

Human rights education: the process towards understanding and action on global and development issues

Colm Ó Cuanacháin reminds us that human rights education is enshrined in international law and advocates the need for whole school approaches and action in the informal education sector to address the gap between this commitment and current practice.

Human rights education offers the essential framework for learning about global and development issues. Development education seeks to challenge the injustices and inequalities that exist in our world. It looks to transform the way people see the realities around them, by encouraging them to examine, question and change their environment. This approach is rooted in the idea that education is about knowledge, attitudes and skills and is experiential, participative and transformational.

Human rights serve to define the enabling environment where just such an approach to education can thrive. They are not just the ends but the means by which global justice and development can be realised; they serve to nurture a values system that can be applied critically, continuously and effectively. Human rights provide the mandate, the methods and the model for an educational process that fosters understanding and action on global and development issues.

The mandate – human rights education and international law

Human rights education is enshrined in international law. We all have human rights as defined in inter-governmental declarations and treaties, and included therein is the enabling right to know our rights. There is a corresponding obligation on governments to fulfil this right by providing education about and for human rights. This fact cannot be overstated – there is an international legal responsibility on the state to ensure people know their rights. Yet, how many educators are aware of this? The gap between the commitment to human rights education by states on the one hand, and the low level of activity to address this on the other is enormous.

Indeed every major international human rights treaty binds states to educate citizens about its content (see table 1). When agreeing these legal instruments politicians chose to include education for a very good reason, because rights mean nothing unless people know about them, justice means nothing unless it is understood.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, for example, is the most widely endorsed international legal instrument, with all but one country (the USA) having ratified it. The Convention provides both the rationale and the framework for human rights education. For children to have respect for

rights, their own and those of others, they must first know and understand them. There must be opportunities provided for children to learn about human rights. In this way the enormous potential of human rights can be realized.

Osler and Starkey (1996) reflect on the commitment governments have made in Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to directing education ‘towards the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations’:

This undertaking by governments implies that teachers should know what is meant by ‘human rights and fundamental freedoms’ and indeed, that they are familiar with the content of the Charter of the United Nations. Our experience is that few teachers would claim to be confident in the first area and that to find someone with even a passing knowledge of the UN Charter is very rare indeed (Osler and Starkey, 1996: 119).

Despite this, and somewhat incredibly, there is little or no formal pre-service education for primary school teachers in the area of human rights education. In fulfilment of this obligation states will tend in the first instance to rely on the

formal education system, where they have a significant degree of control and influence. But it would be a mistake for governments to assume that they can rely only on the formal system, for adults, and children who are not in the school system have equal right to know their rights.

It is essential that educators, activists, youth groups and others know that this international mandate for human rights education exists. It is important that they use the legal framework to underpin the advocacy initiatives for their projects on development and global issues. In pressing for education on development issues in a local school, or seeking support for youth theatre projects on homelessness, it is with the compelling weight of international law behind us that we should demand a response.

The methods – human rights education as methodology

Human rights are not just ends, or solely a set of aspirations. Human rights are values to be lived by, and means to be lived through. To realise social, economic, cultural, civil, political

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Table 1: International human rights standards relating to human rights education**The Charter of the United Nations**

Article 1 on the promotion and encouragement of human rights, and fundamental freedoms for all.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 26 That education be directed to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

International human rights treaties containing internationally recognised standards**International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**

Article 13 Education shall strengthen the respect for human rights. E/1996/2

International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

Article 7 on teaching and education.
General Recommendations V and XIII

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

Article 10 on education.
General Recommendation 3 on education.

Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Article 10 on education and information.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 19 on educational measures.
Article 29(b) on education for human rights.
Article 42 on making the convention widely known.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Preamble Obligation of states to promote human rights.
General Comment 3 Individuals should know their rights

Specific international declarations, recommendations and decisions**The Vienna Declaration**

The World Conference on Human Rights considers human rights education, training and public information essential.

UNESCO recommendations concerning education for international understanding, co-operation and peace and education relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms

... that education be infused with the aims and purposes set

Plan of Action for the United Nations Decade for Human Rights education

each country has been called upon to elaborate and implement comprehensive, effective, and

European regional human rights treaties containing internationally recognised standards**European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms**

Recognition that education is the most valuable tool to promote human rights.

European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights

The rights and best interests of children should be promoted.

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the Union

EU is founded on the principles of human rights, and it reaffirms the rights and

and environmental rights, it is necessary that we all live these rights. Human rights underpin a process of teaching and learning in, for and about human rights (Heater, 1984). It is not enough to teach children about rights, but we must educate using human rights, and for human rights.

The concepts or principles that inform human rights include justice, equality, freedom, dignity, universality, indivisibility and interdependence. It is these same concepts that inform global education, citizenship studies, development, education for mutual understanding, and indeed all experiential learning processes. So it is that human rights have enormous potential for education. Indeed Lynch (1992) goes so far as to assert that human rights inform the aims of education.

This synergy between education and human rights is determined primarily through methodologies, and not just content. Human rights approaches, based on openness, equality, transparency and fairness inform participative methodologies, through which learners experience an environment that is informed by human rights; where learning

is participative; where listening, sharing and understanding are part of the process of attitudinal change that is intrinsic to education.

The approach inherent to human rights education, and arguably the only approach to learning that will not impede human rights, is a participatory process that embraces how learners 'think, feel and do' which is pivotal in developing mutual understanding and reciprocity (Starkey, 1987).

Learning for rights means working towards achieving them rather than offering the subject as an area of knowledge. It is, essentially, an approach to education encompassing the curriculum, the classroom organisation and teaching methodology as well as the school's ethos and organisation (Klein, 2001: 11).

In seeking to advance development education through formal and informal education environments it is critical that we think not only of the content, but the process. It is the methodology and delivery that can impart the strongest message about how people should interact, and how people can act. It is in the area

of methodology rather than content that teachers often enjoy greater curriculum autonomy. Educators and facilitators are given a broad degree of flexibility and control over the delivery of lessons or workshops. There are rarely gatekeepers or head-teachers who will veto participative methodologies, so it is incumbent on human rights friendly teachers to take the opportunities they get to inject democracy and sharing into their teaching approach.

The model – human rights education as the blueprint

The environment, the atmosphere, the structure, the curriculum content, the methodology, the decision-making processes, and virtually every dimension to the educational experience dictates the degree to which it will successfully advance human rights education. In this scenario the most appropriate method to progress human rights education is where the formal school system and the non-formal educational approach are interwoven.

Schools clearly have an important role to play in the process of disseminating the principles and provisions of the

Convention on the Rights of the Child. As Osler and Starkey (1998: 313) argue, ‘They can do this not only by educating children about their rights as part of the formal school curriculum, but also by establishing themselves as model human rights communities’. The experiences from schools that have adopted this approach and introduced whole-school human rights education processes show that participative approaches lead to improvements in conduct, performance, relationships and other variables across school life (Cunningham, 1991). The children’s value systems, and their understanding and approach to global issues was developed.

Proponents of human rights education argue that children are more confident, happier, and have a stronger sense of self-esteem, when educated in a participative and democratic environment. ‘The whole ethos of the school or institution should empower pupils and students to stand up for fairness and what is morally right for self and for others, as well as taking responsibility for their actions’ (Singh, 1994: 98). In a study at primary school level in the Republic of Ireland where a whole-school human rights approach was adopted, the children felt that they knew more about others and understood better the problems faced by other people, arising from the changes in their educational environment. Comments from the children included a view that the programme helped them to think about the world in a way that they had not in the past (Ó Cuanacháin, 2004).

Democracy is imperative to human rights, and creates the enabling environment within which human rights can thrive. Democracy cannot be learned in theory, but must be lived and experienced by the children, through the whole-school dynamic. Democracy, like human rights, is not just about knowledge and information. It is about attitudes and values, and has to be experienced to be understood. It cannot be learned in a hierarchical and autocratic teaching environment, but rather it will thrive in a democratic environment, the same learning environment that is conducive to nurturing understandings of global and development issues.

In practice this means a policy approach at leadership level in the school to create an enabling environment informed by human rights, and where social and global issues both inform the dialogue, and are confronted as part of the process. These ideas draw on the concepts outlined by Thorne (1995):

- A ‘telling school’: Children must be encouraged to tell, if they experience problems, if they have been bullied, or if they witness bullying.
- A ‘listening school’: Children must know that we care, that we will listen, and respond (Thorne, 1995: 177).

A range of democratic systems that can be put in place for the various education partners – pupils, teachers, parents, governors – is listed in table 2. A number of these suggestions might be unrealistic aspirations for some schools, but any system that introduces the democratic ground rules of consultation and consensus for the entire school community will be taking steps in the right direction.

Table 2: Organisational systems that are being used to promote participation in schools

Children	Classroom charter or contract School charter Class courts School council Class committees Suggestion box Rules agreed with children Participative methodologies
Parents	Democratically elected parents committee Written policy on parental involvement Parents’ room in the school Regular parent/teacher meetings Parents involved in classroom activities Sharing the school plan with parents Newsletter for parents
Teachers	Collective management model Delegation of responsibilities Emphasis on participation in school planning Regular staff meetings which anyone can call and where responsibilities rotate Effective internal communication systems Transparent feedback system Use of participative methodologies
Governors/ board members	Democratically elected Open meetings Regular meetings Effective communication of decisions with appeals process Regular consultations with staff and parents Collective management Regular review and evaluation

The need for an education system informed by, and framed in human rights is a matter for states, departments of education, and school management. There is clear evidence of the educational effectiveness of whole-school human rights approaches, and as we have seen above there is an international legal requirement on governments to enable such systems. This goes right to the heart of issues such as power, culture and schooling, and it is these same issues that shape young citizens, and their attitudes to global injustice and inequality.

Conclusions

Educators with a mission to use their energy to encourage others to seek fairness in the classroom, in the community and in the world should see the human rights framework as a source of legitimacy and affirmation. They should use it as the legal justification and endorsement of their approach. Secondly, teachers and trainers seeking to promote equality and justice in society will understand that human rights are not just about what must be achieved, but how to achieve it. Finally, education can bring about lasting change through participative and dialogical engagement with people at the level of values, attitudes and understandings, but this requires a systemic and institutional overhaul of the system, informed by human rights.

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