

The Role of Human Rights Education in the Process of Global Social Change

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The participants were divided into 3 groups and each group was given a different question. As a group, the participants had to develop a response to the assigned question as well as arguments to support their response.

Each group presented their responses and arguments. The resource people then offered comments.

Introduction

United Nations Resolution 2004-71, Follow-up to the UN Decade for Human Rights Education, was adopted on April 24, 2004. The resolution recommended that a World Program for Human Rights Education take place, beginning in 2005. This program will focus on HRE in primary and secondary schools in 2004 and 2005. As NGO and government workers, we need to persuade our governments to lobby the UN General Assembly to adopt this World Program for Human Rights Education. The exercises and discussion will focus on developing arguments we can use to lobby our governments.

Question 1: Convince me that human rights education produces change.

Human Rights Education Builds Skills and Contributes to Development

Attitudes about equality and human dignity are largely formed and set before the age of 10. When we teach children about human rights we are teaching them respect for cultural and religious diversity. Human rights education contributes to creating societies of people who have self-love and who are complete human beings. Therefore, if we want to change the way our children think and behave we must implement human rights education in primary and elementary schools.

The second part of Art. 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote

understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

As stated in the article, we believe that human rights education contributes to skill development. As we introduce children to human rights education they learn about leadership, conflict prevention and resolution, negotiation, mediation, investigation, creative problem-solving, and team-work.

Children do not live in isolation; they live with their parents, in communities, and within whole nations. Therefore children who possess these skills will contribute to the development of their communities and societies. Human rights education in schools has the potential to influence whole nations.

The Economic Benefits of Human Rights Education

It is cheaper to prevent conflict than to resolve it after it has already occurred. Children who develop skills of negotiation and conflict prevention will help to create a society that permits fewer human rights abuses and less conflict.

It is important to think of human rights education in schools as a partnership between government, civil society and other stakeholders. We need to work in partnerships to share the financial obligations of human rights education in schools.

The Role of Human Rights Education in Political Advocacy

Many governments have signed international treaties and agreements that place upon them the obligation to implement, enforce and teach human rights. By advocating for human rights education in schools, and by partnering with government and other stakeholders to implement human rights education in schools, we are helping governments adhere to their international obligations.

Comments on Question 1

Shirley Sarna

Human Rights Education can Focus Global Attention on Little-known Tragedies

There are certain world events and tragedies that continue to be ignored by the media. An organization called Reporters Without Borders publishes an annual report called the Ten Least Covered Tragedies by the Media. This report details global tragedies that are not well publicized. Thus, another reason for doing human rights education is to encourage people to talk about, understand and find solutions for these kinds of global tragedies.

Abraham Magdenzo

We need to believe that human rights education can contribute to global social change, but we also need to be able to show facts in order to prove that people who have been taught human rights are better citizens than those who have not.

Children as Agents of Change in Authoritarian Societies

The group assumed that children who have learned human rights will pass on this knowledge to their parents. In my country we have a very authoritarian society where children are not perceived as people who can bring about changes. Children are educated to listen, not to talk. How do we prepare children to be empowered and to be listened to by their societies, particularly in authoritarian societies where children are almost invisible and don't have voices?

The Importance of 'Selling' Human Rights Education

Subjects like mathematics, sciences and languages are typically thought to be the most important subjects to teach, while human rights education is overlooked. We don't know how to sell human rights education effectively. We are not forceful enough in convincing government officials of the importance of human rights education. We need to be more effective in influencing our societies that human rights education will produce better citizens and therefore must be included in school curricula.

Kristi Rudelius Palmer

Our challenge is to show how human rights education creates changes in societies. We can demonstrate that human rights education produces changes in the following ways:

Short-term and Long-term Evaluation

We need to document the changes that are produced by our human rights education work. For example I have been involved in evaluating whether there are attitudinal and knowledge-base changes for middle-school students who are learning human rights curricula. We found significant changes, both in terms of the students' cognitive and attitudinal learning. However after the students returned to school from summer vacations where no human rights education took place, the changes we observed regressed.

Documenting Observable Changes

We need to create stories about how changes are taking place locally. We must create ways of linking these stories together. This is one way in which we can connect globally to be pressure points of change.

Children as Agents of Change in Authoritarian Societies

How can children confront their parents and teachers in societies where it is difficult to do so? We need to teach children conflict prevention, mediation and negotiation skills as part of a human rights education curriculum. Children can then test out these skills with their families. This is a starting point.

Question 2: What concrete changes need to happen in human rights education?

The group felt that since youth are the future of every society, changes targeted at youth must be made in education systems. The following changes were recommended.

- ◆ It is necessary to modify the content of education manuals that promote discriminatory ideas and perpetuate inequalities. Many manuals promote sexism and traditional gender roles such as: "fathers are supposed to work but mothers are not."

- ◆ It is necessary to establish equal relationships between students and professors.
- ◆ It is necessary to instate conflict resolution programs in schools to reduce the risk of violence.
- ◆ It is necessary to establish a new teaching methodology that is centred on the child. Emphasis must be placed on the education of young girls.
- ◆ Learning should not be confined to the school environment. It is necessary to plan extra-curricular activities that involve human rights education. Extra-curricular activities will help children to assimilate human rights education, and will encourage parents to participate in human rights education.
- ◆ It is necessary to encourage the establishment of parents' associations that will respect democratic principles within schools. Democracy is intimately linked with education and training, and all three are necessary for the realization of human rights.

Comments on Question 2

Shirley Sarna

The group made strong suggestions and demands, and this is encouraging because there are many aspects of education systems that need to be changed. Firstly, human rights education in schools must begin when children are very young – human rights education must begin at the kindergarten and pre-kindergarten levels. It is also necessary to establish the subjects and key elements of human rights education.

Education is a Journey of Self-Discovery

Education begins with knowledge of oneself. Therefore education is first and foremost a journey inside oneself, whose stages correspond with the level of maturity of the individual person. This must be taken into account when planning what subjects to teach. Jacques Delors delivered a report entitled “A Treasure is Hidden Inside” to UNESCO for the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century. In the report Delors wrote that education is vital for the complete development of human beings.

The Power of the Individual

Often we underestimate the power each of us has. We do not need to wait for governments and ministers of education to start the process of change. As educators and activists there is a lot we can do in our classes, our community organizations and our NGOs to advance human rights education. In classrooms, for example, educators can incorporate subjects like minority rights and the situation of women. It is important to begin with what we, as individuals, can do in collaboration with our organizations and colleagues.

Abraham Magdenzo

The Need to Reflect on the Way We Approach Government Officials

Often our approach is that in order for human rights education to be successfully introduced into schools, big changes have to take place in school curricula, in teaching methodologies and in the culture of schools. We approach government officials advocating that the authoritarian culture of schools has to become more democratic. Government ministers of education will not respond well to this approach. They will reply that these kinds of changes are too large and will take too much time to implement. We need to think about intelligent strategies for approaching government officials so that we don't overwhelm them and cause them to panic. The strategy we use will depend on the context in which we are working.

Kristi Rudelius Palmer

'Selling' Human Rights Education

We have to document what is already working in schools. There are teachers who are already doing human rights and social justice education. If we can pool some of these successful examples together, we can use this to 'sell' the idea of human rights education. Teachers who are already doing human rights education can communicate with other teachers through meetings and training videos.

Alternatives to Government Partnerships

If we cannot approach government departments, or if governments are not willing to implement human rights education in schools, we need to think of other resources and partners who can help us. For example, in my state we have been working with the Department of Human Rights to implement human rights education in schools.

Question 3: Should we teach tolerance or should we teach protest? What are the consequences of each?

The majority of the group felt that human rights educators should teach tolerance. Some group members advocated for teaching protest alongside tolerance, however many felt that protest should not be taught because it is not effective in moving human rights issues forward.

Teaching tolerance includes teaching love and understanding. It is also important to teach children about responsibility and obligation alongside human rights.

Human rights educators should use their discretion to decide when it is appropriate to teach skills of peaceful protest and when it is appropriate to teach tolerance.

It is important that parents and caregivers receive human rights education so that they can implement and reinforce what children learn in schools.

Comments on Question 3

Kristi Rudelius Palmer

The Right to Education includes both Protest and Tolerance

If you are not teaching skills of protest and skills of tolerance you are violating people's human right to human rights education. Human rights education means teaching people skills of resistance and change. Protest skills include boycotting, sit-ins and teach-ins as tools for change. We need to teach people how they can resist systems they feel are unjust. We also need to teach the history of protest so that we can learn from people who have successfully used protest to make positive social changes. It is important to be aware of the context we are working in when using tools of protest.

Shirley Sarna

The Importance of Definitions

We must define what we mean by protest and what we mean by tolerance. If protest means destruction we have a problem. But if protest means exercising one's rights to freedom of expression and freedom of conscience then protest is a way of exercising fundamental rights. Similarly, we have a problem if tolerance means accepting the status quo. If tolerance means listening to others, coming up with solutions, and finding ways to work in partnerships, this is good. If we use these definitions of protest and tolerance we can incorporate both into our work.

Abraham Magdenzo

Facing the Differences between Protest and Tolerance

Tolerance and protest are by definition conflictual. If you teach skills of protest, you are teaching values that are different than the values espoused when teaching skills of tolerance. Protesting uses very different methods than tolerance. It is easy to be eclectic in the classroom, and to teach students both tolerance and protest, but it is important to face the differences between tolerance and protest.

Question and Answer Period

The following themes were raised during the question and answer period.

The Relationship between Teaching Conflict and Teaching Tolerance

One of the goals of human rights education is teaching critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Equipped with these skills, individuals then have to decide for themselves whether to use skills of tolerance or skills of protest.

What strategies can we use to deal with governments who are unwilling to implement human rights education and governments who declare war on peaceful conflict?

We need to educate government officials about human rights.

We are not as powerful if we don't have global coalitions and international pressure. Our great challenge is to figure out how to effectively use the global network we are creating to put pressure on governments to accept and implement human rights education.

Kristi will be putting up a website to document best practices in human rights education, as well as effective strategies for dealing with unwilling governments.

The Relationship between Formal Education Systems and Human Rights Education

Often the formal education system is resistant to human rights or social justice education. In their day-to-day practice many teachers commit violations of their students' human rights, including discrimination against girl children or discrimination against disabled children. Often teachers are not aware that they are doing this.

One way to change this is to give teachers the opportunity to critically analyze their practice. Abraham was involved in a project where teachers were videotaped, and then were asked to watch the tapes and reflect on their practice. This exercise created awareness among teachers, and produced changes in the teachers' behaviour.

Teacher training has to include knowledge of human rights as well as opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own practice.

Should children who are not part of the formal education be excluded from human rights education?

It is extremely important to involve these children in human rights education, and both governments and NGOs must take on this task. When we think of education we must think more broadly than formal education. In Montreal there is a human rights education program for street youth.