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Human rights education: what works?

Human rights education is increasingly acknowledged as an essential part of building a human rights culture. But does it work? This brief reviews existing literature on human rights education for children, presenting an overview of findings on the outcomes of human rights education.

Human rights education for children is broadly acknowledged as essential to the promotion, protection and effective realisation of all human rights. Providing learners with human rights knowledge and skills, developing human rights-friendly attitudes and values, and encouraging behaviour change and action, human rights education will, it is assumed, contribute to building and promoting a broader human rights culture, in the sense of a culture where everyone's rights are respected, where people understand their rights and responsibilities, recognise human rights violations and take action to protect the rights of others. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Covenant on Economic and Social Rights, along with other international human rights standards, emphasise the right to human rights education. Human rights education is also accorded a central role in Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with SDG target 4.7 emphasising the importance of human rights education.

But does human rights education work? This is obviously a complex question which does not give itself easily to definitive answers. However, recent years have witnessed a surge in research that explores the question in relation to specific human rights education initiatives, measuring their outcomes based on systematic collection and analysis of empirical data. This research provides important insights into the kinds of outcomes that human rights education may produce and the preconditions necessary for such outcomes. We have reviewed 27 studies on human rights education outcomes, with the purpose to provide an overview of existing knowledge in this area. This brief outlines key findings from our review.

ABOUT THE STUDIES WE HAVE REVIEWED

The studies include academic articles, book chapters and evaluation reports from the period 2000-2020. Methods for measuring human rights education outcomes include quantitative surveys; qualitative interviews, focus groups; observations; and document collection. The studies vary from small-scale ethnographic studies involving a few dozen people to large-scale surveys including 100,000 respondents.

The types of human rights education initiatives studied range from short, one-off initiatives to longer-term or even permanent ones. The studies cover initiatives in Canada, Croatia, Dominican Republic, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, India, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kuwait, Norway, Philippines, Senegal, Turkey, the UK, and USA.

In some cases, the same author has published several studies on one initiative; in those cases, the studies have been grouped together and counted as one study.

SDG target 4.7: By 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

Human rights education often has positive outcomes. In our review, we have identified outcomes related to learners' knowledge about human rights; their values and attitudes towards human rights; and their behaviour and action related to human rights. We have also identified outcomes related to broader changes, whether in the immediate environment (family, school, community) or in the wider society. The vast majority of outcomes documented in the studies were positive, and only few studies found that human rights education had no or negative outcomes.

Human rights education increases individual learners' knowledge. Nineteen studies measure outcomes related to knowledge. Out of these, seventeen document increases in learners' human rights knowledge, albeit at very varying levels. Only three studies find little or no effect of human rights education on learners' knowledge level. The studies define and measure human rights knowledge in different ways; some look at factual or legal knowledge, while others explore learners' knowledge and understanding of broader human rights principles. Regardless how human rights knowledge is defined and measured, however, most studies document an increase in knowledge among learners. In her study of the outcomes of a three-month course for a class of 8th graders in the Dominican Republic, Bajaj found learners' (self-reported) level of human rights knowledge to have increased by 39 percent, and also found significant increase in learners' factual knowledge, measured e.g. through their ability to identify specific violations of human rights such as discrimination against minorities, or abusive child labour (Bajaj 2004:29). Covell, Howe and McNeil have found that children who were part of the Hampshire Education Authority's *Rights, Responsibility, Respect* programme understand the nature of rights as entitlements to fair treatment and their own responsibility to respect the rights of others, while children who were not part of the programme seem to understand rights simply as freedoms, as synonymous with rules, or as contingent on fulfilment of obligations (Covell, Howe and McNeil 2010:120).

Human rights education often leads to positive change in values and attitudes among learners. Eighteen studies measure outcomes related to values and attitudes. Of these, only two studies find little or no effect of human rights education on values and attitudes. Changes are typically measured in terms of learners' acceptance of diversity and their sensitivity towards the rights of others, especially those belonging to vulnerable or disadvantaged groups (e.g. minorities, refugees, children with disabilities). Covell and Howe (1999: 171) speak of a 'contagion effect': when children learn about their own

rights, they become more supportive of the rights of others. This hypothesis is confirmed by several studies. An evaluation of UNICEF's *Rights Respecting Schools* programme in the UK showed increase in positive attitudes towards inclusion and diversity (Sebba and Robinson 2010). A study of the US *Comparative World Studies* course found 86 percent of students self-reporting greater empathy towards victims of human rights violations (Gaudelli and Fernekes 2004). A few studies also find that human rights education can have an effect on values and attitudes that are not directly related to human rights, documenting an increase in general well-being, optimism and self-confidence (Covell and Howe 1999; Bajaj 2004).

"It seems likely that the act of learning that they are independent bearers of rights; that the government cares about their well-being; that there are special laws and international conventions to protect them and to promote their positive development, may have increased the children's optimism about their futures and their overall sense of well-being" (Covell and Howe 1999:81)

Human rights education can lead to an increase in 'rights-respecting' behaviour and action among learners. Fifteen studies analyse outcomes related to individual behaviour and action. The majority of the studies document positive outcomes. Several studies find an increase in inclusion, cooperative behaviour and positive relationships, and a decrease in anti-social behaviour such as bullying and violent conflicts, among learners who have participated in human rights education (Hudson 2006; Sebba and Robinson 2010). Some also find an increase in learner's broader democratic engagement. Sebba and Robinson, for instance, find that students in the *Rights Respecting Schools* programme are more likely to be aware of, and become involved in, decision-making systems and processes in their school.

Human rights education may have different effects on different learners. The characteristics of the learners – as individuals and as a group – influence the outcomes of human rights education. A relatively consistent finding across several studies is that **gender** influences outcomes, albeit in different and sometimes unpredictable ways. In a study of human rights education in 43 German UNESCO schools, Müller found significantly higher levels of knowledge among girls than among boys (Müller 2009:13). A study of a Georgian human rights education programme found that girls' attitudes towards human rights were generally more positively influenced than boys' (Cincera et al 2018:781).

The role of **learners' socio-economic characteristics** in shaping the outcomes of human rights education is also relatively well-documented. Several studies indicate that learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds gain more from human rights education. Covell and Howe (2008), for instance, find most positive effects of the RRR programme in schools in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Here, absences and behavioural incidents decreased markedly; and test scores, motivation, and

self-regulation in learning and behaviour, and parental involvement increased significantly. In her study of human rights education in Japanese schools, Hayashi (2011) documented the same pattern, with more positive effects in schools with a significant number of minority students and/or with more socio-economically disadvantaged students, compared to other schools. Likewise, Russell (2018) concludes that human rights education is of particular importance to marginalised students.

Teachers and their teaching methods influence human rights education outcomes. The crucial role of teachers in shaping human rights education outcomes is broadly acknowledged in the literature reviewed. Engaged, knowledgeable and confident teachers are key in ensuring successful outcomes (Struthers 2020). This means that teacher training is a prerequisite in any human rights education initiative. There is also broad consensus among researchers that positive outcomes are closely correlated with **participatory and practice-oriented teaching methods** (Tibbitts and Kirchschlaeger 2010). Good teachers can, even in authoritarian contexts where human rights education is restricted or amputated, ensure a space for democratic participation, resulting in positive outcomes for learners (Nakib 2012).

The status ascribed to human rights education matters. Several researchers point to the perceived status of human rights education as key in ensuring both teachers' and learners' buy-in. If a significant amount of time is devoted to the course, it is typically perceived as important. Cayir and Bagli's (2011) study on the integration of human rights education in 7th and 8th grade curriculum in Turkish schools, for instance, finds low levels of support – and consequently, lack of learning – among students, who characterise human rights education as 'boring', 'unimportant' or 'easy'. They argue that this has to do, at least in part, with the low level of hours assigned to the course.

The local context matters. Social, cultural and religious norms and practices in the local context can influence human rights education outcomes, supporting learners in, or discouraging them from, acquiring human rights knowledge, changing attitudes or engaging in human rights practices. Some studies indicate that **parents** play a key role in shaping children's perspectives on human rights. For instance, Khouri-Kassabi and Ben-Arieh (2009) find that patriarchal family patterns are associated with less support for children's rights while democratic family patterns predict higher support. Norms and practices **in the school and in the local community** can also influence learners' perceptions of human rights, and as such, the outcomes of their human rights education.

Human rights education seems to be most effective if local norms and practices are reflected in the education through a **contextualised or context-centered approach** (Gerber 2013; Tibbitts 2010). Abstract, universal human rights principles need to be 'vernacularised' or 'translated' to make them resonate with the values and experiences of learners, taking into consideration the context in which education takes place and engaging with human rights issues of relevance in this context (Russell 2018).

"Human rights education should build upon the experiences of young people, particularly in contexts where young people are part of long-standing political, social and cultural struggles" (Abu Moghli 2020:25)

We know little about the lasting effects of human rights education on individual learners. While existing research documents an immediate or short-term effect of human rights education on individual learners' knowledge, values and attitudes, and behaviour and action, it cannot tell us much about long-term effects or durability of outcomes. Does human rights education contribute to lasting changes among learners? One of the few studies that explore the long-term effects of human rights education is Holland and Martin's (2014) study of secondary school human rights education in Senegal. Interviews with former students five years after completion of the programme showed that while the programme had contributed to shaping students' beliefs and attitudes towards human rights, none of them were involved in any human rights related activities, and they found it difficult to apply the skills they had acquired through their human rights education in their current jobs.

We know little about whether human rights education has an impact on the broader society. A few studies provide anecdotal evidence of the effect that human rights education initiatives can have in the local community, encouraging changes in attitudes and behaviour of e.g. parents, teachers or local authorities (e.g. Bajaj 2011). But we found no systematic studies of the impact that human rights education may have on broader society, analysing e.g. the effect of large-scale human rights education programmes on levels of hate speech, gender discrimination or other human rights violations; on human rights activism; or on values related to tolerance and inclusion in the broader population. This would require longitudinal and/or comparative studies.

TEACHING HUMAN RIGHTS IN CONTEXTS WHERE HUMAN RIGHTS ARE DENIED

A key dilemma for human rights education is that where such education is most needed, it is also most difficult to implement.

Implementing human rights education in authoritarian regimes is obviously different from – and more difficult than – implementing human rights education in a democracy. Human rights education in conflict-ridden or post-conflict contexts also presents serious challenges. Political pressure, lack of resources, mistrust and fear are among the many obstacles to human rights education in such contexts.

In their analysis of human rights education in Kurdistan-Iraq, Osler and Yahya (2013) argue that a focus on knowledge *about* human rights is not sufficient in contexts where there is an obvious gap between the ideals expressed in international human rights conventions and the everyday realities of both teachers and children. In such contexts, human rights education needs a particular focus on education *for* human rights, empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others, as noted in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training.

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