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Oana Nestian-Sandu

*Independent Scholar*

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# Notes From The Field

## Teaching Students to Act for Human Rights

By Oana Nestian-Sandu\*

**T**he Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (2010) defines human rights education as:

Education, training, awareness raising, information, practices and activities which aim, by equipping learners with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behavior, to empower learners to contribute to the building and defense of a universal culture of human rights in society, with a view to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. (p. 1)

In reality however, the education system does little to actually “empower learners to contribute” to society. The curriculum is focused mainly on informing students about the history of human rights, with a strong focus on the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and with very little focus on creating an environment that reflects human rights or on empowering students to act for human rights in their community or in the world.

Current human rights education is directed to the dissemination of content knowledge about human rights. As Okafor and Agbakwa remark,

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\* Oana Nestian-Sandu conducts training and research on intercultural education, human rights education, Holocaust education, migration and Roma inclusion in Europe and the United States. She works in the not-for-profit sector and consults for the Council of Europe and the United Nations. She has a Ph.D. in Psychology.

“there is a void between praxis and theory, which has led to the impotency of human rights education in cultivating any learning outcomes, beyond knowledge content” (Okafor & Agbakwa, 2001, p. 41).

Human rights as a comprehensive and universal framework were agreed upon by the international community in the aftermath of WWII as basic standards without which people cannot live in dignity. More than 70 years later, we teach students around the world about the Holocaust and what happened before this international code of rights was agreed upon. They learn about the horrific events from both from a macro perspective and from an individual perspective, from historical perspectives and from personal perspectives. They read history books, diaries, memoirs and they try to imagine where they would have stood. Would they have taken the side of the perpetrator or the side of the rescuer, or would they have settled in the cozy place of a bystander who thinks he or she is neutral or unable to do anything? However, no matter how hard we try to imagine we cannot know for sure how we would have reacted in a situation like that. But what we do know, is how we react to present day violations of human rights – from discrimination in employment or housing, to violence, lack of access to education, to poverty, violence and war.

We teach students concepts and historical facts, but this knowledge is not enough for them to act. They need more than knowledge; they need skills, motivation and confidence to challenge the status quo, to react to a particular situation of discrimination or to cases of human rights violation. They need to be inspired to take action at local and international level and to move away from nationalistic narratives, away from the “us-them” dichotomy.

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, adopted in December 2011, reaffirms the necessity of access to human rights education and asserts that: “human rights education encompasses education:

*about* human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection;

*through* human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners; and

*for* human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others.”

Human rights education interpreted as education *about, through and for* human rights demands commitment, creativity and the willingness to go the extra distance to embed various perspectives and to learn from various disciplines. We propose a series of adjustments that can be implemented in the educational systems and practices for a coherent approach in human rights education, an approach that is deeply rooted in today’s reality, an approach that aims at developing transformative citizens.

## **The “inter“ Solutions:**

### **Intercultural Education**

Human rights education does not deal with abstract concepts, but with every day realities. For this reason it needs to be adapted to the cultural and individual specificities of the students, it needs to be taught with intercultural awareness and from a global perspective.

UNESCO’s publication *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good* emphasizes the importance of cultural diversity, which is viewed as “humanity’s greatest source of creativity and wealth”. However, schools often marginalize students belonging to cultural, religious, linguistic, gender and sexual orientation minorities.

Intercultural understanding is key to acknowledging that human rights apply to all human beings, regardless of the inequalities that still exist and regardless of the fact that they are not always respected. It challenges structural discrimination (a human rights violation in itself) and promotes structural inclusion and cultural empowerment, as essential conditions for the internalization of human rights values (Banks, 2010).

Intercultural education has the potential for social transformation, it is a tool for social change. The vast amount of stereotypes and prejudices that people grow up with, the “us-them” dichotomy which is so often used, from classroom interactions to political discourses need to be replaced with genuine curiosity about our fellow human beings, with empathy and with intercultural competence. The central challenge for modern, diverse societies is to create a new, broader sense of “us”.

Intercultural education contributes to the respect of human rights for all, minorities and majority, immigrants and refugees, undocumented and internally displaced, men, women, transgendered, children, seniors, etc. Moreover, it leads to a deeper understanding of the fact that equal opportunities do not mean favoritism, but an attempt to diminish the inequalities and historical injustices (Gorski, 2008). For this reason, the participation of all citizens in shaping the societies in which they live is necessary in order to reflect the pluralism of their own realities.

A practical tool to support educators to consciously embed intercultural dialogue in their practice was published by the Council of Europe in 2014, titled *Guidelines for intercultural dialogue in non-formal learning / education activities*<sup>1</sup>. The tool was developed primarily for non-formal education activities, but it can be easily adapted to the formal education system.

### **Interdisciplinary Approach**

Education is a powerful transformative force to promote human rights and dignity, to eradicate poverty and deepen sustainability, to build a better future for all, founded on equal rights and social justice, respect for cultural diversity, international solidarity and shared responsibility, all of which are fundamental aspects of our common humanity (UNESCO, 2015). Achieving these goals demands both disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. While there is quite an impressive development in various

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<sup>1</sup> The *Guidelines for intercultural dialogue in non-formal learning / education activities* is available at: <http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/icd-guidelines>

disciplines, there is an increasing need for debate and dialogue across the board.

Interdisciplinary understanding is demonstrated when students “integrate knowledge, methods, and languages from different disciplines to solve problems, create products, produce explanations, or ask novel questions about a topic of global significance in ways that would not be feasible through a single disciplinary lens” (UNESCO, 2015).

Human rights are not the province of any one academic discipline; human rights education is a transversal theme across the curriculum. For this reason interdisciplinary approaches are necessary to provide a robust multifaceted understanding of human rights and teacher training is needed to prepare teachers of all subjects during their studies and their continuous professional development. The UN’s World Program for Human Rights Education emphasizes the importance of such programs and proposes that they are most effective when understandings of human rights inform the entire education system (UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, 2011).

A stronger link needs to be established particularly between human rights education, education for democratic citizenship, intercultural education and global education.

Human rights education and education for democratic citizenship are increasingly viewed as interlinked topics, including in the recent publication on “Curriculum Development and Review for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education” launched in October 2015 by the Council of Europe, UNESCO, ODHIR, OSCE and OAS. We made the case for the importance of strengthening the link between human rights education and intercultural education to promote social cohesion, intercultural understanding and the valuing of diversity and equality. We would like to focus here on the link between human rights education and global education.

The call for global education is made to open people’s “eyes and minds to the realities of the globalized world and awaken them to bring about a world of greater justice, equity and Human Rights for all” (Council of Europe, 2012). Global education is viewed as the global dimension of

education for democratic citizenship. National governments promote citizenship education, but a global perspective leads to education for cosmopolitan citizenship – a framework that has a transformative potential, but which is seldom yet realized (Starkey, 2010).

There are a few timid attempts to teach global education in schools, but governments need to invest more resources in research and empowering teachers and students to act for human rights at local and global level. Global competence is defined as “the capacity and disposition to understand and act on issues of global significance” (Boix-Mansilla & Jackson, 2011, p. xiii). This involves intercultural competence and a critical understanding of cultural, social and political aspects of the world.

In order to *act for human rights*, students need to think about human beings as a single unity and to understand that all human being are related to one other. “Viewing the population of the world as a human family (...) engages both the intellect and emotions” (Starkey, 2010, p.32). In order to take this intellectual leap and to grow the feeling of belonging to the human family in all its diversity, a series of small steps need to be taken.

A single teacher can only do so much to help students become cosmopolitan citizens with a deep commitment to human rights. Changes in curriculum and educational practices should be reflected in all disciplines and implemented by teachers at all levels. Moreover, a whole-school approach in developing democratic and intercultural governance should accompany the changes in the curriculum and educational practices.

An interdisciplinary whole-school approach in human rights education empowers students to become transformative citizens, which is the highest level of citizenship according to Banks (2010). Transformative citizens have “democratic attitudes and values towards diverse groups, the knowledge and skills needed to function within their own cultural group as well as within other ethnic and cultural groups in the nation, region, and within the global community, and the knowledge and skills to engage in deliberation and power sharing with other groups” (Banks, 2010, p. 63).

Last but not least, human rights education processes must be based on a triangulation between policy, research and practice. Educational programs need to be continuously analysed in the light of most recent

research and policies. Research shows educators not only what needs to be done, but also which are the best ways of doing it. At the same time, the educational experiences should be a major information source for policies and research. Often, these three areas act in parallel, rather than intertwined.

### **Internet as an Ally**

Even though the cyberspace is not mentioned in the UDHR, for obvious reasons, today our lives are more and more organized around the technology we use and access to Internet is considered a human right. The development of new digital technologies has offered both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, information and knowledge are more readily accessible to people around the world. On the other hand, we are witnessing an increasing level of ethnic, cultural, religious intolerance, using communication technologies for ideological and political mobilization to promote exclusivist worldviews.

Human rights education has an important role to play in raising awareness about the issues that give rise to conflict and the means for achieving social justice and peace. There are various examples of both individual and state lack of responsibility, but also very important actions and projects undertaken to protect and promote human rights online.

Teachers play an important role in empowering and motivating students to use the power of the Internet for good causes, rather than for promoting hate and ethnocentrism. They can take effective actions to engage students in online human rights campaigns or to support them to start campaigns on issues of importance for them.

The Internet also offers the possibility of online partnerships with students from other parts of the world, in order to develop common projects for addressing human rights locally and globally. These partnerships are the perfect setting for coherently implementing the learning *about, through, and for* approach in human rights education and the possibility to learn about the lives of students from different cultures, all the while empowering students to become global citizens.

## Conclusion

This paper proposes an expanded view of human rights education, a view that calls for more coherence, more commitment and better collaboration between various professionals and between educators focused on different disciplines. It also argues the importance of human rights education through a wider lens that goes beyond teaching *about* human rights to incorporate teaching *through* human rights – in environments that respect the rights of students and teachers and teaching *for* human rights to empower students to become agents of change. It calls for a change in the education system focused on embedding the principles and methods of intercultural education, education for democratic citizenship and global education into human rights education, in order to develop transformative citizens able understand the world as a global community and to take action against any form of injustice.

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