

Human Rights Education – What Is It All About?

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1. Human rights education (HRE) is indispensable for human rights development. It is not a pedagogic addendum, but a genuine component of human rights. What good does it do to have human rights if we don't know them, and what good does it do in turn to know them if we don't understand them!? And finally, what good is it to understand HR if no one is prepared to respect them and step up to support them? The development of HR includes the understanding that they must be firmly ingrained in the civic consciousness, and that this requires efforts from within the movement, namely HRE. It therefore logically follows—and meanwhile has been recognized—that there is a human right to HRE.

2. In order to make HRE a reality, we must now “mainstream” HR into teaching and education. Although HRE can build upon a national and international trove of experience from individual experts, we must now aim to anchor HRE more firmly into school curriculum, to design it as an interdisciplinary cross-section of subjects, to take its underpinnings from educational theory, to model it on existing science fields, to support it with new learning-friendly media and to evaluate its practices. Successful HRE depends considerably upon the training and professionalism of its teachers. Universities therefore need to develop and offer appropriate educational programs.

3. HRE does not just mean HRE in schools! Schools are indispensable for HRE, because children are both the first bearers of HR as well as the first audience for HRE. However, HRE targets not only students and teachers, but all professional groups that perform activities relevant to human rights, such as the police, penal system officials, lawyers, armed forces, internationally-active diplomats and civil servants, development workers, members of peace keeping forces, members of NGOs, media employees, government officials and members of parliament.

4. HRE is not without prerequisites. Above all, the scholastic and social contexts must be taken into account. The high learning objectives must confront the actual learning motivations and blockages. HRE must reckon more with the existing learners/students; that is, with their pre-understanding, but also their ignorance, impatience, prejudices or

yearning for superiority. HRE must also take its direction from urgent issues that arise due to differing social systems and different conflicts and crises (September 11th, for example).

5. The message of HRE is threefold: Know and defend your human rights! – Respect the equal rights of others! – Be as committed as possible to defending the HR of others! As easy as it is to motivate people to stand up for their own human rights, it is usually far more difficult when it concerns equal recognition for the human rights of others.

6. HRE targets widely varying audiences: possible victims of human rights violations as well as possible perpetrators. The imperatives of HRE then change accordingly: stand up for your rights versus do not discriminate! In addition, this double imperative is also directed at each and every one of us, because anyone can become a both victim or a perpetrator. In this way, HRE aims to address the perspective that not only the state can be viewed as a violator of HR, but also other powerful actors (such as big business) down to individual citizens as well.

7. HRE is developing an understanding of the legal and political, as well as the moral and pedagogic-preventive dimension of HR: suing for human and basic rights; promoting, supporting, respecting, monitoring, protecting and realizing human rights; making a scandal of human rights violations and elucidating human rights.

8. HRE is the communication of knowledge and values. HRE informs us about the rights that each and every one of us has, how they came about and who to turn to if we believe that one or more of our human or basic rights have been violated. Human rights knowledge is a descriptive and critical kind of knowledge. It questions the institutions, organizations, documents and actors, but also the cause of the difference between the standard and reality and the root cause of human rights violations.

However, human rights education would remain one-dimensional if it did not also elucidate the values underlying the rights to freedom, equality and solidarity, among others, and it would continue to lack direction if it did not strive for recognition of these values.

But HRE would also certainly be limited if we viewed it solely as a method of instilling values, or if we were content with the notion that HRE is “somehow” practiced implicitly

within the broad selection of intercultural and peace-education offerings. It is absolutely necessary for HRE to forge an explicit link to the rights and their establishment in constitutions and civil rights agreements as well as to the founding, genesis and the actors of human rights.

9. HRE and teaching tolerance go hand in hand. The goal is *to connect the recognition of equal rights with tolerance for differences*. We should demonstrate mutual tolerance specifically because we have a human right to freedom and the right to be different. Tolerance of differences stems from the acceptance of equality. It is precisely when we are not pleased with the way others use their right to freedom in concrete terms and how they live their lives, that we must recognize their right to freedom and tolerate the consequences (as long as the freedom is not misused for intolerance).

10. HRE cannot be reduced to learning about democracy, even if democracy is the form of government most likely to realize HR. HR should also prevail where democracy *does not yet exist, no longer exists* or *does not exist at all*. Some examples are:

- Children's rights are one valid arena of HR, even if the family, school or even the country in which a child lives is not democratized.
- HR also apply to foreigners who do not have access to democratic civil rights.
- The HR of freedom from torture exists regardless of form of government.
- The observance of HR by big business (which often has more power than governments) ranks high on the agenda of international HR debates without the expectation of such enterprises could be democratized.
- And finally, even where a functioning democracy exists, HR places limits on the democratic majority to ensure a human rights core that is not up for debate.

11. HRE must convey the success story and the “power of HR”! It must make clear that HR are the solution to a problem. Through the development of HR—in a long and conflict-ridden civilization process—we have learned to protect ourselves: at first from arbitrary state action, but increasingly from discrimination and repression by other citizens. We must be conscious of what HR mean in concrete terms for our lives and what happens when they are missing. Past or current experiences with dictatorship particularly show what happens when limits on state power are removed and human rights are systematically

violated, but also what is possible under favorable conditions when people fight for their repressed and violated rights.

12. HRE must not come across to learners as an education in finger pointing! The recognition of equal values cannot be prescribed with a moral appeal, but rather it requires a learning culture to strengthen willingness to accept equal rights and equal values. The magic word in the international discussion is empowerment. The goal is to strengthen people as a foundation for openness and tolerance. The way to essential strengthening of self-worth is through the individual experience of recognition. Only those who have experienced recognition themselves are capable of accepting others as equal and tolerating their differences. And, where HRE exists within a school environment, we can conclude that HRE is not a question of one or several school subjects, but rather a question of school philosophy and school culture.

13. HRE must be open to intercultural controversy that stems from the validity of human rights. On the one hand, it must avoid the trap of arrogance, which is blind to cultural objections of less individualistic societies. On the other hand, it must also avoid the trap of the self-induced stalemate that comes from misunderstanding HR as an oppressive instrument of the West.

14. The Internet has become an indispensable resource for HRE, and free access—as well as the opportunity to learn the necessary skills for this—has now become part of the right to education. The Internet offers information on all human rights documents and protection mechanisms, on human rights violations and reactions and initiatives from NGOs, as well as access to and distribution/sending of human rights materials /courses. In addition, it enables communication and dialog between widely divergent actors and affected parties in human rights politics and HRE.

15. HRE is critical. It elucidates conditions under which HR have been violated and also enables us to measure state policies against HR standards. HRE also remains critical where HR conflicts occur within a democracy—as after September 11th, for example. HRE aims to change. People who are oriented toward an idea of equal human dignity and trust in their communal power as citizens will defend themselves against discrimination, oppose tyranny

and step up to support the ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 28 reads, “Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.”

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