

Human Rights Education: Imaginative Possibilities for Creating Change

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Background/Context: *Human rights education has proliferated in the past four decades and can be found in policy discussions, textbook reforms, and grassroots initiatives across the globe. This article specifically explores the role of creativity and imagination in human rights education (HRE) by focusing on a case study of one non-governmental (NGO) organization's program operating across India.*

Purpose/Objective: *This article argues that human rights education can and should be creative and innovative in its approaches to ensure access and sustainability of programs that seek to transform the learning experiences of marginalized students. Evidence from India contributes to the discussion of HRE by presenting teachers' and students' experiences with one particular human rights education program in India that incorporates an array of strategies to secure support and contextually-relevant curricula and pedagogy for poor children. Research questions that guided the larger study from which data are presented here included (a) How have differentiated motivations for, conceptualizations of, and initiatives towards HRE operated at the levels of policy, curriculum and pedagogy, and practice in India? (b) What impact has HRE had on Indian teachers and youth from diverse backgrounds who have participated in one NGO program?*

Research Design: *The larger study from which the data are drawn is a vertical case study utilizing primarily qualitative methods. Participants in the larger study included 118 human rights education teachers, 625 students, 80 staff and policy makers of human rights education, and 8 parents. Observations of teacher trainings included hundreds more participants. The majority of student respondents came from 'tribal' (indigenous) or Dalit (previously called "untouchable") communities, both comprising the most marginalized sections of Indian society.*

Design and Methods: *This study was primarily qualitative and was carried out from August 2008 to August 2010 (13 months of fieldwork during that period). Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 118 teachers, 25 students, 8 parents, and 80 staff and officials of human rights education in India. 59 focus groups were carried out with an additional 600 students. Observations were also carried out of teacher trainings in human rights and human rights camps for students. Follow up data were collected on subsequent, but shorter, field visits from 2011-2013.*

Conclusions/Recommendations: *The study found the following: (a) Human rights education that is creative, contextualized, and engaging offers a meaningful opportunity for educators, families and students to critique and interrogate social inequalities. (b) Non-governmental organizations can provide a unique perspective on human rights education by drawing on diverse creative approaches if they are able to engage effectively with students, communities, educators and schools. (c) Research on human rights education must attend to how local communities, activists, artists and educators make meaning of normative frameworks (like human rights) in order to understand how creativity, imagination and innovation are engaged and 'indigenized' in productive and transformative ways. Further attention to creativity and imagination in human rights education can illuminate how HRE influences—and is mediated by—existing community realities and societal structures.*

I started learning about human rights in class six. I first thought they are giving us more of a burden with yet another subject and more books. But the teachers were so different after they started teaching human rights: human rights teachers talk nicely to us, they don't scold and beat us. They encouraged us to try new things and cultivate different talents like dance, poetry, drama, singing, and everything. Other subject teachers would just teach their subjects and they beat us also. They put the pressure of other people on us. But the human rights teachers release us from that. Through this course, I started writing poems about women's rights and children's issues and my human rights teacher encouraged me to send it to the newspaper when I was in class eight. They liked it and even published it! I had never ever thought something like that would happen. My grandmother can't read—she is a sweeper in someone's home—but I showed it to her in the newspaper and she was so happy. I kept writing poems and made a collection of 125 of them. My teacher encouraged me to put them together in a book and she raised money from teachers and got the publisher to give us a discounted rate. They are putting all the proceeds of the book sales in a bank account under my name so that I can go to college. I can't imagine what my life would be if this human rights class would not have been there. When I grow up, I would like to do a lot more in the field of human rights.

—Fatima, 16-year-old human rights student in India¹

Human rights education is a field of scholarship and practice rooted in the promise of all rights for all people(s). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1948 guarantees access to schooling as well as learning that “strengthen(s) respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (UDHR, 1948). The core of the human rights vision, and the promise of human rights education (HRE) specifically, is rooted in imagining “the world as it could be.”² Creativity, imagination, and innovation are central to a transformative

vision of human rights education and fostering student agency, or their ability to act, in the face of social and educational inequalities. In this essay, I will highlight the imaginative possibilities of human rights education and how the field's core concepts are localized by actors in one specific non-governmental HRE program in India. I draw from my extensive engagement in the field of human rights education over the past two decades and my longitudinal fieldwork in India (2008–2013) to offer insights into the role of imagination and innovation in effecting social change efforts for marginalized youth in the global South and elsewhere.

Despite the mention of human rights education in the 1948 UN declaration, in the post-World War II period, newly independent nation-states in sub-Saharan African and South Asia focused fairly exclusively on expanding *access* to schooling and promoting the right to education given limited enrollments during the colonial period. With increased access, international attention shifted to include quality components of education with the global Education for All summits in 1990 and 2000 and the UN's Millennium Sustainable Development Goals (2000). At the same time, international human rights discussions after the fall of the Soviet Union, primarily in the landmark UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (1993), began to focus on how to raise public consciousness about human rights through formal and non-formal education. Subsequently, the UN launched the Decade of Human Rights Education (1995–2004) that became the UN World Programme on Human Rights Education in 2005 to coordinate ongoing efforts to advance education for human rights across the globe. The global vision for human rights education mainly anchors itself in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related UN documents focused on specific rights—women's rights, children's rights, indigenous people's rights, among many others. How local communities, activists, artists, and educators *make meaning* of these normative frameworks offers a window into how creativity, imagination, and innovation are engaged and "indigenized" in productive and transformative ways.

In India, despite the nation's signing and adherence to many human rights laws and conventions, violations of rights abound in public and private spheres. Child labor, early marriage, and various manifestations of gender, caste, and religious discrimination belie the promises set forth by government policies and international declarations. Human rights education as a field, in order to be relevant and effective, requires that students critically read social realities to understand the gaps between promises and practices. In India, various organizations offer human rights education and seek to engage youth in assessing and acting in the face of social injustices.

The Institute of Human Rights Education is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that runs a three-year course on HRE in over 4,000 schools (in grades six through eight) across India. I have discussed the rise of human rights education and the impact of this particular NGO elsewhere (Bajaj, 2012), and will focus here on the components of this program as they pertain to the creative and imaginative possibilities of human rights education. The following section starts with organizational approaches (Innovating for Impact), discusses the ways teachers are trained by the Institute (Creating Change in the Classroom and Beyond), and then discusses student impact (Imagining a Different World).

INNOVATING FOR IMPACT

The Institute of Human Rights Education began approaching schools and educational officials in 1997 to offer a three-year human rights course in schools. In order to secure permission and gain access to mostly government-run schools, the organization had to use innovative strategies to enlist a broad coalition of support. (In India, schools are run and primarily coordinated at the state and district levels.) For example, with the rise of human rights discourse broadly, public officials were eager to make their mark in ways that gained them recognition. The organization approached public officials who were open to new ideas and who wanted to signal their alignment with global priorities (like human rights) as an innovative strategy to secure entry into schools to run their programs (Bajaj, 2012). The Institute also innovated in its approach to teacher trainings in human rights education to include participatory methodologies, active involvement, and incorporating the arts and teacher leadership—all distinct features from conventional teacher training programs in India. For example, one teacher training I attended had a local artist (who had his own TV show and was well known) train teachers how to make papier-mâché puppets with their students and put on community shows related to countering domestic violence and gender inequality. Teachers often responded favorably to such trainings in terms of their desire to teach human rights, transform practices such as corporal punishment in their schools (see Bajaj, 2012), and in terms of rethinking their own attitudes toward their own lives. One female teacher noted the following about her experience at the training:

At this five-day training, I learned so much about abuses such as gender violence, dowry, and female infanticide. We were doing activities, role-plays and discussing issues from morning until night. With this awareness, I've come to value my own daughters more. I used to feel bad that I didn't have a son in a society where sons

are favored more, but now I feel strongly about girls' value and gender equality. (Mrs. Geeta, individual interview, January 2009)

By offering innovative ways for educators to make human rights learning real for their students and for their own lives, the organization enlisted teachers as partners in the educative process as creative agents, rather than the way that they are often treated in India and globally as passive transmitters of information.

CREATING CHANGE IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

Having visited more than 80 schools engaged in human rights education through the NGO-run program described above, I witnessed teachers utilizing local resources, issues, and realities to make the learning process relevant. For example, teachers—often the most educated members of rural, semi-literate villages where they work—held considerable social status. After engaging in human rights education, teachers and students discussed developing creative ways to interrupt rights abuses they witnessed in their homes and communities. For example, a group of students got together to approach neighbors who they overheard were planning to kill their newborn baby girl in the practice of female infanticide routine in that area of India. The students decided to pressure the neighbors by protesting outside their home, threatening to call the police, and having the teacher's support as a government employee to discourage the family from ending the newborn's life. Perhaps out of shame or fear of repercussions (the practices of female infanticide and feticide, while common and often overlooked, are, in fact, illegal in India), the family did not kill their child, and the 13- and 14-year-old activists were inspired by their ability to effectively intervene in a situation of human rights abuse (Bajaj, 2012). Other teachers and students pursued the avenue of community education, writing songs about human rights issues and even recording a CD then distributed by the Institute of Human Rights Education. The Institute also sponsored an annual drama competition for schools involved in the human rights education program, allowing students to use the performing arts to synthesize their learning about human rights guarantees and situations of abuse in their communities.

While carrying out fieldwork, I attended a weeklong camp for human rights education students in secondary schools to learn about documentary filmmaking, creatively applying the learnings of their three-year human rights course to a new domain. All of the students who participated were from poor households well below the national poverty line and had never attended a camp before, much less operated sophisticated video cameras and editing equipment. The nonprofit digital media center where

the camp was held proved to be an opportune site for students to create the content and scripts, learn how to shoot footage, and ultimately create educational videos to be used in the human rights education program. Saranya, a 13-year-old participant, noted, “I am so much happier here at this camp than at home where I would be doing chores all day during the summer holidays from school. Here, I have learnt about how to make documentary films on issues like child labor, domestic violence, and caste discrimination. I miss my family, but I don’t want to go home!” (individual interview, May 2009). The sheer delight on Saranya and other students’ faces at their final products as they watched themselves on a screen at the end of the week highlighted the uniqueness and efficacy of engaging the creative arts for transformative human rights learning.

IMAGINING A DIFFERENT WORLD

The power of imagination has been cited as central to the educative process (most notably in the seminal work of the late Maxine Greene), and is the core of human rights education. The fundamental and expansive guarantees of the human rights framework offer children, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, the chance to envision a society different from the one that they experience. Many students in the HRE program in India utilized the course to develop a “critical human rights consciousness” to analyze social realities (Meintjes, 1997). Even those children in slightly more privileged positions (e.g., boys versus girls) engaged creative and imaginative thinking to become agents of change in their homes and communities. For example, a human rights education student, Parthiban, offered the following account

My eldest sister was 17 and about to complete school, when the groom’s side came to see her. My mother asked them to come and told my sister, “You do not have to go for higher studies; you should get married.” I was studying human rights in seventh [grade] when they came to arrange the date for the marriage and when all this marriage talk was going on. I went and talked to the groom and told him that my sister really wants to continue studying and asked if he could support her in her studies and get married after she finished her B.A. Now she’s in the final year. Because of what I studied in human rights education, I could help make it better for my sister. (as cited in Bajaj, 2012, p. 104)

In this account, as in many others, the ability to envision alternatives to the way things are commonly done (whether with female infanticide, caste discrimination, early marriage, or child labor) offered youth a chance to

propose different practices to their families, schools, and communities. Sometimes these suggestions were well received and, other times, students were met with violence and backlash to their efforts to create positive social change. Greater attention to the risk of imaginative possibilities is needed in order to prepare human rights education students to intervene safely and effectively in local injustices and in order to prevent discouragement and worse, physical violence in retaliation for speaking up.

The Institute of Human Rights Education in India offers one example of how innovation, creativity, and imagination can transform student experiences, particularly amidst an educational system in which problems—such as overcrowded schools and poor quality—abound. Set against such a backdrop, human rights education engages students and provides them with a distinctive and transformative educational experience as these young people discern how to navigate their uncertain futures. The indigenization and translation of global rights concepts through innovative approaches that are context-specific allow for the flourishing of human agency in making meaning of human rights.

Various other organizations have also utilized the creative arts to spread awareness about human rights. For example, a California-based organization runs institutes on how to create student-led performances integrating poetry, theater, and dance around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Spero, 2012). The East Timorese human rights organization Ba Futuru has created a guide to utilizing the arts for human rights education based on their formal and non-formal trainings and educational activities promoting transformative conflict resolution and rights. Throughout the world, human rights-focused museums seek to raise public awareness around human rights, such as in Holocaust Museums around the world, the Cambodian Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, and new museums in Canada (Toronto) and the United States (Atlanta) that seek to use visual exhibits, photography, and interactive displays to inform and educate about rights struggles, victories, and future visions.

From universal standards on documents discussed in New York and Geneva to the everyday life of educators and students in remote parts of the globe, creative strategies to localize human rights education are essential to its ability to be viable and relevant. Human rights education, despite its mention in declarations and documents as early as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948, has primarily gained momentum in the past three decades. As many organizations and initiatives enter this space of teaching and learning about rights, it is important to caution against using conventional, or as educational philosopher Freire (1970) would term, “banking” approaches to the memorization and recitation of facts and dates about human rights and its history. The gap

between what is promised in rights documents and what actually happens is a source of frustration for many youth encountering universal notions of human rights for the first time. The creative arts, innovative approaches, and catalyzing the moral imaginary are integral and necessary ways to channel such frustration away from disillusionment toward strategizing collectively for social change. As such, the possibility of human rights education rests on the vision of teachers and learners in devising creative ways to be a force for greater equity and justice.

NOTES

1. As cited in Bajaj (2012, p. 2).
2. “The World as It Could Be” is the name of a human rights education program run in the Northern California Bay Area, and previously operated by the Rex Foundation. For more information, please see Spero’s study (2012).

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