Respect, understanding and human rights education: a fair exchange?

Steve Sharra

More than 60 years since human rights entered the education agenda, some groups of human beings are still denied existential attributes of their humanity and are subjected to violence because of their identities. Furthermore, human rights are still perceived as a foreign agenda in numerous societies. Contemporary problems of minority rights point to educational curricula and teacher professional development as the next frontier in promoting global respect, human dignity and understanding. What role can the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM) play in shaping the next Commonwealth frontier?

Origins

Human rights education (HRE) originates from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), in which Article 26 declares that 'Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality'. HRE aims to support the intellectual as well as emotional development of individuals.

UNESCO dedicated the ten-year period between 1995 and 2004 as the UN Decade for Human Rights Education, a development that generated much educational activity around the teaching of human rights in schools and outside schools. The UN envisions HRE for all sectors of society, in formal, non-formal and informal education. In formal education, HRE is taught either as a stand-alone subject or as an integration of human rights issues into already-existing subjects. In non-formal and informal education, HRE is offered in professional training for police, prison and military officers, and for social workers and other professionals working to promote human dignity and end rights abuses.

HRE trends and areas of emphasis differ based on social and political contexts (Tibbitts, 2008). Countries emerging from conflict see rule of law as their main focus; in societies where democracy is seen as entrenched, HRE concerns itself with problems of anti-discrimination and the rights of minority groups.

Despite the global spread of its signatories, the UDHR's Western origins have at times created an image of human rights as an extension of the colonialist project (Baxi, 1994; Mutua, 2002; Barash and Webel, 2002; Ife, 2007). Even where activists have successfully demonstrated local traditions and customs that uphold human dignity and repulse societal abuses and atrocities, the human rights approach has brought with it tensions and misunderstandings. In Malawi, the translation of the term 'human rights' has been based on freedoms one is born with (Englund, 2006), though the ontological definitions of a human being,

uMunthu, already have embedded in them notions of human dignity, rights and responsibilities.

Curricular and teacher professional development interventions run the risk of alienating teachers and students if they are not grounded in practical challenges and societal debates about social justice.

Consciousness, difference and debate

An often ignored source of ideas about human rights is what Upendra Baxi (1994) calls the 'consciousness of people of the world who have waged the most persistent struggles for decolonization and self-determination' (p. 1). The struggle for independence in most African countries was home-grown, with ordinary people, including those without a modern education, understanding the racial, political, economic and cultural violence they were being subjected to by colonisers. To deploy this heritage in arguments against minorities' rights can ring hollow. But arguably, 'the North's human rights diplomacy and advocacy [are] geared more to the exigencies of realpolitik than to a co-equal protection and promotion of human rights throughout the world' (Baxi, p. 22).

Some economic policies of neoliberalism, championed by Western countries and international financial institutions, are known to have wreaked havoc in developing countries, and to be antithetical to poverty reduction and human rights (see Baxi, ibid.). The 2007 Commonwealth report *Civil Paths to Peace* calls this the 'stark problem of double standards' where national self-interest trumps international law (p. 70).

In responding to that report, civil society groups working in education made a series of recommendations that point to a clear need for the involvement of teachers and students in achieving respect and understanding. The civil society groups called for the mobilisation of teachers' organisations, exchange visits between Commonwealth countries for teachers and students, and the forging of links between schools, colleges and community organisations in various Commonwealth countries. More crucially, the groups called for professional development programmes for teachers aimed at supporting teachers and principals working in conflict-affected environments.

In Malawi, HRE is being integrated into the primary and secondary school curriculum, but whether such programmes are having significant effect on societal perceptions of sexual minorities, and

even on problems of gender-based violence (whatever the sexual orientation of the victims), is yet to be determined.

A long-term approach to ensuring a healthy debate on human rights and the ultimate goals of respect, understanding and global peace lies in school curricula and the education of teachers. In many African societies, *uMunthu* or *uBuntu* offers an entry point localising and contextualising human rights thinking. In framing the environment in which teachers train and practise, Commonwealth education ministers have the opportunity to make this engagement a true dialogue, one aimed at addressing the 'silences of HRE discourses' (Baxi, p. 31).

The *Civil Paths to Peace* report is compatible with the ideals of HRE and the wider curricular challenges for teaching and promoting peace. The report offers a basis for a teacher education and professional development that fosters teacher self-empowerment, a necessity for transformative education. A human rights education approach that puts peace and social justice as the central aims of education can merge the Commonwealth's vision and global society's craving for respect, understanding and human dignity.

References

Barash, D. P. and Webel, C. P. (2002). *Peace and Conflict Studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Baxi, U. (1994). *Human Rights Education: The promise of the third millennium?* Available from Organizing Committee of the People's Decade of Human Rights Education. http://www.pdhre.org

Commonwealth Consortium for Education (2009). *Learning to Live Together: A response from civil society in the education sector to the report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding. Civil Paths to Peace*. Available at http://www.commonwealtheducation.org/Final%20version%20Bangi%20Conference%20Statement.pdf

Englund, H. (2006). *Prisoners of Freedom: Human rights and the African poor*. Berkely, CA: University of California Press.

Ife, J. (2007). 'Human Rights and Peace'. In C. Webel and J. Galtung *Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

Mutua, M. (2002). Human Rights: A Political and Cultural Critique. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Sen, A. et al. (2007). *Civil Paths to Peace: Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding*.

Tibbitts, F. (2008). Human Rights Education. *Encyclopedia of Peace Education*. Teachers College, Columbia University. Available at Http://www.tc.edu/centers/epe

Steve Sharra, PhD, is a Malawian teacher educator, board chair of the Malawi Human Rights Youth Network, and a 2012 fellow of the Programme for African Leadership at the London School of Economics.