff, juvenile justice personnel and other providers of school programming that receive federal funding.

School Environment

Findings:

- Bullying continues to be a significant problem in the United States and lacks a coordinated response from federal, state and local governments, as well as district and school officials.

Recommendations:

The U.S. government should:

- provide monetary and technical assistance to non-governmental organizations, institutions of higher education and school districts to ensure safe and welcoming school environments.
- adopt social emotional learning (SEL) standards
- adopt strong anti-bullying legislation.

Working on the stakeholder report was a fascinating and productive process because HRE USA members learned about UN monitoring and consultative processes through personal engagement. We grappled with the use of primary sources and the identification of secondary sources in rendering our profile of the status of HRE in U.S. schools. We did our best to be fair but also clear about setting goals for improvement.

In preparing the report, we educators had to consider what kind of recommendations would be most sensible and “actionable” for the U.S. government, also taking into account our federalist system. We narrowed down the set of problems to be addressed and through our recommendations developed an agenda for working with national and state-level agencies in the coming years.

In the U.S. UPR session, which will take place in Geneva on May 11th, the peer review countries assigned to the U.S. will respond to the report prepared by the U.S. State Department as well as those submitted by U.S. civil society organizations.

Our hope is that the written recommendations for improvement made to the U.S. government following this interactive session will include a reference to improve human rights education in U.S. schools. If this recommendation is accepted, it will give us added political support “from the top” to complement the grassroots work that HRE USA is already carrying out “from the bottom.”

This recent effort in the U.S. adds a new dimension of HRE. It extends our treatment of human rights and the United Nations to one of participation—not only to advance human rights in our own schools and communities but also to advance HRE itself, making use of a UN mechanism. I realize that the circumstances we had in the U.S. to carry out this monitoring was a promising one, and decisions about where to put one’s energy in times when these are in short supply can be very difficult. However, I would like to encourage those readers who hold out hope for the UN human rights system to (a) find ways to teach about, for and through human rights in your classroom; (b) engage in carrying out a review of the status of HRE in your schools, right where you are based and further, if possible; and (c) consider linking up with or beginning an HRE network (Amnesty International has one in many countries). There is no time like the present.