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A broad definition of human rights ...allows for more flexibility in curricular design.

by

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How many teachers have heard of the U.N. Decade for Human Rights Education (HRE)? Did you know that it is scheduled to conclude this year? At the time this article is being written, conversations have just concluded in Geneva and elsewhere among non-governmental organizations (NGOs) about how fruitful this decade has actually been. These conversations have taken place intermittently over the last few years, but they have real import now as groups are considering whether another Decade or World Programme is worth supporting.

What does this have to do with you, the teacher in the classroom? How important is government promotion and recognition of HRE to its successful integration in our schools? What about the creativity and innovation of individual teachers, schools, and NGOs?

As we look at the indicators, both formal and informal, that can be used to measure the growth and success of the HRE movement, we may find that both the need and potential for a second decade are great.

TAKE ANOTHER LOOK

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A SECOND DECADE of HRE

Some background on the United Nations and its Decades

The General Assembly (GA) regularly votes on years and decades that are intended to highlight a topic of special interest to its membership. In the official view of the UN, it is primarily the responsibility of individual governments to rally stakeholders to carry out programming in each topic area.

In the case of human rights education, governments by and large didn't move much off the mark in the early years of the Decade. So in 1997, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights gathered a committee of practitioners and experts to develop guidelines for how governments might develop national plans of action for human rights education. The guidelines were well intentioned and thoughtful and, to be frank, in most cases completely ignored.

The UN asked governments to report on their activities, including national plans of action, in an ongoing manner during the Decade. A questionnaire and two on-line forums solicited feedback on the results of the Decade from not only governments, but also NGOs and others interest-

ed in human rights education. The result: mixed review.

Participants wrote that it was hard to maintain the involvement and interests of those agencies whose mission was not directly related to human rights education, especially when this area was not sanctioned by formal human rights or education channels, and monies weren't forthcoming. At the same time, there are new platforms for promoting HRE in some countries, and HRE has moved forward within the education sector when it has been associated with a related high-agenda issue, such as anti-racism.

Forum participants continued to feel that government cooperation in the area of human rights education would work better than civil society acting alone, but recognized that efforts by NGOs were hindered by limited financial support.

Another decade of HRE

So what does this have to do with your social studies classroom in North America? Well, on the one hand it's simply interesting to consider that while the U.S. government was part of the General Assembly consensus that supported the initial Decade for Human Rights Education, there has never been

a genuine effort made to support a coordinated plan of action that includes schools. The U.S. is one of numerous countries that have never bothered to send the U.N. a report on its human rights education activities, even though there are civil society groups involved in this effort.

photo: K Dan-Bergman



FOURTH R 6 A State Department representative completed an HRE questionnaire on the achievement and the shortcomings of the Decade in late 2003. The survey results were not surprising, but nonetheless disappointing. The questionnaire cited nearly two pages of human rights related programming that the U.S. government is supporting abroad. Domestically, human rights education, in the mind of the State Department, was constituted by the activities of the twelve regional Offices of Civil Rights.

The survey candidly related that no specific activities were carried out in the framework of the Decade, nor specific frameworks or structures created to support human rights education efforts. In conclusion, according to the State Department, no cooperation was necessary with the United Nations system in the field, and it would not be fruitful to use UN resources for a second decade for human rights education.

It's a bit perplexing that there is not more interest in human rights education at official levels in the U.S. Perhaps there are not enough of us making a case that this topic is relevant for classrooms? Or maybe we haven't found the right language to explain how human rights education genuinely supports democratic values.

Teaching Human Rights in U.S. Classrooms

Let's segue back to the classroom. In the International Plan of Action for the Decade, formal education is a key

sector in which to infuse human rights education. We are not just speaking of civil and political rights. We are talking about the range of human rights values, including social, economic and cultural rights. These touch on areas such as the right to food, to affordable housing, to health care, to security.

As you may have gathered from the summary of the on-line evaluation on the Decade, teachers are using multiple strategies for introducing human rights values and themes in their classrooms. Most often, human rights themes are integrated into existing social science courses, although as in the case of citizenship education, the human rights value system can be a core component.

Human rights themes are also frequently taken up in special events, such as school-wide "Human Rights Days" (December 10th) or activities addressing a particular human rights topic, such as child labor or refugees.

The more traditional subjects for addressing human rights no doubt remain classes such as citizenship or world history.

Most frequently, human rights is showing up in state standards in relation to the Holocaust, genocide and slavery. As important as these topics are, the human rights framework needs to be integrated into the analysis of domestic and foreign policy in the U.S., and should utilize the full range of human rights (civil, political, economic, social, cultural).

While there remains increased urgency and opportunity for HRE in U.S. schools, this need is still not being adequately addressed.

This situation calls for drastic action, including the exploration of creative ways in which human rights can be infused within the humanities and sciences. This is the main theme of this issue, which includes numerous examples from classroom practice. The full definition of human rights – including economic, social and cultural rights, in addition to civil and political – also allows for more flexibility in curricular design.

Here are a few examples of ways that teachers are introducing human rights themes into non-traditional subject matter. More extensive examples are covered in the "Teaching in Action" section of this issue.

Science/Health

- Integrate the human rights framework into discussions on contemporary issues, such as environmental degradation.
- Explore the idea of health and the right to medical care, focusing on the situation of HIV/AIDS in Africa.

Mathematics

- Show how demographic statistics support certain kinds of human rights related work, such as refugee flows and the work of Truth Commissions.

Economics

- Explore structures that sustain poverty and consider these in light of economic rights and the new movement for corporate social responsibility.

Film

- Help students to deconstruct the bias of films on minority, vulnerable or even teenage populations by looking for ways these groups are romanticized, rationalized, trivialized, or ignored.
- Explore how film can be used for propaganda purposes.

Literature

- Using fiction, such as Garcia Marquez's novella "A Chronicle of a Death Foretold," have students discuss patriarchal society and research contemporary violence against women.
- Use examples from American literature to have students discuss the role of civil disobedience.

Technology

- Using on-line newspaper and journal sources, have students explore media bias.
- Discuss how human rights groups are using the Internet. Discuss hate sites and the promotion of intolerance on the Internet.

Service Learning

- Introduce students to a human rights framework in the classroom and then have them research and support a local agency working to promote the human rights of vulnerable populations in the community (for example, refugees and migrants.)
- Have students interview and write about "human rights heroes" in the community.

A New World Programme

As this article went to press, the UN Commission on Human Rights approved a resolution for a World Programme for HRE, with structured planning in each sector.

A Decade for HRE has a time limit of 10 years whereas the World Programme is open-ended. This reflects a recognition that governments have a long-term responsibility to promote HRE.

The first sector that the Office of the High Commissioner will focus on is primary and secondary schools. This means that we have a renewed, formal opportunity to work at many levels (local to national) and in all sectors (governmental and non-governmental) here in the U.S. This is a political opportunity, if we want it.

First and foremost, of course, educators have to support each other. Let's not forget that we are part of a learning network, that we can benefit from each other and strategize to create more opportunities for HRE in schools.

Sharing ideas about how HRE can be integrated with-

in non-social science classes is one step in this direction. But there are others. There are lessons to be shared informally with colleagues, messages to be posted on the North American HRE listserv, presentations to be made at conferences, and links to be made with existing standards.

With a strong learning network, we can carry out coordinated activities to bring HRE further along. We can organize a status report or needs assessment on teaching about human rights at the state level, and combine this to create a national report coming from the civil society sector.

With a united voice, we can try to convince government agencies – at least our representatives at the United Nations – that we take our human rights education obligations seriously. If we really want to dream big, we could imagine a time when the Convention on the Rights of the Child or the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women get passed in Congress.

With or without the World Programme framework, we need more human rights education in American classrooms. If our citizens don't know about international human rights standards, how can we hold any other government accountable to them?

For more examples, read the review of Richard Pierre Claude's book Science in the Service of Human Rights, on page 18.



photo: Naile Goelbasi

FOLLOW UP:

Review a summary of HREA On-Line Forum results:
www.hrea.org/erc/forums/index.html

Read Dennis N. Banks' article *Promises to Keep: Results of the National Survey of Human Rights Education 2000*:

<http://hrusa.org/education/PromisestoKeep.htm>