

Why teach for human rights?

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Teachers everywhere seem to live increasingly busy lives, so why would we add human rights education (HRE) to an already crowded school curriculum? Why are experts suggesting that HRE be added to teachers' already jam-packed professional education? And how exactly is HRE relevant to children's schooling?

These are questions that I frequently hear from teachers and teacher educators as I travel in various countries across Europe and beyond. As a human rights educator it may surprise some people to know that I welcome such questions. It's important for all professionals to think about the reasons behind the things we are asked to do and to reflect on those practices we sometimes take for granted. I'd like to share my thoughts about *why* we need to take human rights education seriously; consider *how* it might improve children's learning; and how it may support teachers in carrying out their professional duties. But first I consider what human rights education is, and what it isn't.

Human rights education

Our understandings of human rights in the early 21st century have been shaped by the events of the mid-20th century, and particularly by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed in the aftermath of World War II. The Universal Declaration was drafted by representatives from all regions of the world and by people with very different legal and cultural backgrounds. It set out a common standard of achievement for all people and all nations.

The UDHR was inspired by a vision of peace and justice for all, and it has paved the way for more than 70 human rights treaties, applied at global and regional levels. It consists of 30 articles, and has been translated into more than 500 languages. It has also been made accessible to young children through child-friendly versions.

Most people are aware of the right to education, Article 26, but not all realise that this article of the Universal Declaration also proclaims a universal entitlement to *human rights education*. Human rights are probably best understood as principles designed to protect the vulnerable. As human beings, we are all vulnerable at some point or another during our lives. Human rights apply to us all, regardless of our citizenship or nationality, our status, age, gender or other characteristics.

Human rights education is essentially about learning to live together, practising the principles of justice and peace for all. The goal is to create a culture of human rights. The principles of human rights education remain the same, regardless of the age of the students, their cultural backgrounds, or the country in which they live. But the ways in which these principles are taught, and applied, is likely to differ according to the situation in which teachers and students find themselves; the everyday challenges they face; and the experiences of the students in question.

Human rights education doesn't require teachers or students to learn the Universal Declaration off by heart or to recite its various articles or those of any other human rights treaty. Knowledge is however

important, and it is essential that teachers understand the content, principles and focus of the UDHR and other key treaties, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Teachers need a basic level of *legal literacy* so that they understand how such treaties relate to their work. This means that they also need to understanding key elements of domestic law and how these impact both on their everyday work and on students' lives. So, for example, they need to understand that students and their families have the right to privacy and that they should treat the data they hold on students securely. They also need to know when it is appropriate to share information, for example, in relation to child protection. So human rights education (for teachers and their students) has a *knowledge* component.

Why take human rights education seriously?

We are living in turbulent times. This is arguably reason enough to teach for human rights. Some people suggest that human rights education is especially needed now because the world has become a dangerous place.

It is generally recognised that in countries that have experienced a war, especially a civil war, that education for human rights and living together is essential. But I suggest that it is equally important in established democracies and in societies that have seen generations of peace. In Europe and across the globe, we see justice and peace under threat. We can't afford complacency.

Human rights are not guaranteed by empty rhetoric, but by individuals and communities ready to stand up and defend their rights and the rights of their fellow human beings. Governments have a duty to uphold the rights of their citizens, but they are much more likely to do that if those same citizens are aware of their rights and are ready to hold governments to account. For the 46 countries that are member-states of the Council of Europe, governments have a duty to protect the human rights of all living in the country, regardless of their legal or citizenship status. They have made a binding agreement to do this under the European Convention on Human Rights.

Human rights education needs to include *skills*, for example, skills in campaigning for human rights. People's movements such as MeToo, Black Lives Matter and World's Youth for Climate Justice are all examples of campaigns that seek to hold the powerful to account and to call for justice, not just in the present, but also for future generations. They all illustrate the power of communities, at different levels from the local to the global, in claiming their rights.

Authoritarian leaders have shown themselves to be skilled in using propaganda to promote 'alternative facts', particularly at times of crisis, as we have seen in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. So HRE needs to equip students with the skills to critically examine sources of evidence and to ask questions about the sources they use to find out about the world. Students need to be media-savvy and to develop critical reading skills, asking questions about the sources of information they use and about the vested interests of those who are telling the story, whether in established news channels or social media.

Ethnonationalist movements have been powerful in dividing people between 'them' and 'us' and attempting to play one group off against another. In times of austerity, political leaders sometimes use 'them' – migrants, minorities – as scapegoats. It is important that teachers support students in understanding the differences between patriotism and ethnonationalism. Teachers need to help

students distinguish between ‘critical patriotism’ – loving your country enough to want to improve it and blind nationalism – my country, right or wrong. Teaching such concepts are key to the human rights project of justice and peace in the world.

How might human rights improve children’s learning?

So far, I have discussed some of the big ideas of human rights education. But how are human rights relevant to small children and to everyday problems that students of different ages may experience, such as bullying, exclusion, low self-esteem, or problems with body-image?

We know that all these things impact negatively on children’s enjoyment of school and on their learning. Teachers, like parents, want students to be happy at school. We know that when students feel safe they thrive, but when they feel insecure their capacity for learning decreases, and in the worst scenario, they may drop out of school all together.

In human rights education it’s important not to focus exclusively on teaching the child to defend their own rights, but also to defend and secure the rights of others. Concepts young children are familiar with, such as kindness, or fairness - ‘it’s not fair’ are human rights concepts that can be developed from an early age to teach for justice and solidarity.

Teaching children to care for each other and to speak up on behalf of the vulnerable is a key aspect of human rights education and a central part of an effective anti-bullying strategy. With online bullying, teachers rarely see what is going on. In cases of bullying, there are rarely two individuals, the bully and the victim. There are many bystanders, who may say nothing or look the other way. Teaching children to care for each other and to speak up on behalf of the vulnerable is a key aspect of human rights education. In enabling and maintaining a safe learning environment, teachers have taken an important key step in teaching for human rights.

How does HRE support teachers in their professional duties?

Teachers and teachers’ professional associations have a code of professional ethics. Human rights education is a central element in that code.

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child has been almost universally ratified by governments. Governments have a duty to uphold the Convention. It is legally binding on governments. Teaching for human rights is central duty of any teacher.

This means that teachers and schools need to provide human rights education in keeping with this government promise. Teachers are not doing anything radical in teaching children and young people about rights; developing skills to stand up for rights; or even how to challenge governments when they fail to protect rights. They are helping governments to fulfil their duties to the people.

Why (and how) should we include HRE in teacher education?

Without appropriate professional training, both for new teachers and for all teachers as part of their ongoing professional development, human rights education is likely to be piecemeal and inadequate.

Without teacher education, children and young people are unlikely to enjoy their right to human rights education.

It is possible to map a large part of the knowledge, skills and experiences teachers need onto existing programmes. This requires commitment and careful planning. But research and past experience teach us that it is important to name any curriculum area, if time and resources are to follow. Human rights education needs a named place in teacher education programmes if it is to thrive. It needs to be explicit, not implicit.

Minimally, all new teachers need opportunities to study the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They need to discuss its relevance to their professional activities; apply it in their teaching practice (ideally working cooperatively with other teachers); and report back on what they and their young students have learned.

Effectively for children to claim their right to human rights education, we need to reform teacher education, equipping teachers to be both human rights educators and human rights defenders of the children they teach.

Further reading (all open access with links)

Draugedalen, K., & Osler, A. (2022). Teachers as human rights defenders: strengthening HRE and safeguarding theory to prevent child sexual abuse. *Human Rights Education Review*, 5(2), 32–55. <https://doi.org/10.7577/hrer.4776>

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The article was written and financed within the project "A more humane approach into human rights education in Slovakia", which is supported by the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021 and the state budget of the Slovak Republic.

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2023