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## Notes From the Field: 7th International Conference on Human Rights Education, Santiago, Chile, December 12-14, 2016

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# Notes From The Field

7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Human Rights Education  
Santiago, Chile  
December 12-14, 2016

By Susan Roberta Katz<sup>\*</sup>, Nancy Flowers<sup>\*\*</sup>, & Kristi Rudelius-Palmer<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

**T**he seventh annual International Conference on Human Rights Education (IHREC) took place from December 12-15, 2016, in Santiago, Chile - a fitting site for discussing the theme, “Challenges in Civil Society.” Hosted by the University of Chile School of Law, the conference

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welcomed around 185 participants from 25 different countries, mostly from Latin America (Chile, Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico), but also including Asia (Taiwan, New Zealand, Philippines, and India), Australia, Europe (Poland, United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands, Italy), North America (United States and Canada), and Africa (South Africa and Nigeria). Even though most attendees came from Chile, the impressive representation from around the world lent the conference a strong international ambiance.

The conference structure included 12 panel presentations, introduced by special invited speakers, such as Claudio Grossman, Dean of the Washington School of Law, American University in Washington, DC, and Sev Ozdowski, Director of Equity and Diversity, Western Sydney University in Australia and IHREC founder. Each panel was moderated by local Chilean human rights professionals, such as Dania Maquilón, Subsecretary of Human Rights, Chilean Ministry of Justice, and Myrna Villegas, Human Rights Center, Faculty of Law, University of Chile. Panel topics covered a wide span of themes, such as “Gender and HRE,” “Multiculturalism and Human Rights Education,” “Global Tendencies and Local Experiences in HRE: Memory Sites, Urban Spaces, and the Role of the State,” and “HRE in Formal Educational Systems.” In addition, poster sessions were held simultaneously with the panels.

A unifying thread throughout the conference was an exploration of how to make human rights more accessible to the public. The expansive range of presentations provided exposure to the rich variety of ways in which Human Rights Education is conceived and delivered – in the academy, in schools, in community sites, in the arts, and in professional training in the military, police and judiciary. Recognizing that human rights education begins in the classroom, several important sessions focused on formal education, addressing the challenges of integrating human rights from early childhood instruction through teacher preparation and legal training. Significant advances appear to be taking place in institutions of higher education, like the University of Playa Ancha (Chile), National University of Lanús (Argentina), and the University of San Francisco (United States), in developing academic programs in HRE for teachers.

Also important was a new sense of the growing research in the HRE field, as presented in Panel 1: Human Rights Education in Formal Education Systems (Part 1) Challenges and Analysis. Hector Gómez and Mariela Fuentes of the University of Santiago, Chile, spoke of how HRE is gaining visibility throughout Latin America as embedded in the universal right to education. After being interwoven into the Chilean school curriculum since the 1990s, HRE will become its own school subject in 2019 under the name of “Citizen Education.” While this may appear as an advance, the presenters raised critical questions regarding underlying conceptions of HRE in Chile, such as an emphasis on individual over social rights, that have contributed to greater inequality and precarity in Chile. Also examining HRE in a developed country, Stefanie Rinaldi’s study, “Why Do Teachers Avoid Explicit HRE? Insights from Group Discussions with 55 Secondary School Teachers in Switzerland,” confirmed other recent reports worldwide that even after training in HRE, most teachers do not feel competent. More surprising was teachers’ general opinion that human rights was not a subject to teach explicitly but rather a way of life to model implicitly by example. Thus, when we are talking generally about HRE, we always must ask for more specific definitions since they vary greatly depending upon the context. Central questions must be asked: HRE for whom? HRE for what end?

One of the most stimulating sessions at the conference was Panel 6: HRE for the General Public (Part 2): Literature, Art, and Social Organizations and Movements. Included in this panel were artist Marisa Cornejo, a Chilean who paints her dreams of exile, and esteemed Chilean writer Arturo Fontaine, along with literary critics and educators who all brilliantly portrayed the powerful role of the arts in HRE. However, the traditional academic format and structure constrained the possibility of a dynamic discussion - which was true throughout the entire conference). While this panel brought together such diverse talent, each presenter was given the floor for about fifteen minutes with a meager ten minutes allowed at the end for questions from the audience, ultimately allowing only two questions. Not only were those listening inhibited from engaging with the speakers, but also the panelists themselves could not interact with each other.

For example, in his presentation, Arturo Fontaine (novelist, poet, and former director of the Museum of Memory and Human Rights) declared, “To claim to know the truth is always to lie,” a provocative statement that could have evoked a deep discussion among the panelists, many of whom were very much engaged in the memorialization of violence, exile, and oppression. Instead, auditors scribbled notes, and the statement was left to echo in the room: a waste of a learning moment for panelists and audience alike. Hopefully, IHREC conferences in the future will integrate critical pedagogy (learning *through* human rights) and build in ample opportunities for open dialogue and active reflection. On a positive note, Equitas, a global human rights organization hosting the 2017 conference in Montreal, is already planning a balance of panel discussions and professional development workshops.

Given that this conference was situated in Chile, where tens of thousands suffered brutal human rights violations during the Pinochet military dictatorship that ruled from September 11, 1973-March 10, 1990, a central focus was on the importance of preserving historical memory as a tool to struggle against contemporary abuses of power. In this vein, Panel 4 was dedicated to “HRE for the General Public: Global Tendencies and Local Experiences in HRE: Memory Sites, Urban Spaces and the Role of the State,” which included three speakers from Chile and one from Indonesia. In addition, two documentary films on these issues were screened in the evenings: “Héroes Frágiles” (2006, *Fragile Heroes*) by Emilio Pacull and “Habeas Corpus” (2015) by Claudia Barrill and Sebastián Moreno.

Above all, the highlight of the conference was the emotionally haunting visit on the last day to two historical memory sites, Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos (Museum of Memory and Human Rights) and Villa Grimaldi. Upon entering the museum, we were immediately greeted by a poster with the words of President Michelle Bachelet, who placed the first stone at the building site on December 10, 2008:

*No podemos cambiar nuestro pasado  
Sólo podemos aprender de lo vivido  
Esta es nuestra responsabilidad y nuestro desafío.*

We cannot change our past  
We can only learn from what is lived  
This is our responsibility and our challenge.

President Bachelet's message embodies the essence of historical memory and its meaning for the present. The mere existence of the museum and other historical memory sites is a significant testimonial act in and of itself. For many years, the Chilean government did not acknowledge the horrors of the dictatorship that affected a wide sector of the society, leaving behind much pain and division.

This state-sponsored museum, which seeks to document the brutal repression of and popular resistance to the Pinochet regime, is admirable in its design, creative use of technology, and extensive documentary resources. Unlike many museums also dedicated to memorializing historical events (e.g., the US Holocaust Museum), the museum balances the story of brutal oppression with that of resistance and popular efforts to reestablish democracy and the rule of law. The victims (many of them students, leftists, or union members) are individualized, their names and faces memorialized. Like the new National Museum of African-American History and Culture, the visitor is led through dark times into a hopeful future.

After the visit to the museum, we went to Villa Grimaldi Park for Peace, Chile's memorial to Pinochet's victims of torture between 1973-1978 that was inaugurated in 1987. At this former detention center, Pinochet's secret police held and brutally tortured around 4,500 men and women; of these, over 220 were "disappeared" (never to be seen again) and 18 were murdered by the government. All the victims, including President Bachelet and her mother, were actively involved in resisting the oppression of the dictatorship; their only crime was their political idealism. Detainees at Villa Grimaldi were political prisoners of the state, tortured because of their involvement in leftist organizations like the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, or the MIR (Revolutionary Left Movement).

Once a private estate before being taken over as a prison camp, Villa Grimaldi today is designed to be a place of reflection as well as a cultural center. In the large outdoor park, "many birds – parakeets, caracaras, and

doves – gather on the trees and inhabit the place as if they were representing the souls of the disappeared” (as described in personal conversation with author J. Patrice McSherry, 2016). Beautifully colored flowers brighten the garden, each labeled with the name of a woman tortured at the site. As we walked through the park, we entered the indoor exhibits and could almost physically sense the spirits of the victims. Our tour guide explained the challenges of recovering the documented acts that occurred at Villa Grimaldi and speaking up against these human rights violations. We ended our visit with a discussion about current obstacles to gaining access to the truth about violations still happening in Chile, even under a democratic government.

The whole narrative of both the Museo de la Memoria and Villa Grimaldi continually puts Chilean history into a context of human rights and compares it to other struggles to affirm human rights principles against oppressive regimes. In effect, the museum itself is a human rights education lesson. Our visit to these two sites truly made history come alive, vividly culminating the VII International Human Rights Education Conference, which had a powerful impact on all the attendees.

For example, native Chilean, Barbara Santibanez, who soon will receive her MA in Geography and Global Studies from the University of North Carolina, returned home to attend the conference and to finish her thesis research on HRE in Chile. In offering her impressions of the conference, she stated, “It was a strong signal of how much the HRE field has progressed in Chile in the last decade or so. This is the first Latin American country to host the IHRE conference since its inception. These are still baby steps, but the future looks promising for those who believe in the transformative power of HRE.” Similarly, Janaina Pereira Antunes, human rights attorney from Brazil, summed up our collective experience: “Attending the 7th IHREC made my conviction and hope in HRE fields stronger.”

As mentioned earlier, the 8<sup>th</sup> International Human Rights Education Conference will be held in Montreal, Canada, from November 31-December 3, 2017, to be hosted by Equitas. The theme of “Bridging Our Diversities” is designed to explore the ways that human rights education can serve as a vehicle to resolve current conflicts arising from globalization, based in di-

verse identities and ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic differences. The conference format promises to be interactive, providing an invaluable opportunity for those engaged in HRE around the world to once again meet together and unite in solidarity.