

Human Rights Education: An Essential Teacher Preparation

By **Betty A. Reardon**

The field of teacher education, as all sectors of our society, is profoundly challenged by the rapidly changing global social system. The curricula of our schools and teacher education institutions had hardly worked out an effective response to the often repeated litany of global problems when the system in which they evolved began to drastically restructure itself. This situation revealed the limits of a problem-centered approach to world issues and peace education and the inadequacy of even a global systems approach to global education and—for those few institutions which offered them—peace studies.

This new challenge raises again the question of values in education, a major concern of Theodore Brameld (1965) and other reconstructionist educators for years. It calls for an approach more readily adaptable to the challenges presented by

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drastic changes; namely, a set of fundamental principles by which human affairs can be assessed in a variety of situations. This essay proposes one such approach to global education and peace studies in our schools, and thus, necessarily in our teacher education institutions. It is values-based and conceptual, rather than issues- or problem-centered. The argument is based on the premise that our social problems at all levels, local through global, are as much a

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matter of ethics as they are of structures; as personal and social as they are political and economic. It further contends that the subject of human rights most readily lends itself to the approach. Indeed, it can be argued that most of the problems faced by the global system in both the Cold War period and now, in its aftermath, can be viewed as issues of human rights. These arguments are central to the positions and programs of the People's Decade for Human Rights Education and to a K-12 curriculum sampler and resource guide designed to implement its purposes.¹ This essay is an adaptation of one of the chapters introducing the approach advocated by the sampler.

The guide was constructed to serve as a resource providing a framework, rationale, and curriculum sampler to facilitate human rights education in elementary and secondary schools, and especially in teacher education institutions. It is intended to be suggestive rather than definitive, and to demonstrate some possibilities for an holistic approach to human rights education that is comprehensive, conceptual, and developmental, and that directly confronts the values issues raised by human rights problems.

A holistic approach is advocated as consistent with the principles of ecological or whole systems thinking that are emerging as the paradigm most appropriate to the formation of planetary citizens. Holism, as applied to human rights education, interprets all rights and entitlements as interrelated and interdependent components or aspects of one central, generative principle—**human dignity**.

The comprehensiveness of the approach lies in its attempt to touch upon all areas of rights and in the assertion that human rights can find some appropriate place in the curricula of all grade levels and subject areas. Although the sample lessons provided here are presented by grade level, rather than by subject area, most can be adapted to several subjects. The range of materials now available or in development make it possible for teachers of all grades and subjects to include human rights topics in their curricula. These suggestions are made in the belief that such comprehensive human rights education is not only possible, but, more important, it is essential to the welfare and survival of human society.

The preference for a conceptual rather than a topical approach derives from the values, both explicit and implied, that infuse the ideas and the evolution of human rights. As a social movement and a field of study, human rights addresses the norms and standards deemed appropriate to a good society. Within a human rights framework, society is not an abstraction divorced from notions of ethics and qualities, but is the forum for the expression of human moral development, applied to public and social, as well as to private and personal, relationships and behaviors.

Indeed, recent feminist scholarship on human rights makes an argument for a holistic approach, arguing that all human rights are integral, one to the other, and cannot be separated or prioritized, as has been the practice in the industrialized nations of East and West. Feminist scholars such as Riane Eisler (1991) and Charlotte Bunch (1990) argue that the standards and norms of the public and the private

spheres should be informed by a universal and fundamental respect for the dignity and integrity of all human beings. The feminist argument asserts that the distinction and separation between private and public morality, as well as between the ethics applied to one's own group and those used in dealings with others, is a major cause of the violation of rights of women, ethnic minorities, and adversaries. Such an argument provides further rationale for a conceptual approach, devised to illuminate principles of human dignity. The Decade's human rights education framework is thus one of principles and standards more than problems or cases. Although both problems and cases are included in the units presented in the sampler, they are used to illuminate principles and provide opportunities to apply standards. A central purpose of both the framework and the approach is to develop the capacity to make moral choices, take principled positions on issues, and devise democratic courses of citizen action; in other words, to develop moral and intellectual integrity.

The key concepts that inform the framework are a set of social values that define social problems such as racism, sexism, and other readily obvious denials of human dignity. These values are the qualities and conditions toward which we seek to educate as a contribution to the resolution of the problem. Human rights education is values education. It seeks to provide learnings which will lead to the development of a set of core values and sub-values that derive from the fundamental central value of human dignity. This value system is comprised of a range of values of varying degrees of complexity and abstraction, but the most fundamental of them can be expressed in both simple and sophisticated terms appropriate in one form or another to all learning and developmental levels. Thus these value concepts are woven throughout the developmental sequence suggested in the sampler. The subvalues and problems are more specific and can be designated as appropriate to the curriculum of specific grade levels. Thus a conceptual-developmental sequence that advocates presenting specific concepts, problems, and the relevant international human rights standards at the grade levels most appropriate to the social and cognitive development of the intended learners is presented to illustrate how the concepts can infuse the entire K-12 curriculum.

The ultimate goal of this kind of education is the formation of responsible, committed, and caring planetary citizens, citizens with sufficiently informed problem awareness and adequately reflected value commitments to be contributors to the reconstruction of a global society that honors human rights. For this purpose, some action oriented curricula are essential and thus are included.

Few of the students in our elementary and secondary schools will become human rights experts. Neither will many become human rights workers. Yet it is our hope that some of them will become human rights activists and many, if not most, will become advocates. And, surely, all should be human rights aware.

Certainly the teachers being prepared to serve today's students should have at least an awareness of human rights issues and standards. The overall goals we seek in advocating the inclusion of human rights curricula in schools and teacher

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education is a form of citizenship education that develops both awareness and advocacy. No citizen of the 21st century should leave school without knowledge of the fundamental human rights upheld by the international legal standards that provide the norms for a just and peaceful world community. Knowledge of these norms and the obstacles to their fulfillment is essential to the development of human rights activists and advocates, to the universal observation of human rights, and to the achievement of a just world peace. Thus, human rights is an essential subject for courses in educational foundations and other teacher education areas.

Human Rights and Peace Education

Human rights education is as fundamental and constitutive to peace education as human rights are to peace:

Stated most succinctly, the general purpose of peace education, as I understand it, is to promote the development of an authentic planetary consciousness that will enable us to function as global citizens and to transform the present human condition by changing the social structures and the patterns of thought that have created it. This transformational imperative must, in my view, be at the center of peace education. (Reardon, 1988A)

Human rights education is essential to the fulfillment of the transformational purposes of peace education, for it seeks a set of goals that are in the aforementioned terms fundamental to peace.

Two general objectives or purposes of the field have been defined by the initiators of the Peoples' Decade for Human Rights Education. Primarily, human rights education seeks to assure that all human beings are made aware of the rights accorded to them by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the international instruments for its implementation; that all may know that procedures exist for the redress of violation of these rights; and that political authorities and citizens know they can be held accountable for rights violations. Secondly, it seeks to facilitate society's becoming more fully informed of the problems that impede the realization of human rights, and its awakening to the possibilities for the resolution of those problems.

In these purposes of the Decade are articulated a set of tools for the achievement of "the conditions of peace," those structures, processes, and behaviors most likely to limit and—ultimately to eliminate — social, structural, and political violence. The achievement of the minimum conditions of human rights fulfillment would provide the foundation of a non-violent social order which could be defined as peace. These conditions, defined in the field of peace research as "positive peace," it is argued, would also greatly reduce the causes of the organized violence of war. The resolution of that problem, the elimination of armed conflict (and, I would add, political repression imposed by force), is referred to in the field as "negative peace." It is the underlying assumption of the approach advocated here that human rights

education is essential to the achievement of both positive and negative peace. In including both, human rights education assumes a comprehensive concept of peace which requires in turn a comprehensive, all inclusive approach to human rights, including all categories and “generations” of rights, a concept to be discussed below in the context of a historic approach.

A Holistic Values Approach to Human Rights Education

Human rights is a normative field of study seeking to define and apply standards of justice to human affairs. Both as the subject of research and education and as an arena for political debate and social action, it is thus determined by values. The fundamental values that inform human rights, it is claimed, are universal human values which can be found in one form or another in most ethical and religious traditions. They are, as well, an integrated holistic system of ethical standards for all human relations, a web of normative concepts which inform most notions of a good society, and an inspiration for much of the best of reconstructionist education.

Human dignity and integrity are the centermost concepts of the web of related concepts that comprise the social values that are the essence of human rights. Within this approach **dignity** is defined as the fundamental, innate worth of the human person. A good society honors the dignity of all persons and expects all member of the society to respect the dignity of others. **Integrity** refers to the wholeness of the many facets of the human person, physical, mental, aesthetic, and spiritual. The good society provides for the expression and development of the multiple facets of the human person and holds them to be inviolable. Good societies are built upon the active recognition of individual and group rights and the fulfillment of individual and social responsibility.

From this core emerge all the other values which give rise to specific concepts of human rights. There are five such values which comprise the framework which constitutes this particular holistic values approach. There are, however, other values frameworks for the interpretation and application of human rights that can be of use to human rights educators. The world order values defined as the basis of research into a “just world peace” by the World Order Models Project² and the human values—human needs approach (Mac Dougal, Laswell, & Chen, 1980) are two that are especially adaptable to human rights education. The five posited here, however, stem from the core value and from the proposition of the inseparability of the various categories and “generations” of human rights. We identify these values as economic equity, equality of opportunity, democratic participation, freedom of person, and a sustaining and sustainable environment.

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Economic equity is the value from which the assertion of the right to the fulfillment of basic survival needs derives. It embodies the belief that the material benefits and social values of a society should be distributed so that no one suffers unnecessary deprivation. It is this value that shows the poverty imposed by the inequitable distribution of the world's wealth to be a violation of human rights. It implies the responsibility to work for **distributive justice**.

Equal opportunity is the value that calls for all members of the society to have access to the possibilities of developing all the human capacities with which they are endowed. It is this value which has led to defining racism, sexism, and colonialism as human rights violations. This value entails the responsibility of the society to assure **social justice**.

Democratic participation is the value from which come the claims to civil and political rights. The value is embedded in the belief that people are entitled to **exercise power** and make decisions in regard to public and social issues. They have the right to **participate in formulating the policies** which will affect their lives and in decisions about the use of public resources. Democratic participation requires the **acceptance of the responsibilities of citizenship** on the part of all citizens.

Freedom of person is the primary and fundamental notion of the Western tradition of human rights. It connotes the rights of all to control their own bodies, minds, and spirits; to choose their own personal cultural identity and ways of life; and to move freely where they will, if this does not adversely affect others, neglect important responsibilities, or cause harm to the community. It is the value which **rejects slavery, unjust imprisonment, torture, enforced prostitution or pregnancy, and the restricting of movement within or between countries, limiting access to information, and impeding personal choices**. This right is fulfilled by the responsibility to refrain from and prevent infringement upon the freedom of others by individuals, organizations, social groups, and governments.

A sustaining and sustainable environment is a concept which encompasses a right in the process of definition, one among those rights which may be claimed not only by individuals but by human groups and by the entire human species, perhaps a whole new "generation" or category of rights. It derives from the assumption that maintaining life is the essential requisite to continuing the human experience and to the ongoing struggle of humankind to attain its full humanity. A sustaining environment implies the right to natural conditions and social circumstances which enable persons and groups to make a living, such as the **right to development** (both economic and social development as pertains to the group, and personal development as pertains to the individual), the **right to peace**, and the **right to a healthful environment**. It also entails individual and group responsibility for preserving the health of the environment itself, what has been referred to as

ecological responsibility, caring for the environment and assuring its sustainability.

Within these five value concepts most of the normative and value concepts that make up the conceptual and moral terrain of human rights can be located. The five not only derive from the same central concept of human dignity, but all are interrelated and none can be fully separated from the others. Many human rights issues and problems fall within the domain of several of the core values, and none can be resolved without some consideration of all. Conflicts between human rights sometimes arise precisely because the interrelationships are overlooked. It is for such reasons that a holistic, ecological approach emphasizing interrelationships informs this resource.

Defining positive peace, “the good society,” as a set of social, political, and economic conditions dependent upon civic responsibility and authentic democracy is to say that positive peace derives from social responsibility and active citizenship. In a planetary age this translates to global responsibility; that is, participating as a world citizen in the world political order. The same assumption also underlies a previous teaching resource, *Educating for Global Responsibility* (Reardon, 1988B), to which this volume constitutes an essential complement:

...three fundamental value concepts found throughout peace education efforts of all kinds...are...positive human relationships based on the dignity of all persons; stewardship of the planet based on a reverence for the Earth; and global citizenship based on responsibility to a world community. These values sum up the most general notions of what comprises global responsibility in the eyes of most peace educators. (p. 15)

These same values and notions suffuse human rights education and thus endow it with a dynamic quality of education for change. They emphasize participation in the struggle for universal human dignity which can be realized fully only under conditions of a positive peace based upon respect for individual persons, social groups, human cultures, and the natural environment. As preparation for this struggle, human rights education becomes a major component in the movement for global transformation articulated as the goal of the peace and environmental—as well as many human rights—movements. Thus, human rights education is intended to prepare the learner to become a maker of history, bringing values and concepts into lived human experience and into changing the human condition toward the achievement of “the good society.”

A Historical Approach

Knowledge of the historical origins of human rights is important to understanding the human rights movement as a dynamic, living human endeavor. The teaching of history can be greatly enlivened by the story of the conceptualization of and struggle for human rights.

The evolution of the concept of human rights as the organizing principles of the

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good society can be traced to the very roots of Western society. The idea of articulating the social contract in the form of behavioral standards and laws binding on all members of the society can be seen in such ancient social landmarks as the code of Hammurabi and the Ten Commandments. However, that such standards should be equally binding on citizens and leaders alike is an essentially modern idea that gave rise to present notions of human rights and democratic government. The political philosophy of representative democracy developed from the argument that the function of the state was to protect the rights and well-being of its citizens. As stated in the Declaration of Independence, governments were established “to secure these rights.” The obligation of the citizen is to assure that governments fulfill this purpose and “to alter or abolish” governments that fail in or flout this purpose. Resistance to unjust or illegitimate authority is thus a fundamental principle of democracy and an essential responsibility of citizens for the assurance of human rights.

Such concepts reflect a standard interpretation of Western history, but history is seldom taught as the evolution and development of the concepts and assurances of human rights. Yet such an approach offers teachers the opportunity to present historical experience not only as the unfolding of events, but as the intentional evolution of the social and political thought that influenced and was influenced by these events. Further, a human rights context for history offers a view of human social experience from the view of peoples, not just outstanding leaders. Perhaps most important for educators who perceive human rights as the fundamental substance of “positive peace,” such an approach to history provides a balance to the heavy emphasis on wars and military developments of most standard instruction in history, and shows history to be made of possibilities and choices.

At the very least, all relevant human rights events and developments should be included in the respective history courses that deal with human rights related events and periods. At best, history courses could be taught from a human rights perspective. Applicable to all points on the spectrum of such a perspective is the need to assure that all students have an acquaintance with the history of the fundamental human rights standards of their own nation and of the world community. For American students this means equal familiarity with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the major covenants and conventions as with the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the constitutional amendments assuring particular citizens’ rights. And it should mean that the knowledge of all these standards is required content of the curricula of all our schools.

Human rights have been derived from and defined out of the lived history of human beings. This reality is reflected in the terminology of human rights which defines categories as generations. Generation connotes the chronology, or the time and age, in which a category of rights is identified and defined. It also conveys that rights are produced, or “generated,” by a set of historical conditions—political, economic, social, or cultural—that have formed modern, Western society. These

generations offer a fruitful framework for teaching European and American history as human rights evolution, placing the emergence of existing human rights concepts and events in the context of what has been called “modern history,” and framing the evolving and yet to be defined human rights concepts as “post modern.” These newly emerging concepts can be viewed as “the future of human rights,” or the “rights of the ecological age.” Thus, the first generation, or category, of rights to have been defined are the political and civil rights articulated as the rationales for the American and French revolutions that closed the 18th century. The second generation are the economic and social rights generated by the socialist and workers movements of the 19th century. The mid-20th century produced the third generation—“solidarity” rights—sought by groups with common identity or experience in the struggles to end colonialism in all its forms. The rights to self determination of peoples and self identification of ethnic groups are articulated in this generation. As the 20th century closes, a fourth generation claimed on behalf of all humanity may be emerging. The seeds of this generation lie in the notion of “crimes against humanity” invoked in the international standards condemning genocide and apartheid. As they come to understand and internalize the oneness of humanity, students of today will define this generation.

Enlisting students in such a definitional process is to invite them to be actors in history, to be creators of standards that identify and challenge the problems of their times. It enables them to see that human rights standards emerge from notions of “social wrong,” conditions society comes to see as contradictory to the fundamental values that uphold the social contract. Thus, the political excesses and repression of monarchy produced the first generation of rights; industrialism’s unchecked exploitation of the laboring classes produced the second; and the contradictions and injustices of colonialism produced the third. It is up to this generation of citizens to identify and challenge contemporary social wrongs, to formulate and apply the human rights standards that will reduce and prevent such wrongs, and perhaps to establish the fourth generation of rights as international standards. In so doing they participate in making for themselves and subsequent generations a more humane future, and thus contribute to the achievement of peace.

An International Standards and Institutions Approach to Human Rights Education

One of the most effective conceptual approaches to human rights education is through the international standards themselves, the principles, declarations, covenants, and conventions, which are the foundations of international human rights law promulgated by the United Nations. Here, too, it is possible to apply the approach in a comprehensive and holistic manner, starting with the meaning of universality and the UDHR. While the world has changed considerably, the Declaration is still the most comprehensive conceptual statement of rights. It is

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recognized to apply to all peoples, and it is the source for all subsequent standards and treaties. It should be the centerpiece of any human rights curriculum.

The UDHR does not make specific reference to every particular right that has been claimed since it was put forth in 1948. However, it has been interpreted so as to validate most recognized rights, even those of the so called third generation which pertain to groups rather than individuals, and those which some call the fourth generation. In the latter case, it is claimed that some rights pertain to humankind as a whole, basing the claim partially on the designation of some of the worst violations of human rights, such as those previously noted condemning genocide and apartheid as “crimes against humanity.” If crimes are committed against humanity, then humanity can be said to have rights such as the right to peace, or to a healthy, ecologically balanced planet, or to a world of genetic, cultural, and political diversity. Some also claim that these rights derive from Article 28 of the UDHR which proclaims the right to an international order conducive to the realization of human rights.

An international standards approach provides two other significant content possibilities. The standards serve to demonstrate some of the major world problems as problems not only of rights violations, but as issues of importance to the order and viability of world society. Even if there were no human rights standards, the conditions which gave rise to them would still be problems for the world. However, human rights standards provide criteria by which to define and assess and determine the severity of these problems. The approach also makes possible the consideration and assessment of trends toward and away from world community and global social integration. Human rights standards reflect the growth of an emerging sense of universality and provide norms that strengthen the potential for a system of shared global values, an essential requisite to an authentic world community.

Finally, the promulgation of these standards attests to the phenomenon that rights are, indeed, defined in the face of “social wrongs,” or those acts and conditions which contradict generally accepted assumptions about right human relationships and violate minimal standards of human decency. In short, human rights are a secular code of ethics and morality for the world community, and, as such, form the fundamental basis for peace, as is the claim of the Universal Declaration:

...recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. (Preamble, UDHR, 1948)

Although all international instruments for the protection and realization of human rights are not essential to the study of the field, some essential documents should be known to all citizens. Among these are, of course, the UDHR and the Covenants enumerating the first and second generation on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. The three together are often referred

to as “The International Bill of Rights.” Equally important to the actual protection of rights are the regional instruments which should be generally known to all and specifically to the peoples of those respective regions.

An international standards approach can be applied in a global perspective as indicated above, but it can also be adapted to regional studies through the regional instruments and charters such as the African Freedom Charter or the African Charter of Human and Peoples Rights. Regional institutions and procedures such as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights might also be studied as a phenomena of regional integration as well as an example of international institutions arising from changes in the international system. These regional courts together with the institutions, especially the United Nations machinery, can be studied as consequences of both political change and social movements. They are evidence of an evolving global social order, the institutional core of the society of all humanity.

All current standards stem from the UDHR declared by the U.N. General Assembly in 1948 and all are related one to the other. Taken together the standards form a whole, a system of norms, values, and aspirations which can serve to guide the development of a healthy and just world social order, and provide the core of a reconstructive form of global education.

A Reconstructionist Approach

Teachers who undertake human rights education usually do so with the general purpose of developing the capacity to engage in social change. For such a purpose, a reconstructionist approach demonstrates how human rights movements emerge, gain social support, and produce both attitudinal and legal structural changes in society. Such an approach—especially when it, too, is presented in a conceptual, values based framework—can be used to complement the historical and/or international standards approaches. It can, as well, stand on its own as an avenue for demonstrating to learners the possibilities for using knowledge of human rights to directly affect the world in which they live. A reconstructionist approach is fundamentally developmental and process oriented.

The process through which rights are recognized by a people, enacted into law, and become the standards by which a society judges itself can be observed in our own social environments, and in other areas both past and present, on a local as well as a global scale. It usually starts with persons of conscience becoming aware of a condition they perceive to be against their society’s ethical principles or fundamental human values. Such persons are often the initiators of a movement or organization which attempts to bring the conditions or specific situation—for example, slavery or torture—to the attention of their community, nation, or the international system. Here is an opportunity to show how most human rights organizations have been founded in the face of actual historic circumstances people believed could and should be changed.

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It can be observed that in some cases these organizations or *ad hoc* groups mount campaigns that become major social movements such as the abolitionist, labor, child advocacy, and civil rights movements. When successful, such movements and campaigns lead to serious public discussion of the problems and proposals for remediation. When political leaders recognize the public concern and support for action toward change, specific policies or laws are proposed and debated. If the society acknowledges both the need for remediation and the probability that the proposed policy, national law (*e.g.*, voting rights), or international convention (*e.g.*, the Convention on the Rights of the Child) can provide it, a law or convention is likely to be adopted, but only after a further campaign of political action.

Then the task becomes one of implementation and monitoring, very important roles for citizens and non-governmental organizations. This process is the actual phase in which social change takes place. It is that part of the process in which first stage social action can be taken by learners, be they professors of education and student teachers or classroom teachers and middle and secondary school students. These actions, in fact, may lead to new campaigns and movement as other offenses to human dignity are often uncovered in such an implementation process (*e.g.*, the relation of the abuse of women's rights to the adequate implementation of children's rights). Such on-going processes of uncovering and overcoming obstacles to human dignity can be shown to be a fundamental dynamic of truly democratic societies.

Reconstructionist education is first and foremost education for authentic democracy. The responsibility to provide such education falls upon all teachers, and their professional education should prepare them to carry it out. One of the most effective tools for such teacher education can be found in human rights. Because the struggle is an on-going one, likely to be with us through a long period of global change, an approach based on principles and standards arising from clearly articulated values—one that shows social change to be a process affected by individual and group intervention—offers possibilities for hope in the human future. This continuing struggle lies at the heart of reconstructionism.

Notes

1. People's Decade for Human Rights Education, 526 West 111st St., New York, NY 10027. The resource guide is *Educating for Human Dignity* forthcoming from the University of Pennsylvania Press.
2. World Order Models Project, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115.

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