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Special Issue Review

“Dilemmas and Hopes for Human Rights Education:
Curriculum and Learning in International Contexts”

Guest Edited by Felisa Tibbitts and Susan Roberta Katz

Prospects, 47. (June 2017)

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Entitled *Dilemmas and Hopes for Human Rights Education*, the present gathering of articles comprises the June 2018 edition of the journal *Prospects*. Edited by Professors Felisa Tibbitts from Teachers College of Columbia University and Susan Roberta Katz from the University of San Francisco, the collection explores some specific possibilities and challenges of Human Rights Education (HRE) in various contemporary settings, particularly from the standpoint of governmental education policy. A multitude of locations on different continents are included: Western Europe, China, Pakistan, India, Chile, and the United States. The underlying thread that connects these articles has to do with the search for truly

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transformative HRE amidst pressures from the nation-state and various other power interests to domesticate, depoliticize, and even exclude HRE from schooling efforts. Furthermore, the contested and often misunderstood nature of HRE is analyzed, as teachers, administrators, and policy makers in several educational systems display a combination of misinformation, passivity, and even active resistance to these initiatives. On the positive side, HRE is presented as a dialogic, empowering, and liberating tool of teaching and learning in diverse contexts, with the potential to complicate overly simplistic narratives and dichotomies, as it generates a powerful combination of critical consciousness, individual and collective agency, and social engagement. The superseding goal at this stage in the evolution of HRE appears to be twofold: incorporating this type of pedagogy into an increasing number of curricula *and* restoring its probing, structurally-critical facet as the movement becomes global.

Summary of Contents

The collection is divided into three main sections. The first section, entitled “Viewpoints and Controversies,” investigates the frequently co-opted and deeply contested territory of HRE.

In “Disrupting power/entrenching sovereignty: The paradox of human rights education,” A. Kayum Ahmed provides a very perceptive analysis of *HRE as sovereignty* and *HRE as disruption*. While the former type of pedagogy is viewed as a confiscation of the educational act by the nation-state, with the goal of strengthening hegemony and compliance, the latter is defined as an intervention to unsettle the status quo. HRE as sovereignty consolidates the influence of the state by using human rights discourse to craft unilateral and subordinated narratives. HRE as disruption often operates beyond established human rights conventions and norms, concentrating instead on direct action and grassroots activism that can take many local forms. Both movements are viewed to originate in the Global South and possess the capacity to shape the approach and implementation of HRE in other parts of the world.

“A perspective of controversy in human rights education: A curricular proposition” by Abraham K. Magendzo and Jorge B. Pavez is the second article in this section. The authors advocate for making HRE more controversial by adding nuance, complexity, and immediacy to such classroom discussions. Specifically, through incorporating multiple knowledges, relating the subject matter to the students’ lived experiences, and developing the ability for critical reflection, HRE gains relevance and impact. Furthermore, as a central part of this strategy, discussions on topics such as freedom, equality, justice, solidarity, or socioeconomic rights are approached from the ‘controversial’ standpoint of seemingly-clashing articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The goal is to elucidate, for instance, how the right to education can be reconciled with the right to religious freedom in cases when the wearing of specific symbols of faith by students is governmentally forbidden.

The second section of the collection is entitled “Open File: Articles on neglect, misunderstanding, and resistance in schooling policies.” This part looks at the broader education policies of several nations and the manner in which the teaching of HRE is affected.

In “China’s search for human rights education in secondary schools,” Weihong Liang provides an in-depth overview of the state of HRE in her country. Defying Western expectations, the author reveals the contemporary Chinese approach to actually incorporate many elements of HRE, although in a modified and original form. Thus, HRE appears indirectly in the curriculum of Chinese secondary schools, ‘embedded’ in what is termed “moral education” (p. 48). This type of teaching is preoccupied with creating responsible citizenry by emphasizing a set of personal, social, and national rights. The vision employed features numerous similarities to educating for human rights in the West.

“Human rights education in social studies in the Netherlands: A case study text book analysis” by Frauke de Kort is a very incisive critique of the state of contemporary Dutch HRE. De Kort mentions that HRE is still not taught explicitly in the Netherlands but rather implicitly as part of “citizenship education” in social studies courses (p. 56). From this standpoint, she proceeds to textually analyze a recent and widely

disseminated social studies textbook, which has a chapter devoted to human rights. The information is found to be seriously flawed and misleading. For instance, human rights are mislabeled as “values” as opposed to inherent entitlements, while “social rights are less important than civil and political rights” (p. 68). Finally, interviews carried out with the authors of the textbook reveal their problematic misperceptions and insufficient knowledge.

The third article in this section is entitled “Teaching human rights through global education to teachers in Pakistan” and is authored by Munir Moosa Sadruddin. The analysis revolves around a teacher training course designed by Sadruddin to familiarize a group of prospective Muslim educators in Karachi with HRE. In the early stages of the course, participants display significant reluctance to accept HRE and view human rights as a form of Western hegemony. Gradually, an emphasis on local remedies, dialogic learning, and critical reflection leads to increased receptivity. Major recommendations involve the need to receive experiential HRE training through teaching internships and the importance of making HRE a central part of national education, albeit with a Pakistani flavor.

Stefanie Rinaldi explores the views of educators in Switzerland on teaching and incorporating HRE into their curriculum. In “Challenges for human rights education in Swiss secondary schools from a teacher perspective,” Rinaldi reveals the complexities of understanding and implementing HRE in her country. The educators interviewed convey significant reservations toward HRE, viewing the subject matter as controversial, overly abstract, or politically problematic. Furthermore, despite a flexible and largely decentralized national educational system, resources on HRE and in-depth knowledge are scarce. Finally, the author traces a direct connection between the absence of institutionalization and the absence of teacher training in HRE (p. 96).

Sandra Sirota’s overview of HRE in the US reveals its implementation to be similarly problematic. Entitled “The inconsistent past and uncertain future of human rights education in the United States,” the article explores the birth and evolution of HRE in this national context. Sirota builds her

analysis on a series of interviews with members of the volunteer network Human Rights Educators USA. The major findings underline that, from an official standpoint, HRE and teacher training are still not viewed to represent a human right in the US context. In this sense, some of the major obstacles stem from the growing impact of neoliberalism in education, general unfamiliarity with human rights, and the notion that violations mostly happen elsewhere but not at home.

The final section of the collection is entitled “Case studies on creativity and hope in teaching and classroom practice.” The emphasis is on the dialogic and emancipatory openings provided by HRE in a few distinct settings.

“Pedagogy of human rights education and secondary school pre-service teachers in India: Philosophy and praxis” by Anamika is an inspiring study of HRE training and implementation. Upon receiving HRE instruction at the University of Delhi, a group of prospective educators went on to apply the knowledge and incorporate this type of pedagogy and critical analysis into their classroom work in various subjects. Notably, HRE was powerfully incorporated into the teaching of math and science, as topics such as deforestation, child labor, or equitable access to water became part of the lesson plans. As other authors have done in their national contexts, Anamika underscores the main challenges to HRE in India: limited funding and resources, along with a public conversation where human rights are marginalized. However, she is equally preoccupied to articulate the possibilities of HRE to generate critical reflection and the “fact of realization” (p. 129). Changing language, namely by introducing human rights vocabulary, is viewed by Anamika as the beginning of emancipation.

The second article in the section is penned by Dimitrios Gkatzos. In “Teaching children’s rights and climate change with the support of Act for Climate web-based learning environment,” the author provides an effective example of how technology can augment HRE in Greek education. Specifically, Gkatzos establishes a relation between climate change education, sustainability, and children’s rights. The analysis that he offers is a convincing exemplification of incorporating climate change education into the school curriculum through the frame of the rights of children, who

are one of the most vulnerable groups to environmental degradation. Based on the three principles of experiencing, constructing, and transforming, the web-based learning environment (WBLE) is conducive to a critical understanding of sustainability and social justice. Thus, in mathematics, social studies, or science courses, children learn to think of climate change in relation to the right to food, the right to water, the right to education, the right to health, gender equality, and the right to a clean environment (p. 143).

The third entry in this section, which rounds up the entire collection, returns to the Indian context. Meenakshi Chhabra authors “A human rights and history education model for teaching about historical events of mass violence: The 1947 British India Partition.” Noting the insufficiencies of traditional pedagogic modalities, as they transpire from various nationalistic and hegemonic textbooks, Chhabra proposes a much more nuanced “integrated snail model” (p. 156). This dialogic HRE approach places a student’s lived experience at the center, aims to analyze textbooks critically, explores primary sources, investigates oral histories and sociopolitical discourses, features field trips, and contemplates consolidating this fresh knowledge into other educational tools. The general effect that is achieved is to transcend narrow dichotomies and empathize with the suffering of the other.

Internationalizing HRE

Perhaps the most compelling aspect about the present collection, as summarized above, has to do with the multitude of national contexts that are discussed. Indeed, the geographic and cultural terrain covered is truly vast. There is a real unity in diversity, as the various settings, dilemmas, and solutions are in dynamic conversation with one another. They are tied together by the ethos of HRE, with its emphasis on equity, critical analysis, and liberation. Furthermore, many of the articles deal with aspects of HRE in the Global South, representing a very important broadening of the analytical lens.

On Methodologies and Introductory Sections

While the philosophical and analytical angle stays critical and consistent, despite the variety of contexts and settings, this collection of articles does not feature the same consistency in terms of method. A multitude of methodologies are employed, some much more developed and convincing than others. For example, the textual analysis on the social science textbook in the Netherlands is extremely interesting but should have been extended to more than one chapter in one text.

Another observation has to do with significant overlap in the first part of many of the articles. Several of the authors included provide an extended discussion of the background and evolution of HRE. This takes up a lot of space and becomes repetitive, as the content is largely similar. Perhaps there could have been more room devoted to discussing findings. Most of these findings/discussion sections are fascinating and might have been developed even more.

Concluding Remarks

The present set of articles provides a wonderfully nuanced window into the state of HRE globally, viewed through a series of national exemplifications which take into account the complicated role of public education policy. The authors display profound knowledge of their subject matter and ask poignant critical questions. The need to consolidate HRE into a central component of any national education program is eloquently emphasized. Equally persuasive are the critiques of HRE's blatant marginalization, misrepresentation, or exclusion. Finally, the possibilities offered by these pedagogies, when employed dialogically, receive repeated articulation and inspire a call to action.