

Multiple Perspectives on The Right to Education

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IN THE SUMMER OF 2003, more than 180 educators, community representatives, academics, administrators, NGO representatives, and politicians gathered in New York City for a national human rights education summit. The five authors attended at the behest of Amnesty International for discussions on human rights, the No Child Left Behind Act, and the related issue of the right of all children to obtain a free education.

Our statements below, which are excerpted from a larger report, discuss the work of social studies educators who believe that it IS possible to leave no child behind. We look beyond the era of limits set by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to think about how social studies education might be enacted if we really believe that each person is important to the whole of humanity—that each person has the right to be an active and engaged part of the community. We each seek a reasoned and equitable way of educating America's children. -MLW

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I am concerned because of the inequity of the learning experiences that we observe and the limiting of possibilities we see for teachers who are tightly bound to state and school policy.

Boundary 1: Current experiences and practices in Texas schools are shaped, in many cases, by the legislation of No Child Left Behind and its antecedents in Texas.² There is the Texas Essential Knowledge

and Skills (TEKS), developed in 1995, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), which is now history, replaced by the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). In 2003, before the first administration of the TAKS exam, predictions of failure ran as high as 30 to 50 percent. Students must pass this one test to receive a high school diploma.

Students have had considerably higher attrition rates than White students. Hispanic students are lost from enrollment at even higher rates than either White students or Black students.³ Currently, in the midst of heated controversy, the Texas Education Agency is working to clarify the records that track what happens to all of the many students who do not finish high school.

Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT ¹

Boundary 2: With an intense focus on numeracy and literacy, social studies teaching, learning experiences, and materials are often absent or limited. This is particularly evident in the primary grades and in the economically, linguistically, and ethnically diverse urban schools in our region of the state.

Boundary 3: Texas has a rising problem with children not completing school: they become lost in the system. During the period from 1982-83 to 1985-86, the attrition rate in Texas public schools was about 33 percent. During the period 1996-97 to 1999-2000, the attrition rate was about 40 percent.² Hispanic students and Black stu-

Boundary 4: The political and educational climate in the state creates limitations on teaching and learning opportunities. Our students do not wish to teach, or feel compelled or prepared to teach under these limitations. Senior teachers do not want to mentor interns or novices in a grade level where TAKS is administered. They might be blamed if scores dip. Thus, opportunities for professional development become limited.

Boundary 5: Finally, a teacher's ability to be creative and to teach rich and complex content to the needs and interests of their students is also limited. This is a grave concern. Philosopher John Dewey

wrote: “The best minds are not especially likely to be drawn where there is danger that they may submit to conditions which no self-respecting intelligence likes to put up with; and where their time and energy are likely to be so occupied with details of external conformity that they have no opportunity for free and full play of their own vigor.”⁴

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A quality learning environment is characterized by students authentically engaged in learning and teachers having high expectations for all students. When teachers set high expectations for students, the classroom becomes a place

- where risk taking is encouraged and supported;
- where there is positive support for learning;
- where there is mutual respect among teacher and students; and
- where students have a say in their learning.

Further, teachers’ learning expectations must be clearly defined by explicit criteria so that students can use such criteria as reference points for the development of their own learning. Classrooms that are characterized by these attributes are fertile settings for examining human rights topics; in fact they are inexplicitly intertwined—how you teach cannot be separated from what you teach.

Learning must be personally significant to students and deemed worthy of their time and effort. Students need to see why, and to understand that, their learning matters. Making such connections takes time; to understand deeply complex issues necessitates a paring down of the standards—a careful consideration of what’s most important. A democracy depends on a well-educated citizenry with the foundations for understanding human rights, democracy, and our relationship to others. Fostering dispositions towards justice and equity is fundamental to these understandings, whether related to our neighbors next door, down the street, or

around the world.

Teachers and students who engage in lessons characterized by these elements cannot breeze through the curriculum; these lessons take time. Until we seriously examine the role of standards in relation to quality teaching, learning outcomes are in jeopardy.

BLYTHE HINITZ is a professor of Elementary and Early Childhood Education and Assistant Chair for Early Childhood Education at The College of New Jersey.

My current research deals with anti-bullying and harassment among young children. A new state law requires every school district in New Jersey to have an anti-harassment plan in place during the current academic year.

As a delegate of an NGO organization accredited at the United Nations, I attend the annual conference each fall on human rights. Every time I enter the UN buildings along First Avenue, I am reminded that although President Clinton signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the U.S. Congress has not yet ratified it. We are one of the two U.N. member nations that have not done so.

The CRC states that every child has a right to a name and nationality, the first and most basic of human rights. This portion of the document speaks to the experiences of refugee and displaced children, street children around the world, and undocumented immigrants in the United States.

Among the basic provisions of the CRC are the right to play and the right to education. One way of entering the discussion is to respond to students’ questions.⁵

Many history and social studies classes focus on a litany of wars and their causes, effects, and resolutions. Peace educators are attempting to assist social studies teachers in sharing “peace history,” the saga of those throughout the decades who have worked for peace, what these individuals stood for, what they did, and the results that were achieved through their efforts. Peace education at its best gives students the skills to become active peacemakers. It is a pedagogical effort to build a better

world, including the teaching of the skills and techniques of conflict management, the various ways to provide security, and nonviolent ways of working together.⁶

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With so much emphasis placed since passage of the “No Child Left Behind Act” on the fundamental skills of literacy and numeracy, not only does social studies lose ground, but global studies, women’s studies, and lessons about human rights are increasingly marginalized. Teachers and teacher educators need to find ways to resist this narrowing of the curriculum, especially as regards the history and contemporary situation of women of the world.⁷

If a nation insures women’s rights to education, health, economic and political security, it also secures the wellbeing of its children. Organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations work with educators to insure that women’s rights and human rights gain visibility in the curriculum. These organizations, and the international treaties they struggled for, have brought attention to the many infringements, both overseas and in the United States, of women’s rights. This history needs to be better known. Schools and teachers can play an important role in this process. In the end, protecting women’s rights strengthens the family and provides a better future for children, despite the efforts of some individuals, groups, and governments to have us think otherwise.

I believe that education can help us resist the inheritance of patriarchy, which has shaped social and cultural institutions around the globe. A variety of resources are at hand. For example, Joni Seager’s *Penguin Atlas of Women in the World*⁸ provides powerful graphics depicting the geography of women’s rights violations worldwide. Students can conduct oral histories with significant women in their lives, make use of online resources to find up-to-date information about women’s status in different counties, and read novels, autobiographies,

and biographies that help them understand women's situation today and how it has developed historically.

CYNTHIA TYSON is an associate professor in Social Studies and Global Education in the College of Education at The Ohio State University.

Often I tell a story about September 11: Teachers near the cataclysmic zone of Ground Zero in New York City walked as many as 9,000 students across the Brooklyn Bridge to safety. These teachers were people who for a moment in time embodied the spirit of what it means to be a human rights educator. Some of them stayed with their students for up to three days while parents, caregivers, or social service agencies arrived to claim children. Some sang songs with preschoolers as they crossed the Brooklyn Bridge. Some told stories over and over again to children sleeping in their arms, hoping, in some cases against all odds, that a parent or caregiver would pick the children up.

The challenges and opportunities of teaching in today's political climate are many. Human rights ought to be a central theme in social studies classes, but the reality is that social studies topics—history, civics, and current issues of any sort—take a back seat to high-stakes standardized tests, even the best of which measure a narrow range of skills and knowledge.

There is, in society today, a lack of attention to connections between our history and current, significant decisions. There is, for example, a historical connection between patterns of educational impoverishment in this nation and the fact that in these United States, not too long ago, there existed the institution of slavery, followed by the institution of Jim Crow laws. Within living memory, American jurisprudence has denied the full status of “human” to many citizens.

This historical connection reminds us of ancestors who were enslaved and dehumanized, and yet struggled for a better tomorrow. Many children in American classrooms today are descendants of the people who experienced these events, and they deserve to know this history in full. “There is no example I know of in the literature of world politics that is more stunning than the American effort to raise black people out of legalized slavery and bring them, finally by actions of the Supreme Court of the United States, into full citizenship.”⁹

Until we create a bridge from the events of history to prospective action in contemporary times, we will continue to have teachers and children in 21st century classrooms not aware of the power they have to confront the problems in their own communities as well as the many human right violations that take place internationally. The old African proverb, “You are

because I am,” embodies the notion that both the legacy of our ancestors and the experiences of everyone alive today speak to us. We have much to learn. Our fates are tied together, and none of us can stand idly by. 🌍

Notes

1. Eleanor Roosevelt, speech at the presentation of “In Your Hands: A Guide for Community Action for the Tenth Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” March 27, 1958, United Nations, New York, NY www.udhr.org/history/inyour.htm
2. See, for example, Intercultural Development Research Association, “Longitudinal Attrition Rates in Texas Public High Schools, 1985-86 to 2000-01” (www.idra.org/Research/long2001.htm).
3. Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).
4. John Dewey, *Education Today* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1940): 11.
5. See for example: Wendy J. Hood, “Did They Know He Had Slaves When They Elected Him? Young Children Can Ask Powerful Questions,” in Stephanie Steffy and Wendy J. Hood, *If This Is Social Studies, Why Isn't It Boring?* (York, ME: Stenhouse, 1994), 107-120.
6. B. F. Hinitz, “Early Childhood Education for Peace,” in Nuba et. al. *Resources for Early Childhood: A Handbook* (New York: Garland, 1994), 249-286.
7. Merry Merryfield and Margaret Smith Crocco, “Teaching about Women of the World,” *Social Education* (January/February, 2003).
8. Joni Seager, *Penguin Atlas of Women in the World* (New York, Penguin, 2003)
9. Roger Wilkins, “What Patriotism Means Today in the Wake of 9/11/2001,” *Social Education* 66, no. 6 (October 2002), 351.