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Educational Strategies for Legal Empowerment

Posted by [Monisha Bajaj](#) | June 28, 2012



How can school-based programs promote broader social justice? What is the role of the law? As rates of access to schooling increase globally with international efforts such as the Millennium Development Goals and Educational for All campaign, those interested in promoting greater respect for the rule of law, legal empowerment, and human rights would do well to engage students and teachers in efforts towards greater justice.

Educational initiatives aimed at youth operating in schooling contexts can offer interesting alternatives and broader perspectives on the role of the law. **Human rights education—offered in a participatory format with an eye towards individual and social transformation—also offers us the chance to cultivate a new generation of empowered citizens willing to demand their rights and stand in solidarity with those at the margins of society.**

Human rights education offers us the chance to cultivate a new generation of empowered citizens.

The Indian non-governmental organization (NGO) [People's Watch](#) and the programs offered through its [Institute of Human Rights Education](#) are an example of how engaging young people—in this case through legal protections grounded in domestic and international human rights norms—offer opportunities for transformative learning and address some of the most egregious forms of human abuse. I talk more about the rise of human rights education, the work of this particular NGO, and its impact on students and teachers in my book, [Schooling for Social Change: The Rise and Impact of Human Rights Education in India](#). **This post offers thoughts on the possible relationship between formal educational strategies and legal empowerment in an Indian context.**

People's Watch—a legal and advocacy organization focusing on caste discrimination, police abuse, and gender issues—expanded its work to include educational programs in 1997. The organization operates in 18 Indian states, training teachers, developing textbooks in regional languages, and offering a human rights education course to students in standards (or grades) six, seven, and eight in 4,000 predominantly rural government schools across India; these students generally came from the poorest and some of the most disenfranchised communities in the country, if not the world. For example, the state of Orissa—where the organization offers human rights education in all schools run for Adivasi (rural indigenous) youth—has one of the highest rates of poverty in all of India (and the world): 64 percent of the state's population of 42 million

lives below the Indian poverty line of approximately U.S. 50 cents per day. The organization has effectively secured government support for the introduction of its human rights curriculum in the schools in which it works and, typically, these programs are offered twice a week by trained teachers for three school years.

I found, in a year-long study between 2009-10, a number of examples that, taken together, suggest fresh perspectives on the role of educational initiatives in promoting greater awareness, and ultimately deeper realization of, basic legal and human rights.

First, for students whose age, gender, and caste/religious status may disadvantage them when claiming their rights, collective action strategies that enlist allies, civil society organizations, and the authority of printed information in textbooks or legal documents may serve to leverage and amplify marginalized voices.

The presence of a specific program on human rights and legal empowerment within schools provided a framework for understanding social issues and connecting with broader social movements.

Second, the presence of a specific program on human rights and legal empowerment within schools that the over 600 students interviewed for this project (and many more) attended provided them a framework to understand the social issues they were encountering and to connect with broader social movements. One 12-year old boy from a Dalit group stated that prior to participating in the human rights education course, he thought that something was wrong with his personality that other children didn't want to play with him; after learning about social exclusion and how caste functions in many rural Indian communities, he felt part of a movement to end this negative social practice and didn't take the instances of exclusion he faced personally.

Lastly, teachers and students became active actors in human rights movements through learning about legal guarantees, instances of abuse, and social movements and organizations working towards greater equity. Several teachers noted stopping corporal punishment, becoming more attentive to their students, and engaging with students' lives outside of the classroom after attending the training on human rights education and reading the textbooks they were using to teach students. Students similarly found that they could talk with their teachers and share any problems they or their families were facing. Creating an intentional space at school—a respected and often trusted institution, particularly in semi-literate communities—allowed for students and teachers to take human rights issues seriously.

While there were certainly many instances of resistance and “push-back”, the organization's efforts certainly suggest broader, and no less effective means of addressing oppressive practices and realizing respect for basic norms of human rights with some of the most marginalized communities in India and the world.

A group of students (boys and girls) who had taken the human rights education course several years prior, reflected back on their experience:

“After reading human rights education in sixth standard, we overheard in our area that a neighbor was planning to kill their newborn girl baby. We formed a group of classmates and we went to their home. We explained to the lady [that this is wrong], but the father didn’t accept. He scolded us and slapped us. We told [him] that the child also has a right to life; you should not kill the child. We said, ‘If you are going to kill the child, we will complain to the police. We also have contact with human rights organizations. We won’t move from this area. We will stand here and watch what you are doing with this child.’ Often we used to go to that home and watch that child. But now that child is older and is even studying in school.”

While lawyers, judges and politician can determine what “Rights” are, the everyday practice between educators and learners struggling to bridge the gap between laws on paper and realities on the ground allows for sustainable and long-term respect for the rights of all.



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For Further Information:

- [People’s Watch – Institute of Human Rights Education](#)
- [Schooling for Social Change: The Rise & Impact of Human Rights Education in India](#) (by Dr. Monisha Bajaj) (hardback & on [kindle](#)) (paperback available in August):

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