

Human Rights

Michael Olatokun

Michael Olatokun's article discusses human rights education (HRE) and is followed by a sample classroom activity for teaching human rights through a rule of law lens.

Where do we go when our freedom of religion is compromised? Who will allow us to love freely those that we choose to love? How do we empower those with disabilities to have a say in their treatment? Time and time again, British citizens have found themselves asking these questions, and the answer has been consistently our greatest safeguard: human rights.

The importance of Human Rights

International rights treaties such as the European Convention of Human Rights and the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights have endured merciless, frequent and often spurious attacks over the last decade.

As educators, I argue that we have a duty to correct this malaise. We must give students the criticality to be able to separate well-founded criticisms from malicious agendas. I challenge every teacher that reads this article to join our mission to do so. There has never been a more crucial moment at which to educate students around human rights than this.

Defining HRE

The United Nations has provided the leading statement on what a programme of HRE entails. A summary follows that characterises HRE by three necessary aspects that encompass both its content and its delivery:

- Education about human rights, focusing on the knowledge and understanding of rights as well as the mechanisms for their protection.
- Education through human rights, focusing on the delivery of teaching and learning in a way that gives effect to the rights of the teacher and student.

“ We have been told that sources of law providing claimants with remedies for violations of their rights are instead perverse corruptions of our democracies. Such statements poison the minds of our youngest citizens against this important concept and prevent them from being fully informed about their democratic rights and entitlements. ”

- Education for human rights, focusing on giving young people the skills required to respect and uphold the rights of others as they develop.

This approach goes beyond the mere content of HRE to (a) insist that HRE must be delivered in a way that is compatible with human rights; and (b) that the education should have a practical impact on the student's ability to help others to actualise their rights. For (a) we could conceive of a scenario where programme resources disproportionately focus on the experiences or perspective of a particular community, to the exclusion of other groups, undermining the cross-cutting right to non-discrimination. This sort of situation might explicitly reference the content of human rights treaties, but would not be a HRE approach as it would not fulfil the “through” criterion.

With regard to (b), human rights represent the hardest fought concessions that campaign groups across the world have struggled for. In order for programmes of HRE to be successful, they must catalyse ‘active citizenship’ to help young people understand the roles that they can play in society. Thus a necessary goal of HRE is to equip students with the skills required to they can make a positive impact in their community.

The Bingham Centre approach to HRE

We have created a timely intervention into HRE called The Rule of Law for Citizenship Education: International Law and Human Rights. This resource equips students with the skills required to analyse and evaluate the machinery of international and domestic justice.

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Students that take part will come to understand the fundamental principles underpinning a fair society.

The programme engages students with political systems, rights and obligations, the nature of rules, international governance and diversity. There are calls throughout to connect students with campaign groups that work in the areas associated with the human rights issues contained therein. A short exercise is attached that reflects one aspect of our approach.

Where does Human Rights Education (HRE) fit within current school provision?

Educating students about human rights need not be an additional requirement to already bursting schedules; it can instead be a cross-cutting, interdisciplinary route to achieving a number of teaching obligations at once.

Perhaps the most obvious (and common) placement of human rights-based teaching is within a school's Citizenship provision. HRE fulfils the substantive subject content and aims of the national curriculum for Citizenship. Through resources like our pack, HRE organisations provide thoughtful, value-based examinations of the justice system, not merely teaching the law as it is but encouraging students to reflect on the world as it could be and suggesting their own reforms. Beyond this, international law and human rights are subject content points for the Key Stage 4 curriculum.

HRE also enables educators to engage with other Department for Education strategies. In his seminal work ‘The Rule of Law’ Lord Bingham viewed compliance with human rights as a necessary part of the rule of law. The rule of law is a key aspect of the fundamental British Values duty that teachers have repeatedly told us that they struggle to teach; by using human rights resources they can provide rich examples of the rule of law in action.

Speaker's School Council Awards Day 2015, St Francis de Sales Primary School, in Church Road, Tottenham, photo courtesy of UK Parliament (flickr)



Getting involved

The Rule of Law for Citizenship Education is now supporting teachers at both KS3 and KS4 with Citizenship, British Values, Enrichment and cross-curriculum resources for teaching about legal institutions and human rights through the rule of law. If you would like to sign up to our programme, join at bit.ly/binghamschools or email us at schools@binghamcentre.biicl.org.

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4.3.1 ACTIVITY 1 - International Human Rights and Access to Justice - Printouts for students

Maria is a young woman in Kirzia, an imaginary country that has experienced nearly 20 years of conflict between government and anti-government forces. Before the conflict started, Kirzia's public institutions were improving. Unfortunately, since the conflict started, the government's resources and efforts have been diverted towards the conflict and without central administration, public services are not functioning.

Most young adults have not received education as most schools closed down when the conflict began, and it is in any case too dangerous to make the journey to school. There are many people who cannot read or write.



Kirzia has a court system to deal with civil disputes and to hear criminal cases. However, after decades of conflict, there are few lawyers and judges with the expertise to administer the law and they are based mainly in Kirzia's capital city. The lawyers who are still in practice charge high fees for their services. Those who can afford it sometimes give court staff money to schedule cases for prompt hearing and give judges money to help them win their case. As a result, poorer people feel that a number of barriers prevent them from accessing the justice system, and their prospects of winning their case are low.

Maria lives in a rural area far away from the capital. Her family are not aligned to either side of the conflict but her parents have friends who are politically opposed to the government. One day, she hears a knock on the door and when she opens it, armed men enter and take her father forcefully into a car. He is taken to a prison where he has now been detained for weeks. Maria has no idea why this has happened. The only thing she knows is that the men who took her father away were probably government forces.



Kirzia has agreed to (ratified) the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and therefore the government not only has to respect the rights guaranteed in the Covenant, to make sure that everyone in the country respects those rights, but must also take action where those rights have not been respected.

Both the ICCPR and Kirzia's national law say that:

1. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention.
2. Anyone who is arrested shall be informed, at the time of arrest, of the reasons for his arrest and shall be promptly informed of any charges against him.
3. Anyone arrested or detained on a criminal charge shall be brought promptly before a judge and shall be entitled to trial within a reasonable time or to release.
4. Anyone who is deprived of his liberty shall be entitled to take proceedings before a court, so that the court may decide whether his detention is legal and order his release if it is not.
5. Anyone who has been the victim of unlawful arrest or detention shall have a right to compensation.

Maria is desperate to get her father released and to seek justice for him. What can Maria do and what difficulties does she face?