

Changing the Culture of Child Rights Through Education

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Bio:

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*“Tell me, I’ll forget. Show me, I may remember. Involve me and I’ll understand.”
Ancient Chinese Proverb*

Cultural norms, values and beliefs are transmitted from one generation to the next through the process of routine social interactions as well as through organizational processes and infrastructures. Human rights must be learned in order to be appreciated. They must be appreciated in order to be incorporated at both the micro and macro levels. It is therefore imperative that children and youth be taught about the issue of human rights and their importance. Human rights education has the potential to change the way we think, behave, and treat one another. It shapes the manner in which organizations and social structures interact with those whom they serve. At the highest levels, this includes government, education, and our economic systems. Human rights education has the power to create peace, demand justice, and promote equity in a civil and humane society that respects the dignity of all.

Educating young people about their rights is part of the mandate of the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It is a part of the education that children as young as three years of age receive in many parts of the world. However, rights instruction is not a part of the curriculum that children receive in the United States. Most young people in the US actually know little about what rights they have as citizens. Human rights education is not regularly taught in US institutions of higher education. It is most noticeably absent in teacher training courses. As a result, students – who become teachers of younger students – cannot teach their younger charges about human rights because they never learned about them. They cannot teach what they do not know (Ferneked 2014). As the Human Rights Educators USA (2014) report shows, when human rights education is taught, it is usually spearheaded by a single individual who understands and cares about the material. It is not customarily taught in the United States as part of a mainstreamed curriculum.

It is important to note that many children around the world do not learn about their human rights either. The lack of human rights education that plagues the US is also a problem in many other parts of the world. Human Rights Watch has found that many countries that ratified the CRC have not adequately implemented it; 58 million children are not in school, 168 million children are engaged in child labor and ninety percent of

the world's children live in countries where corporal punishment and physical violence against children is still legal¹. Groups such as the International Conference on Human Rights Education, UNICEF², and Youth For Human Rights³ have traveled around the globe meeting with youth, educators and government leaders to encourage greater dissemination of rights education. Human rights education is often a roulette system that usually results with few winners and the majority of youth losing out on the opportunity to learn about human rights – their own and others.

Stats and facts about human rights are important things for students to learn. However, it is important that children learn more than facts – they have to acquire the behavior that accompanies a rights-respecting ideology. Human rights education changes the way in which we teach and interact with our students. Pedagogy shifts to a more dignity-honoring, personally-empowered format when we incorporate a human rights perspective from top-down as well as a bottom-up approach (Freire 1970; Bruner 1971). Infusing the entire educational process with a human rights agenda is antithetical to authoritative-style education practices and creates an environment where students have tangible models for understanding the value of human rights. This chapter focuses on a case study in which a human rights approach is taken to change the culture of child rights in the state of Massachusetts. It shows how the intersection between: a) teaching style; b) learning approaches; and c) community climate can lead to the creation of a human rights embracing culture.

Child Rights as Human Rights

In 1989 the UN passed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has become one of the most ratified human rights treaties in the history of the world and reflects a global commitment to the principles of children's rights. The Convention sets out standards designed to help children develop their full potential and live free from hunger and want, neglect and abuse. It reflects a vision of children in which they are neither the property of their parents nor helpless objects of charity. As human beings they are therefore entitled to the full range of rights and privileges. The CRC sees the child as an individual and as a member of a family and community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development. By recognizing children's rights in this way, the Convention firmly sets the focus on the whole child.

To ratify the CRC, governments state their intention to put their commitment to honoring rights of children into practice and state parties are then obligated to amend and create laws and policies to fully implement the Convention. It obliges them to consider the best interests of the child in any action taken. The task engages not just governments but all members of society. “The standards and principles articulated in the Convention can only become a reality when they are respected by everyone—within the family, in schools and other institutions that provide services for children, in

¹ See <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/11/17/25th-anniversary-convention-rights-child>

² See <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>

³ See www.youthforhumanrights.org

communities and at all levels of administration”⁴. This makes comprehensive human rights education a necessity.

According to the Canadian Cape Breton child rights resource guide (2014), there are specific Articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child that they feel all children should know. These include:

- Article 1: A child is every person under age 18 years, unless national law grants majority at an earlier age.
- Article 2: All the rights in the Convention apply to all young people without exception. Governments have the responsibility to make sure that youth are protected from discrimination and punishment based on your family’s status, origin, beliefs, etc.
- Article 3: Child best interests should be considered first and foremost in all decisions. Governments have the responsibility to make sure that institutional standards are respected so children are always adequately cared for and protected.
- Article 6: Children have the right to live in a safe, happy home. Children must be given help to survive and develop.
- Article 9: Children have the right to live with parents and not to be separated from them unless this goes against youth best interests. In any hearings or proceedings concerning a separation, children have the right to make their views known.
- Article 12: Children have the right to express opinions freely and to have opinions considered, even in judicial or administrative proceedings.
- Article 13: Children have the right to think and to express themselves and to receive or send information through any medium.
- Article 14: Children have the right to make up their own mind, to follow their conscience and to choose their religion freely, with the guidance of your parent(s) or caregiver(s).
- Article 15: Children have the right to meet with others to form/join groups.
- Article 17: Governments have the responsibility to make sure that information and material is available from many sources, both national and international, especially when it is aimed at promoting wellbeing/health.
- Articles 19, 34, & 36: Children have the right to be protected from maltreatment and exploitation of any kind, including physical punishment, sexual exploitation, neglect or verbal abuse.

⁴ See http://www.unicef.org/crc/index_protecting.html

- Article 23: Children have the right to special care and assistance if they have disabilities of any kind. They have the right to have a life of dignity and every opportunity to succeed and to feel they belong.
- Article 24: Children have the right to proper health care.
- Article 25: If children are placed by the authorities under protection, care or treatment, they have the right to a regular review of that placement.
- Article 27: Children have the right to an adequate standard of living which will help them to develop socially, morally, spiritually, physically and mentally.
- Article 28: Children have the right to a free education in public schools at the State's expense.
- Article 29: Children have the right to develop their own personality, talents and abilities at school and at home, the right to be prepared for life in a free society by learning about respect for others' rights, for one's culture, natural environment, language and values, and for those of others.
- Article 30: Children have the right to enjoy their culture, religion and speak native language if members of a minority/indigenous group.
- Article 31: Children have the right to rest, to play, and to participate in leisure activities.
- Article 32: Children have the right to be protected from work which threatens their health, education or development.
- Article 33: Children have the right to be protected from the use or sale of drugs.
- Article 35: Governments have the responsibility to do everything they can to prevent the sale, trafficking and abduction of young people.
- Article 37: Children have the right to be protected from torture, cruel treatment or punishment and unlawful arrest or other invasions of liberty. The government has the responsibility to make sure that capital punishment and life imprisonment are prohibited for young people. If theirs is taken away, they have the right to be treated with humanity and respect, to be kept separated from adults, to keep contact with families and to receive legal assistance.
- Article 39: Children have the right to appropriate care for recovery if they experienced armed conflict, torture, neglect or exploitation.
- Article 40: Children have the right to be treated with dignity, to be presumed innocent until proven guilty, to be told of the charges made against them, to have an interpreter if needed, to receive a fair trial, to have privacy respected and to appeal the court's decision, if accused of breaking the law.

Throughout the world children from preschool on learn about the CRC and the importance of human rights. But this is not so in the United States. All member countries of the United Nations have passed the CRC except Somalia, S. Sudan and the United States. The US is the one UN nation that seems opposed to joining the rest of the world in ratifying this human rights treaty. This is a curiosity for many reasons. The CRC was crafted under the Regan and H.W. Bush presidencies and incorporates many of the principles in the US Declaration of Independence, Constitution and Bill of Rights. The CRC was designed with emphasis of human rights values that were essential in the establishment of the nation. It was signed by Madeline Albright under President Clinton but never ratified by the US Senate. Reasons for this vary (Vissing 2014; Bradley 2010; Van der Vyver 2012; University of Minnesota 2014; Mason 2005; Davidson and Waddell 2012; Blanchfield 2014; Lister 2008; Moosa-Mitha 2005; Meyers 2009; Pangaea 2014; Glendon 2001; Henkin 1979; Johnson 2004; Yurchyk 2008) but as Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont notes “the administration’s resistance to ratifying the CRC is due to misunderstandings about the Convention. Opponents claim that it is anti-family or infringes upon states’ rights. The CRC does none of these things.” (Sealander 2006; Rutkow and Lozman 2006).

The tension between pro and anti-child rights groups is noteworthy for whoever controls the mind of a child determines how they view themselves and others, how they expect to be treated, and what kinds of human rights they will demand. Controlling the way children think ultimately determines not just their futures but also the future of a society. Therefore, human rights education is not a neutral subject like math; rather, it can be seen to be quite controversial. This fact impacts if, and how, child rights as human rights will be taught.

Child Rights and Education

Education is part of the CRC mandate. In countries where the CRC has been ratified and implemented, there tends to be a comprehensive attempt to teach children a) that they have rights, b) what they are, and c) how to use them in a positive and constructive manner around the world. Rights-education can begin in the early years and continue as children grow into teenagers. Rights education is age-appropriate in its delivery and seems to underscore a cultural tone of how children are expected to treat and be treated by others. This implies that children are to be rights-respectful of their peers, of people older and younger than themselves. It also implies that adults are to role model respectful behavior to other adults, to their children, and to others in the community, irrespective of age. The teaching of rights and ways to act in accordance with them is a fundamental way to create a culture and climate of human rights, equality, and respect. Therefore, rights education can be seen to be the most fundamental ideological and behavioral shift necessary for the creation of caring communities and engagement in civic societies.

A 2014 report by Human Rights Educators USA, in conjunction with the US Human Rights Network submitted to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, analyzed the status of policies for policies and practices for human rights

education in US schools⁵. According to their recommendations, all levels of government should take immediate steps to implement human rights education, including a national plan of action for it, as is called for in the UN World Programme for Human Rights Education. It should include curriculum standards, teacher preparation, and training of others working with youth. It recommends that the Department of Education provide financial and technological support for schools to incorporate human rights education and have it incorporated within curriculum standards of social studies, with it becoming integrated across all disciplines over time. They also recommend increased training, credentialing and accreditation for teachers so they can succeed in fulfilling their human rights education mandate. The report also recommends that social-emotional learning and anti-bullying legislation should be implemented, along with providing greater help to school districts to create safe and welcoming school environments. It also recommended that schools should integrate human rights education into multiple courses and content areas with concrete examples. It notes that most teachers aren't proficient in human rights education and it tends to be taught by individual teachers, not as part of integrated programs. Moreover, most US schools do not help their students to apply human rights education to daily life; most universities do not teach students about human rights, which results in professionals in most fields who do not know how to protect children's rights.

The CRC encourages that children learn human rights education from an early age. Consider the statements on just two of the child rights education organizations:

Save the Children: The philosophy at the heart of the UNCRC is that if children and young people are to become responsible citizens, they need the chance to participate in the world around them. If they are denied the right to take part in their community, they will struggle to learn how to become responsible members of that community as adults.⁶

Canada: Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Canada is obligated not only to respect the rights of children but also to spread awareness of children's rights. Children, as well as adults, are to be informed of the rights of children as contained in the Convention. Under the Convention, children are defined as persons under the age of 18 years. This means a particularly important role for public schools and for public school teachers (Cape Breton 2014).

Teaching children about their rights has been deemed so essential that its incorporation has been developed into a UNICEF program called Rights Respecting Schools (RRS). The United Kingdom⁷ has been particularly active in creating them and have developed national programs that schools can create. Schools, from nursery school through secondary schools, have developed detailed curriculum with specific rights units,

⁵ See <http://www.hreusa.net/>

⁶ See <http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/>

⁷ See <http://www.unicef.org.uk/rrsa>) and http://www.unicef.ca/sites/default/files/imce_uploads/UTILITY%20NAV/TEACHERS/RRS/DOCS/ADVGC001%20RRS%20Bro%20EN_ALB_FA_Pg.pdf

clear lesson plans, resources, and assessment tools. The Children's Rights Centre of the University College of Cape Breton has created a comprehensive 8th grade Children's Rights Curriculum Guide, the NICCY in Belfast⁸ has developed a curriculum for young children, as have Save The Children, all which provide guidelines and specific examples that teachers can readily use. UNICEF as well as individual schools have developed excellent instructional power point presentations to teach others about what Rights Respecting Schools do and how they do it. In short, there are plenty of instructional materials already available at no charge – all a school has to do is make the choice to add a rights respecting unit into their instructional programs.

Schools that have implemented a child rights based curriculum report that it helps administrators manage programs and policies. It assists them to deal more effectively with opportunities and challenges as children are more engaged, empowered, participate in school and classroom decisions and contribute to resolving problems. Teachers report having more time to teach, students achieve higher standards of learning, and they all like school more because of a more positive school climate. Benefits of a rights-based school for children include decreased bullying, less classroom disruption, more positive conflict resolution, less adversarial behavior, more self and other respect, greater use of higher-order thinking, more tolerance of others, less exclusion, and greater school attendance. It appears that there is significant data to indicate that when children learn at school how to use their rights to shape their environment, they can extrapolate that information into adults and have more participatory citizenship and positive parenting and family dynamics.

There are a variety of ways to build rights into learning opportunities for children. Some curriculum focus on incorporating a rights perspective into content units such as: Basic Needs, Equality for All, Alcohol and Drug Abuse, The Environment and Health, Justice and Youth Offenders, Abuse and Exploitation, Rights and Sexuality, or Work and Education. Articles could be taught directly. Incorporating rights into programs, policies, actions, and decisions seems to be an essential component of all rights programs. Successful human rights education programs don't just talk about rights, they develop structures and processes that embody that commitment. In short, child rights education has a level of sophistication that is conceptually, pragmatically and methodologically grounded in sound academic principles.

Changing Ideas Through Education

Human rights education has the power to improve individual lives of children, the social institutions with whom they interact, and society as a whole. Because children often do not know about their rights, and their teachers and parents may not as well, successful human rights education must occur at multiple levels and be presented in different ways. It must take a multifaceted approach. While curricula materials do exist on how to teach human rights to children, usually teachers modify them to meet the needs of their culture, institution, and own personal teaching style. There is, thus,

⁸ See <http://www.niccy.org/childrensrights/unccresources>

significant variability in how the topic is taught. What are some different methods to teach children about their rights? How can rights education be used to change the cultural climate towards children in communities? Here are some of the pedagogical issues that I have confronted in creating child oriented human rights education.

Changing teaching styles. I never had a course in human rights and neither do most teachers at any level in the US. Learning about human rights has been a self-taught endeavor. First I had to educate myself on the topic before I could educate others. Initially I tried to engage my students through readings and lectures and erroneously thought knowledge would inspire their passion for human rights. They were interested, but not committed to it. A shift in my pedagogy came through traveling to Scandinavia, UK, and Ireland where the CRC is widely incorporated throughout education systems. I learned it was insufficient to talk about rights; they had to be role-modeled. This required a shift in not just what I taught but how I taught.

A democratic, egalitarian and mutually-respectful learning environment had to be created. Education is often authoritarian-based, with teachers requiring quiet compliance as students learn to be fearful of talking in class. Whereas once I saw my role to pour knowledge into students, I changed to drawing it out of them. Education became active, not passive. My role shifted to tour-guide, where I exposed students with new ideas to explore and share with classmates. This was challenging at first; they would sit waiting for the old formula, for teachers to take charge of their learning. Creating a climate of engagement required respectful communication. We referred to one another by first names, sat in a circle to increase eye-contact, communication was respectful, and we learned to give empowering feedback. I created an environment where learning was fun and enriching, not a boring, punitive chore. Because I was excited about the material, they became more engaged. As they received positive reinforcement for participation, they cared more about human rights and each other.

Research Inspired Instruction. It is important to gain baseline data on what students know before developing educational strategies. I engaged in a three-prong research strategy. First I conducted focus groups with seven different classes of college students, asking what they knew about their rights and if they heard about the UNCRC. They did not know what rights they had. They focused on things like the right to drive when they were age 16 or the right to vote when they turned age 18. Almost none of them had even heard about the UNCRC, and those that had heard about it didn't really know what it was.

This led to a second research step in which I asked 6 new classes of students (N=132) to list on one side of paper all the rights they could think of that they had when they were children (under age 18), and then on the back to write down all the rights their parents had. Universally, the classes had the same pattern of results. They felt their parents had more rights than they did but they actually did not know what they were. The students identified very few rights they had when they were children (mean = 4), while they came up with double the number of rights for their parents (mean = 8). The type of rights they listed for themselves mirrored that of those listed in the focus group

(driving, education, voting) or blanket-statements like they had the right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. Students attributed more rights to adults that included having jobs, credit cards, lawyers, and the like. They had a systematic lack of understanding of what it meant to have human rights.

In stage three, I collected more detailed information from students who were not in my classes. After an approved application to my university’s Institutional Review Board, I asked professors in departments of political science, education, social work, communication and psychology if they would ask their students to complete an electronic survey. Student answers were voluntary and anonymous and there were no penalties or benefits to their participation. One hundred and thirty (N=130) students responded to the survey. The results reaffirmed that students had a shocking unawareness that they even had rights and a lack of knowledge of what rights they had. Over 82% of students did not know they had specific human rights and almost none knew details about the UNCRC.

While they may not have known exactly what rights they had, about 87% of the respondents felt that young people rights weren’t as respected as the rights of adults. About 1/3 of students did not feel they had rights growing up and 86% knew peers who they felt had rights violated during middle/high school. They felt powerless compared with parents/adults, who they saw as much more empowered. Over two-thirds (69%) felt people of all ages should have same rights, but when asked specifically about child rights, one-third felt young children should have fewer rights than others and most felt that young children should not have the same rights as adults. Most felt that as children age they should be entitled to more.

While students did not know much about their rights that did not preclude them from thinking they had more rights than children around the globe. Indeed, 87% of respondents felt children in other countries have fewer rights than they did; only 3% thought others had more, and only 10% thought it might be a possibility that children elsewhere might have as many or more rights. This conveyed a total lack of understanding of the CRC and the rights education that virtually all of the children in UN member countries receive.

When students were asked to respond to specific rights behavior, they conveyed again a lack of support for what could be their own youthful rights. For instance, when asked if spanking was a violation of a child’s right, there was a 50/50 split on their response, with half thinking it was a violation and half thinking it was a parents right to spank. Yet when asked if hitting was a violation of a child’s rights, 90% said that hitting was a violation of child’s rights. In their minds there is a difference between spanking and hitting. While hitting may be deemed unacceptable, verbal abuse was acceptable to them, with 80% reporting that yelling at child is not a violation of their rights. In another example of intolerance toward children having rights, a third felt people under age 18 shouldn’t have right to vote. Fewer than half of the college-age respondents felt children had right to have underage sexual contact, whether with same or opposite-sex partners. Fewer than half of the respondents felt they had the right to view whatever they wanted

on television, film, or on the internet. Less than half felt they had the right to use body art, as in tattoos or piercings, without parental consent.

Despite resistance believing children had the right to engage in many behaviors, 97% felt children would benefit by knowing more about their rights. This finding, conveyed with earlier findings that while they didn't know much specifically about their rights they knew of youth who had their rights violated, indicates a strong need and desire for young people to learn more about their rights.

The open-ended questions on the survey illustrated three common themes. The most prevalent is that children are not entitled to the same rights as are adults because of their immature or less developed state of being.

“Because of how children develop they need a lot of parental structure whether they want to admit to it or not. When they hit certain ages they should have access to new rights. You can't just generalize children's rights as those under 18...a child's maturity level need also be considered.”

A second theme was that children were entitled to the same rights as everyone else and that they had the right to make their own decisions on issues that would impact their wellbeing:

“A child should have rights as other people and not be discriminated against because they are young. Parents may or may not be their best advocate.”

“I work with children in a psychiatric setting and many individuals are not aware that a child has the right to refuse their psychiatric medications. I think more attention needs to be paid to this in the mental health field.”

A third point of view that felt that children should not have access to their rights is reflected in the following student statement:

“I think it is dangerous to share with children what their rights are. They are not old enough or mature enough to understand them fully or to respect rights in general. Perfect example from the news recently of a 17 year old girl attempting to sue her parents - I am not 100% sure of all the charges but one of the reasons for her attempting to sue was for them refusing to pay for her college education. Children under the age of 18-even under the age of 21 - have a lot of learning and maturing and developing to be done before they can be concerned on whether or no their rights are being respected and validated. “

The data from these three data sets indicates that students do not understand the issue of child rights. Their socialization histories complicate their comprehension. Data underscored the need for intelligent and factual education on the issue of human rights in general and child rights training in particular. Knowing their views helped me to decide what to teach them – and how.

Using Enhanced Learning Methods. The 2014 Human Rights Educators USA report assessing human rights instruction in the United States found that usually human rights is not taught as part of a curriculum/specific course but integrated into required classes because an individual teacher decided it was important. This is my situation as well. I believe it is important for students to learn about their rights – and to be respectful of the rights of others. In my classes on the Sociology of Children, Violence & Children, and a Seminar in Children and Youth a rights-respecting orientation is used and is now a part of my standard teaching pedagogy. In these courses I have adopted a multifaceted educational strategy that includes a variety of teaching/learning strategies. Students today are used to being bombarded by social media and multiple stimuli at the same time. Using an old-school approach to inspire students of today is not going to help them understand the relevance of human rights education. Some of my techniques include:

Credible Scholarly Literature Exposure: In order for child rights to be seen as important they must be exposed to use well-written, high-quality materials from esteemed scholars and credible organizations. It is vital to show them that many important academics from around the world have dedicated their careers to investigating and writing about the topic, and that prestigious publishers and honorable organizations feel human rights is important.

Frame the material: One of our jobs as teachers is to help students explore human rights issues from different perspectives. For instance, the CRC is endorsed by advocates and opposed by critics. Why? Sociologist Howard Becker (1967) is famous for his question “Whose side are we on?” Material on any topic, especially human rights, needs to be contextualized so that the students identify different ways to understand the material.

Peer Discussions: While benefits to rights may be obvious, discussion of them is seldom neutral. Within the safe confines of a course, students have an opportunity to debate and dialogue with each other about the key points; they are able to compare and contrast ideas and wrestle with their own viewpoints. Discussions must always follow a rights-respecting protocol, so in this way even contentious issues can be explored in a way that is not personally adversarial. This is another example of how framing the discussions will help students to learn that there are ways to respectfully disagree with each other and negotiate ideas.

Social/Media Reinforcements: Use of online and traditional media is especially important to include in rights-based education. It is one thing to talk conceptually about oppression; it is entirely different to see pictures of people who are suffering as we view their living arrangements, hear their words, and observe its impact. Films, Youtubes, and audio-visual media are convenient and inexpensive ways to transport students out of their silos and into the worlds of others far away, or to share the hidden lives of people they would otherwise not know. Social media links that students share with each other are worthwhile windows to information you/they may not otherwise know about. It puts students in touch with websites, organizations, and individuals who are doing work for, or against, human rights. Students created their own media on human rights, including

films, public service announcements, websites, music, or blogs. Students love engaging in this type of medium, which can be valuable learning demonstration and information sharing opportunities.

News Items: I regularly incorporate news items in my classes to show how the rights issues are not “dead” or “elsewhere”, but alive, here and now, all around the world, including in one’s own community. The more that we can teach students that human rights issues impact the daily lives of people around the world, the better they will learn the importance and relevance of the material. Searching both national and international news sources helps to broaden material – and perspectives.

External Supports: Outside speakers who can share their human rights experiences give a live name and face to the issue. While teachers can provide enormous instruction, having outsiders reinforce the class concepts can be a valuable learning opportunity for students. Likewise, going on field trips to areas where human rights violations are easily observable can be helpful, but if this is done the professor must make certain that the students will be safe at all times. Taking students into potentially high-risk situations could be a violation of their rights.

Class presentation opportunities: Students need to learn conceptual material through reading and viewing it, they need to demonstrate competence through writing, and it is my belief that they need to learn public speaking skills where they learn to have a voice, put their ideas forward, and discuss them in a public forum with others. As we groom students for leadership positions in their communities, we are wise to give them opportunities to learn how to speak in credible and informative ways. Students may pick their own rights topics and formulate presentations in ways that help them to be creative and learn skills. Class presentations become very engaging learning opportunities for the entire class. They also provide a safe and structured forum for presentation of controversial ideas and discussions to occur that will help students to better grapple with the complexities of rights work.

Internships: Students may choose to do civic engagement, service-learning, volunteerism, or internships with organizations which are doing rights-based work. Some work with lawmakers. These hands-on types of learning experiences can be life-changing opportunities for students.

Community Forums: Students can work in group projects or collaborate with organizations or community groups to create larger scale events. These could include creating or participating in workshops, symposium, conferences, rallies, marches, music, theatre or arts projects, radio shows, television or film opportunities, or journalistic outlets, to name but a few. The more students can take knowledge learned in class and transform it to have broader dissemination into the community, the more we can all learn about the importance and benefit of human rights education.

Realistic Assessment Strategies: How do we know students learn the essentials about rights? Human rights education needs to assess students to prove competency, just as

they would be required to do in a physics or psychology class. Given the complex and interpretative nature of human rights, this may require creative assessment strategies. I tend to rely upon a “*show what you know*” assessment approach. I do not want a multiple-choice test that students can guess on – I want documentation that they a) read the material, b) obtained the central concepts, c) understood those concepts, and d) could apply those concepts to real-life situations. It is in the combining of analyzing key findings and applying them to real life situations that shows whether or not they have truly learned. This can be in research papers, material critiques, other written forms, but assessments can also be made from student discussions, presentations, community involvement, or creation of film, music or media products. Just as we encourage students to think creatively, teachers must be open to assessing in a creative manner as well. Assessments can be used as data-gathering mechanisms to show success of human rights education. Documenting processes and outcomes of teaching approaches helps educators to develop a best-practices approach.

This teaching strategy resulted in student being much more concerned about human rights issues and more willing to use their knowledge to advocate for their own rights and the rights of others. Many of my students are going into teaching or service professions where they will work directly with children/youth so they now have information needed to engage in community change.

Community Climate Change

Students are graduating with a keener sense of child/human rights. Will they graduate to find jobs in organizations which will incorporate a rights-based approach? When this project started there was no formal position in our community on child rights. It wasn't an issue that leaders identified as a priority. This required changing the leader/stakeholder attitudes as well as those of the students. Education became the key to changing their basic assumptions, which were identified as:

Assumption 1: Leaders did not realize that there was a global movement to ensure children have rights. Teaching them that all UN members had ratified child rights except for Somalia and the US got their attention. This enticed them to learn more.

Assumption 2: Leaders assumed that US children already have rights. Since child abuse protection laws exist, stakeholders never ventured beyond that point to consider that children/youth may be entitled to other types of rights.

Assumption 3: Leaders assumed that children do not need rights. Rights are seen as things that are gained with age and that children are too immature to be entitled to them. The US is a culture that views children as property of their parents so giving children rights threatens those that think parents/adults will lose rights as a result. The underlying assumption is that young people can't use rights as responsibly as adults.

Three groups were targeted for education - teachers, agency administrators and government leaders. Because these groups are no longer in school, education had to occur at the informal, interpersonal level. The pedagogical approach used focused upon

a) providing general facts about human rights, b) getting consensus about areas of interest commonality, c) providing them detailed facts about child rights in the form of websites, email attachments, and paper documents and d) developing a plan for working together on some aspect of a human/child rights agenda. Through this process, education was provided, partnerships were created, and action-plans promoting community human/child rights change resulted. Through this step-wise model of education to action, a foundation was laid that we could build upon to add more levels of human/child rights endeavors.

At the teacher level, we experienced resistance to encouraging use of a CRC curriculum, ostensibly because there was no room in the schedule. However it seems another example of teachers not knowing the rights material and unable to teach it as a result. A unique opportunity emerged where up to 100 high school students were invited to pilot a project on US Senate child rights legislation through the Dodd Research Center of the University of Connecticut, Salem State University, University of Massachusetts-Boston and the Edward M. Kennedy (EMK) Institute. The EMK Institute trains students on lawmaking using technology and simulations. Teachers were initially resistant to the offer because they felt they would have to teach units on child/human rights but agreed when they realized EMK staff would do it and transportation and lunch obstacles were overcome. The training had to be convenient. It showed that interesting options for students to learn about human rights were available and accessible and that there were benefits to both the students and the school for providing the training. This opportunity empowered teachers to work with three separate universities and a major community resource to help students learn the complexities of rights decision-making. Students returned to school educated, enlightened and empowered as a result. The school is now more open to further human/child rights collaborations. One activity is the consideration of how to implement a variation of the UN's Rights Respecting Schools programs at the local level.

At the agency level, human service administrators and police officers knew little about the CRC but saw the benefits of protecting child rights. Working with clients who suffer from poverty, family problems, and social struggles has shown them why giving youth rights could benefit them. A police-agency-school partnership, the Youth Advisory Board, meets monthly to pursue ways to empower youth through existing community resources. This includes mentorship programs, community safety programs, civic, recreational, mental health, social service and education opportunities. This partnership reinforces work that different groups are doing to promote child rights. Together more is being accomplished than any one unit could do alone. Each group has its own diverse network that has become more integrated around child rights endeavors as a result.

At the governmental level, it has been important to create a relationship with a gate-keeper who is in support of child rights and willing to push that agenda forward with other leaders. People in positions of power listen more attentively to other people who are in positions of power. Sometimes it only takes finding one person, the right person, who can trigger a series of human rights efforts. In my case, a former student who

became a community political leader became aware of my work in child rights and saw it as an important issue. She opened doors to the mayor, who made a proclamation in support of the UN's Universal Children's Day, and then worked with the city council to help pass a resolution to make Salem designated as a Child and Youth Rights Respecting Community. The city is reviving a Youth Commission, the police department is refining their Youth and Community division, and a stronger foundation has been created to pursue future youth rights efforts. At the state level, a youth commission is being created through Senate Bill 2080 - An Act Establishing a Commission on the Status of Children and Youth has been proposed⁹. A Children's Bill of Rights will be submitted before the state senate in 2015. A groundswell of pro-child rights activity is now emerging, and is triggering the creation of more. It is hoped the state will become a national leader in the area of child rights as it has in its history fighting for civil rights legislation (Vissing 2014).

Education: A Human Rights Change Agent

Education is a powerful vehicle leading to both personal empowerment as well as institutional and community change. The intersection between role of personal commitment to human rights, how we teach others about rights, and how we change community climates to be more respectful of them is a worthy conceptual and applied topic for scholars to pursue.

Nothing happens by chance. Social networking promotes social action. Child rights mobilization at the high school, in city of Salem and state of Massachusetts is occurring as a result of a) education on the issue, b) commitment to honoring the human rights of children and c) willingness to use the political infrastructures to evoke social change. We are attempting to change the culture of Massachusetts towards children through access to education about child rights. While at the beginning of this journey, tangible products have already resulted. These include community changes that are leading cities and state to formally commit to protecting the rights of children and youth. It also includes access to a variety of education opportunities, including trainings at the EMK Institute, a student-made public service film, interdisciplinary workshops and community symposiums, youth advisory boards and commissions, and the active engagement of youth into citizenship and participatory democracy activities.

Our data indicate that most US students don't understand their rights, and that they think they are more enlightened and empowered than they are. Education is part of the CRC mandate. Rights curricula materials are plentiful and easily accessible. Students are excited to learn more about their rights and benefit from it in a variety of ways. The only thing lacking is adult willingness to incorporate child rights education into schools, starting at early ages and going through university level instruction. This requires that community leaders must also be educated about rights in order to create social change.

Changing organizational and community cultures is challenging, as is changing entrenched attitudes and behaviors. Advocates for rights education must be proactive,

⁹ See <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/188/Senate/S2080>

positive, engaging, use multi-modalities for instruction and be continuous in the commitment to putting rights information forward. Child rights education is a vitally important factor in helping to create a positive climate in our communities, one that certainly would be worth exploring as a good alternative in a time of rising school shootings, bullying and interpersonal conflict. Honoring the rights of our youngest citizens has the potential for becoming a powerful, positive community change agent.

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