

Human Rights Education: A Necessity for Effective Social and Civic Learning

A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)

Introduction

Within the United States, education has long been valued as a means of fostering the growth and development of each person in order to realize the democratic ideals of freedom, equality, non-discrimination and respect for the rights of all. In an increasingly globalized world and within the United States itself, this growth and development must emphasize not only the rights and obligations arising from American citizenship, but also the rights and responsibilities that arise domestically and globally from our common humanity. Social studies education is best suited for this task, as it equips students with the knowledge, values and attitudes, skills, and dispositions to be engaged, reflective citizens and responsible, aware members of the world community.

The National Council for the Social Studies affirms that Human Rights Education, in both its civil and its humanitarian aspects, is a necessary element of social studies programs and should be integrated throughout the educational experience of all learners, from early childhood through advanced education and lifelong learning.

Intended Audience

As proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “every individual and every organ of society ... shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for” the human rights of all. Therefore, this position statement is intended for a broad audience of the general public, preK-12 school communities, social studies supervisors and directors, higher education, and all educators, formal and informal, throughout society.

Background

Questions about rights and responsibilities of humans in society are as old as humankind. Cultures across the globe have for millennia identified people’s rights and guaranteed their protection. Even when tied to group identity—family, band, community, religion, class—socially-acknowledged rights have been used to support fairness, compassion for the poor, and justice for members and strangers.

From its founding, the United States has been part of a global conversation on how to promote justice and prevent abuses of individual rights. The American commitment to equal and unalienable rights for all has remained part of the American Revolutionary heritage since the Declaration of Independence (1776). This commitment extended to humanitarian conduct in time of war with George Washington’s orders that captured

British soldiers and Hessian mercenaries be treated humanely.

As is often the case in human history, ideals proclaimed in the name of “We the People” and conduct tolerated in actual practice have sometimes been in conflict. The Declaration of Independence was drafted by revolutionary leaders who owned slaves; the U.S. Constitution did not protect suffrage for women or people of color. The transition from proclamations to legally enforceable civil rights required more than a hundred years after the end of the Civil War. At the same time, social movements to abolish slavery, expand the right to vote, guarantee rights for workers, eliminate segregation, and respect indigenous self-determination have continued to advance human rights within the United States, a story which continues today.

In the 1860s, brutal wars raged on both sides of the Atlantic. The horrors on European battlefields led to the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross (1863) and the adoption of the First Geneva Convention (1864). Simultaneously, the fratricidal devastation of the American Civil War led Abraham Lincoln to issue General Order No. 100, the Lieber Code (1863), establishing standards for the humane treatment of captured Confederate soldiers and civilians in the occupied South.

The savagery of two world wars, the atrocities of the Holocaust, and the rising demands for decolonization led to a flowering of human rights and humanitarian standards in the mid 20th century. From the early 1940s, the United States provided leadership in the development of international laws, standards and principles for the protection of human rights and codification of humanitarian standards in armed conflict.

In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared global promotion of Four Freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear—as critical

Allied war aims, incorporating them into the Atlantic Charter (1941), the Declaration by the United Nations (1942) and the Charter of the United Nations (1945). The UN Commission on Human Rights, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, built upon this foundation while incorporating ideas and aspirations of European, Asian, Latin American and African nations into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). There was not always unanimity across nations, social classes, cultures or political philosophies as to which rights were most central or valid in the essential canon of human rights. Some of these differences continue to this day, both internationally and in public policy debates within the United States. Yet these rights—political, civil, economic, social and cultural—together constitute a body of “basic values widely cherished” (L.C. Chen, p.202) as universal human rights.

Developments in international humanitarian law after World War II included both principles governing trials of major Nazi criminals at Nuremberg and expansion of the Geneva Conventions through the Diplomatic Conference of Geneva (1949). The Nuremberg Tribunal relied on principles of jurisprudence articulated by Robert Jackson, the Tribunal’s chief prosecutor and a U.S. Supreme Court justice. Nuremberg established “crimes against humanity” as conduct considered illegal even in times of armed conflict and even within an individual nation. The 1949 Diplomatic Conference expanded the existing Geneva Conventions and adopted a 4th Convention dealing specifically with protection of civilians in armed conflict. High-level U.S. diplomats advised by top military lawyers participated decisively in this process.

Clearly, the development of universal principles of human rights and humanitarian law is an essential story in the history of the United States and the world.

Why?

Rationale for Recommendation and Recommendation

Each declaration or treaty expressing human rights principles or humanitarian law standards, commits all state parties to educate their people about the rights and standards that the peoples of the world have agreed must be upheld. In the United States, this responsibility to educate exists at different levels within the federal system and within different agencies at state and local levels. In the 21st century, local, national and international spheres have become interdependent. Thus, the quality of human rights/humanitarian law education provided in pre-collegiate education carries national and global consequences. Today’s students must understand fundamental principles of human rights and humanitarian law to appropriately exercise their civic responsibilities and take their places in the world at large.

Recognizing the importance of human rights education, the UN General Assembly, in December 2005, established a World Programme on Human Rights Education to provide global coordination and information on the development of

human rights education worldwide. In coordination with this ongoing global effort, the UN General Assembly on December 19, 2011, adopted by consensus a Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (UNDHRET). The United States mission in Geneva expressed the U.S. government’s support for the declaration when it was under consideration by the UN Human Rights Council and joined the consensus.

Likewise, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the American Red Cross (ARC) recognize their mission to disseminate information about international humanitarian law (IHL) to civilian populations and encourage incorporation of IHL into programs of school based and community education.

In the United States, at least 35 states include human rights content and/or references to human rights in their social studies standards. Human rights education is also referenced in the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards.

What?

Fundamental Principles of Human Rights

Universal human rights today include those rights identified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the various international and regional treaties and national laws adopted to ensure those rights. According to Amnesty International:

Human rights are basic rights and freedoms that all people are entitled to regardless of nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, race, religion, language, or other status. Human rights include civil and political rights, such as the right to life, liberty and freedom of expression; and social, cultural and economic rights including the right to participate in culture, the right to food, and the right to work and receive an education. Human rights are protected and upheld by international and national laws and treaties. (www.amnestyusa.org/research/human-rights-basics)

These rights have been further elaborated through various covenants, conventions and declarations such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and other international and regional agreements.

Fundamental Principles of International Humanitarian Law

International humanitarian law is a special category of human rights law. The International Committee of the Red Cross explains:

International humanitarian law is a set of rules which seek, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of

armed conflict. It protects persons who are not or are no longer participating in the hostilities and restricts the means and methods of warfare. International humanitarian law is also known as the law of war or the law of armed conflict. (www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/whatisihl.pdf)

Who

A fundamental understanding of universal human rights and international humanitarian law is an inheritance belonging to every child in every nation of the world and an essential resource for citizens everywhere. Therefore, it is a fundamental responsibility of educators in the United States to incorporate human rights education into their teaching, curriculum planning and program administration.

Implementation

Human Rights Education is a lifelong process of teaching and learning that helps individuals develop the knowledge, skills, and values to fully exercise and protect the human rights of themselves and others; to fulfill their responsibilities in the context of internationally agreed upon human rights principles; and to achieve justice and peace in our world. (Human Rights Educators USA, www.hreusa.net)

NCSS members and all educators are encouraged to use this position statement in developing and advocating for human rights education practices and programs so that all students learn to understand and value fundamental principles of human rights and to apply those principles in daily life. Educators can begin by discovering the wide range of human rights-related curricula and lesson plans developed by civil society organizations in the United States and around the world.

For example, in the state of Minnesota, the Human Rights Resource Center of the University of Minnesota has joined with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights and community partners to develop *This is My Home*, “a human rights education resource for primary and secondary students, which seeks to create peaceful, effective, and fun learning environments for all to excel in Minnesota schools” (www.hrusa.org/thisismyhome/index.html). The curriculum is aligned with Minnesota content standards and enjoys popularity and use in schools throughout the state and across the country.

Other examples can be found on such publicly available sites as the Human Rights Educators USA website and its resource list: www.hreusa.net/resource list and many others, some of which are included in the bibliography below.

No matter what the setting—classroom, service learning program or community center—common principles inform the methods for effectively teaching and learning human rights.

These include using participatory methods for learning such as role plays, discussion, debates, mock trials, games, and simulations. Students should be encouraged to engage in an open-minded examination of human rights concerns and critically reflect on their environment with opportunities to draw their own conclusions and envision their choices in presented situations. Universal human rights represent a positive value system, a standard to which everyone is entitled. Students can make connections between these values and their own lived experiences. This approach recognizes that the individual can make a difference and provides opportunities to explore examples of individuals who have done so. Students should examine both the international/global dimension and the domestic implications of human rights themes and consider how they relate to questions of diversity, economic inequality and the relationship between individual choices and collective wellbeing. These intersections provide an opportunity to incorporate a variety of perspectives (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, cultural/national traditions). In addition, human rights should be explicitly linked to relevant provisions of international, regional, national and state laws, treaties and declarations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions. As students build their social studies research skills with primary source documents, they will learn that the protection of human rights involves a framework of laws and enacted policies that reflect an evolving understanding of justice.

Like all civic and social education, human rights education includes both content and process dimensions. Thus, the learning environment should reinforce respect for fairness and human dignity. In such a supportive environment, students can connect their lived experience directly to core human rights concepts and legal documents. Human rights education is enlivened when it includes an action dimension providing participants with opportunities to act on their beliefs and understanding while addressing challenges at local, state, regional, national and /or international levels.

Conclusion

The principles upon which the United States was founded—equality of rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” promoted by attention to the “general welfare” of all—resonate with the aspirations of people everywhere. Educators, government leaders and community members across the United States and throughout the world call for renewed emphasis on civic engagement, civility in discourse and behavior, and a renewed respect for the common humanity of all. Agreements articulating universal standards for human rights and humanitarian conduct, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions, call on all nations to educate their civilian populations about their human rights and their responsibility to uphold and protect the rights of others, in all circumstances.

Today’s world has never been more interconnected. When violence and hatred disrupt community life at all levels from

familial to global, people working together for the common good continue to demonstrate the power of human rights and humanitarian standards to change the balance. The UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, adopted with United States support, calls for a new initiative, a new energy to build understanding and respect for the essential rights of all. Social studies educators in the United States have a special opportunity and a responsibility to contribute to this growing movement by integrating the fundamental concepts of universal human rights and international humanitarian law into a nurturing and yet rigorous education that prepares students to be compassionate, aware, and effective citizens and to work together to build a more livable world. 🌍

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