

## Human Rights Education and Peace Building

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### Introduction

Current Issues in Comparative Education (CICE), November 1999, carries an article by Bernath, Holland and Martin entitled "How can human rights education contribute to international peace-building?" The article presents some interesting findings and discusses some of the fundamental elements of human rights education (HRE). A discussion of this type of education is both welcome and timely and should be encouraged among scholars and practitioners. It seems that there is growing awareness of the importance of HRE as a key element in education in emergencies and in conflict/post conflict areas. This is likely the result of the increasing number of internal conflicts around the world as well as the need to work towards the prevention and amelioration of conflicts in order to build more stable and democratic societies.

We strongly agree with the authors' views on the importance of HRE as an instrument in building peace in post-war societies. However, we would like to broaden the scope slightly by presenting HRE as a preventive measure which can reduce the risk of conflict occurring or recurring, as well as set important standards for countries in transition from authoritarian rule to democratic societies. We will also share some experiences in the implementation of HRE projects particularly in Southern Caucasus, as a way of contextualizing and demonstrating some of the practices suggested by Bernath, Holland and Martin. In our conclusion, we will advocate for the potential benefits of HRE across, not just within, national borders.

In 1996, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) started its HRE program in Armenia in response to a request by UNHCR. In 1997, the program was expanded to Georgia including the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and in 1998 to Azerbaijan. The main elements in NRC's HRE are a Teacher's Resource Book, which is translated into local languages, the training of teachers and of trainers, and, to some extent, material for pupils. NRC works in co-operation with governments, government-related institutions and other NGOs. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs funds the program.

In our initial development of the HRE program certain key components were presumed necessary. Looking back on four years in Armenia and two years in Georgia, we can examine both the validity of these assumptions and their manifestations. In this respect our discussion responds to the issues raised by Bernath, Holland and Martin, specifically in the "Essential Components" portion of their article. Hopefully our experiences can inspire others to share their views and "lessons learned," thus contributing to the development of this important field.

## **Obstacles**

Bernath, Holland and Martin mention the "well-known obstacles of development and political and economic culture" as well as the breakdown of social order. We would like to highlight what we see as the reluctance on the part of humanitarian organizations, governments, and donors in general to prioritize basic education in conflict-ridden areas. Working in conflict/post conflict/transition areas with HRE and similar activities represents a number of challenges. There are a number of obstacles that have to be faced. We will focus on a few areas where difficulties are likely to arise and also mention circumstances that assist the introduction of HRE programming.

### *Bureaucratic obstacles*

To be able to work within the school system in a country one has to have the approval of the school authorities, assuming that there is a functioning central authority. This may involve a number of challenges. For example, in the highly bureaucratic and centralized system of the Southern Caucasus, individuals at the top levels of government displayed a positive attitude toward HRE, but as a result of a break-down in government funding, program responsibilities and possibilities became unclear. Such a development then created competition for support at both the local and international levels. In approaching school institutions such as those in the Southern Caucasus, international organizations should be aware that the schools might have their own agendas. Similarly, individuals within these institutions are competing for assignments, especially from the internationals that can usually provide better--or more reliable--payment than local authorities. In light of these considerations, one should exercise caution when entering into agreements with institutions and individuals.

Building local capacity, however, is an important element in the NRC program. Internationals usually have a limited amount of time in a country, so it is vital to find local institutions that can take the responsibility for sustaining and developing the program. In the Southern Caucasus fostering relationships with local actors has taken time, but it now seems to be gaining momentum. In Georgia the program is currently implemented through an independent teacher training institution (with links to the Ministry of Education) and in Armenia in close co-operation with an agency of the Ministry of Education. The NRC hopes to strengthen these units and their capacity to promote HRE in the schools.

### *Practical/logistical obstacles*

In their article Bernath, Holland and Martin demonstrate an awareness of the likely limitations of a conflict/post-conflict environment and remind planners of the fact that low cost and/or simplified delivery modes and methods can be both more effective and more easily replicable for use by trainers and teachers. Our experiences confirm that HRE programs should be very aware of the practical realities and school facilities in the area of intervention. Providing fancy material and ideas for activities is futile if there is no infrastructure to make use of them--videos and transparencies are useless in a seminar room with no electricity. One should be prepared to work low-tech and overcome obstacles such as a lack of heating or immovable chairs which are most likely the conditions under which local trainers and teachers work daily.

Inspiring trainers and teachers to use their own creativity and their surroundings to find ways of demonstrating a point may change the attitude of teachers and pupils alike. As an example, one of the most important tools of the Swedish freelance educator, Håkan Wall, who has been involved in the entire Caucasus HRE development process, is a piece of string. For different lessons, a certain length may represent the age of "our common earth," while a six meter string can represent the world population. The next time around, the string can be used as a clothesline for children to hang their self-produced drawings of what they see as basic needs. The messages and instructions should also be simple, especially if you are working through an interpreter, which will usually be the case in our work if you are not a Russian (or Armenian, Georgian, Azeri) speaker.

#### *Supporting circumstances*

In the Southern Caucasus, there were also a number of circumstances that facilitated the introduction of the HRE program. First, the three countries in the area were all part of the relatively well functioning Soviet educational system, although the system was eroding due to a lack of funds and maintenance. Another factor was that the governments wanted to build ties to the West. They saw that adherence to concepts such as human rights and democracy could further this goal. Active participation in the efforts of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education would also be seen as a signal of democratization. Influenced by factors such as these, the governments and school authorities eventually developed an overall positive attitude toward HRE, and as a result the NRC has enjoyed a good relationship with local authorities.

#### **Methodology and implementation**

The Bernath, Holland and Martin article claims that "the most effective educators" and the "most successful practitioners" are strong believers in and users of interactive educational methods. While we, out of our experience in the Caucasus as well as in several countries in Africa, would endorse these observations, no doubt some representatives of other systems and structures may not agree that these methods are valid for all subjects and levels. Whatever the case, we need to be prepared for the acceptance, internalization and practice of many of these methods to take time.

The teaching of HRE might run into some cultural obstacles even if the local attitude towards human rights and democracy is positive. These obstacles appear at different levels--the school system, teachers, and parents, to mention just a few. The school culture in many of the countries of the former Soviet Union has some characteristics that are not especially compatible with human rights and democracy. Schools tended to be authoritarian, dogmatic and competitive. These kinds of traditions can, of course, be found in many countries, not just those which were formerly communist. Regardless, it is quite a challenge to introduce HRE in a school environment that is teacher centered and authoritarian. The teacher is assumed to have the right to ask any question, and for the pupil the task is to answer correctly the questions raised by the teacher. Otherwise they should remain silent. Discussions and different points of view are absent. There is always one correct answer and one obvious lesson to be learned from each topic raised. However, these practices and attitudes are contrary to the ideas of HRE, and thus the introduction of different teaching methodologies is an essential part of the program. Student centered learning should predominate in the school system though that will

take time to accomplish. However, one cannot wait to start HRE until the school environment becomes more participatory.

Given the situation in the Southern Caucasus with the school system and the educational climate drawn between Soviet heritage and democratic reform, it is important that HRE should focus at least as much on methodology as on content. The old pedagogical slogan that "what you do is more important than what you say" is more than relevant in this context. For the students this slogan represents a total shift away from what they have been used to--namely to listen, accept and repeat. Informing the pupils about their rights in a theoretical way is therefore unlikely to impress them unless at the same time they experience some change of behavior in the teacher and his/her teaching methods, as well as improvements in the classroom situation.

A new methodology based on participation and more learner-centered approaches may help pupils develop a positive attitude to the whole concept of human rights. Ideally, they will be encouraged and rewarded for bringing forth their own thoughts and ideas, they will learn that there are often several possible and acceptable answers to a question and perspectives on an issue, depending on the individual's views and situation. The pupils will most likely find that "critical thinking" confirms the reality they see and know, and this acknowledgement could provide the basis for changes and improvements.

Some schools have started using participatory and interactive methods in teaching human rights, and they have reported that pupils responded positively. In one particular school the attendance rates rose in classes that were receiving HRE and other classes that were not yet involved in the program began requesting it. Some teachers also found that it is more interesting to work using participatory methods and have started using them in other subjects as well. They claim that they develop a better relationship with their pupils and that their lessons become more engaging.

Many teachers, however, seem reluctant to introduce new methods into their teaching. They may be in favor of human rights teaching, but would prefer to do it the old way--with an emphasis on factual knowledge, in a manner which can easily be controlled. This is where we believe it is appropriate to engage in a discussion to discourage "Human Rights Competitions" in which children memorize the articles and are rewarded for their memory skills, rather than on an understanding of the issues and the practice of the intentions. Several of the teachers interviewed expressed fears that they will lose control of the classroom if they start regrouping students and allowing more participatory activities. They seemed to be afraid of the potential for chaos and lost discipline. [1] We should note that the teachers who have participated in the NRC's HRE seminars have been probably the most active and most motivated towards this kind of education. Thus, the majority of teachers would likely share the concerns of the teachers mentioned earlier in the paragraph.

At our teacher training courses, especially in Armenia, we noticed age and gender differences regarding teacher attitudes towards using new methods. Younger, female teachers seemed most comfortable learning and implementing newer methods, while older male teachers were often more skeptical and resistant to engaging in the group

activities. In order to facilitate the introduction of HRE into local schools, the training sessions included representatives of the regional education authorities as well as the headmaster and one or two teachers from participating schools. We feel that this strategy has paid off, since convincing the headmaster is essential if teachers are to gain support in the implementation of HRE.

In sum, the methodology presented in the NRC HRE program is interactive and participatory. Emphasis is placed on dialogue, discussion, visualization, concretization, and activities such as role-plays and group work. Our experience has been that teachers are mostly positive and enthusiastic about taking part in these activities. The seminars are more active and lively than the ones to which they are accustomed, and they are challenged and allowed to use their own creativity. However, it will probably take more training before a substantial number of them feel comfortable transferring these methods into their own classrooms.

### **Content**

Several international agencies and organizations are working with similar educational programs, but under different labels. Looking into programs such as "Peace Education," "Tolerance Education" (UNHCR), "Education for Conflict Resolution," "Schools as Centers for Peace" (UNICEF), "Education for Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship" (Council of Europe) and "Human Rights Education" (Amnesty International, NRC and others) one will largely find similar content and approaches. The NRC program focuses on a global perspective, conflict management, tolerance and how to deal with prejudices and stereotypes, identity formation, and knowledge about human rights instruments and protection mechanisms. Our experience has been that this complex content is not quite what the recipients have expected, and we have sometimes been met with the attitude that human rights are theoretical and law oriented. This was the initial reaction at the first introductory session in Armenia. University professors and other academics felt that the subject matter was so difficult and complicated that it would only be possible to teach it in the upper classes, maybe first at high school or university level. However, in NRC trainings, human rights are approached as being a basic human need, and are connected people's everyday lives. Eventually, our dialogue partners accepted this perspective that HRE could be taught from the very beginning of primary school and some aspects even in pre-school classes. After the trainings, both teachers and authorities seem to appreciate this approach.

We need to be aware that authorities in post-conflict/transition countries will normally experience and resent attacks on their human rights record and practice. It is likely that human rights groups and activists will have emerged and demanded wide-reaching and dramatic changes in their society. Challenged to include human rights education in their public system, the authorities may fear that a closer focus on their government's performance in the area of political rights and freedom of speech will follow. Understanding this we must try to introduce our particular objectives, texts and approaches in a way which will seem less threatening--while not compromising agreed upon international standards and conventions.

Given that the titles describing HRE programs range from "Peace, Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution" to "Civic Education" to "Human Rights Education," it is our experience that a term may be acceptable in one country while rejected in another. Thus,

the acceptance of HRE content may be encouraged semantically by simply changing titles.

### **Tensions between rights and responsibilities**

The Bernath, Holland and Martin article refers to the important relationship between the learning situation and the real life of the learners, but it does not mention specifically the links between rights and responsibilities. The NRC program and many others link human rights explicitly to responsibilities. According to Article 29 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all human beings have rights, but they also have the duty to respect the rights of others. Although the Soviet system always reminded citizens of their obligations to society, recent trends underscore the responsibilities accompanying human rights. Because corruption has repeatedly emerged in the societies of the Southern Caucasus, the necessity to teach about respect for the rule of law, respect for others, and the connection between a democratic society and law-abiding citizens is clear.

The fear of some teachers--that too strong a focus on rights will result in unruly and impudent children--may be eased if responsibilities are also stressed in the delivery of HRE programs. Every pupil has the right to state his or her opinion freely in the classroom, but he or she also has the responsibility to listen to others without interrupting, and to speak only when given the floor, so that everyone has the opportunity to share their opinion. A suitable exercise to raise awareness on this topic can be to discuss the responsibilities of different groups in society: pupils, teachers, children, and parents. Even though there may be a great difference between the ideals and the reality, the obligation of all citizens to work toward a realization of common and larger democratic goals should be emphasized.

### **Cross-border approach**

The NRC HRE program operates in contexts where the potential outbreak of violence is ever present. Armenia and Azerbaijan are in conflict over the Nagano Karabakh area. Georgia is in conflict with South Ossetia and Abkhasia, both of whom claim independence. One of the ultimate goals of the HRE program is to help prepare the ground for peaceful coexistence between different ethnic groups, the refugees and the internally displaced. NRC believes that pupils and teachers should learn to respect each other in spite of differences and to solve conflicts in a peaceful manner.

The fact that NRC has offices or conducts programs in all contended areas gives credibility to the organization's neutrality. This has made it possible for local NRC staff in the three countries to meet. The pilot HRE program in Armenia caught the interest of the other countries, and the same basic material, first translated into Russian, gave potential partners the chance to study the contents and the program's approach. Discussions with the Georgian Ministry of Education made it possible for the Abkhasians and the South Ossetians to make use of the Russian rather than the Georgian version, a recognition of the fact that the content was more important than the language. The material is similar, but adaptations were made through dialogue with education experts in each country in their own language. The trainings share a common curriculum, and the inter-active methodology has been adopted by all.

To promote cross-border understanding, the NRC has acknowledged the importance of working in the different areas with the same program simultaneously. Local HRE co-ordinators were hired as staff in each country. Based on their common interest in the program, it was possible in December 1998 to invite an Armenian, an Azeri, a Georgian and a South Ossetian to a joint training in Oslo. This positive interpersonal event laid the foundation for further contact and co-operation, in spite of occasional political cross-border difficulties. Core groups of trainers were then established to strengthen and build local capacity and expertise, and to support individual co-ordinators in the provinces. Subsequently, in the autumn of 1999, NRC held a joint training of trainers seminar for groups from all the involved areas. The seminar demonstrated that twenty trainers from different national, cultural and political backgrounds, despite bilateral conflicts, could work very well together. They came to understand that they shared some common heritage, and that they could profit by learning from each other. Plans were made for the exchange of materials, ideas and even resource persons.

The ability to focus on a regional perspective was a major advantage. These areas have much in common, with the shared history of the Soviet Union and recent independence being just two examples. Bringing representatives from each area together makes it less relevant to focus on one conflict over another. Instead, one can concentrate on regional similarities to stimulate a more constructive and less contentious or narrow discussion. The political problems have not disappeared and the conflicts may flare from time to time. But we are convinced that the more people know, respect, and practice human rights, the greater the chance for a peaceful future.

### **Evaluation**

Bernath, Holland and Martin, in their passage on evaluation, consider a wider scope of impact than the NRC program in the Caucasus has so far attempted. However, over time, the evidence and proofs of changes initiated partly through HRE in schools would hopefully manifest themselves in the type of results they present. Since the start of the Caucasus program "informal feed-back mechanisms" to check working methods, materials and strategies have been used at different levels and with varying scope. A few such mechanisms are:

- Bringing draft learning materials to the training sessions and challenging the teacher participants to study the contents and presentation and to suggest needed changes. (It was not easy at first to get a response, because teachers were not used to being asked their opinion.)
- Inviting representatives of the Ministry, educational institutions and NGOs interested in HRE to Roundtables and presentation workshops to discuss different materials, approaches and working methods to share experiences and suggest strategies for going forward working with the different target groups in the society.
- In many cases NGOs and Young Lawyers' Associations provided important support to local teachers open to HRE by visiting classes. As participants at trainings they can provide valuable comments for further work.
- Asking the teachers to take home draft materials for the school children and having them comment on their reactions to the textbook as a whole.

- Seminar and workshop evaluations, covering the whole range of activities, methods and contents of materials and documentation.

### **Looking forward**

The advantages of a regional approach seem obvious. The Caucasus educators have discussed the idea of having HRE teachers meet across the borders, perhaps at some point bringing school children as well. Based on experiences thus far, and building on current contacts and networks, we believe that realizing this idea is more a matter of finding adequate funding than participant objection or troublesome borders.

The possibility to continue and develop a program along this line depends upon a number of factors, ranging from the political developments in each country and in the region (such as shifting individuals as heads of the Ministries of Education), to the competence and tenacity of local trainers and staff. It also involves funding commitments on the part of both the international and local communities.

The main objective for the future is to make the program sustainable within and across borders by enabling local partners to take over. From the beginning, the NRC has planned for eventual phasing out. To this end, we have searched intensively for partners who are or can be included in permanent structures or sustainable networks. Hence the close contacts with ministries, provincial education authorities, teacher training institutions and curriculum planners. While the international education experts have been active partners, they have been present as visitors twice a year, only for trainings and dialogues. The day-to-day co-ordination and accountability has been carried out by local staff.

At the moment there are strategic discussions as to how and when to phase out the NRC's direct project support to the Caucasus countries. Concrete achievements include HREs having been inserted into the official school curriculum at fourth, ninth, and eleventh grades in Georgia. In Armenia, a first to third grade HRE textbook has been well received and the fourth to sixth grade textbook is underway. In Azerbaijan efforts have been limited to training and implementation in a certain number of schools. Future efforts will concentrate on relationships and co-operation with authorities, production of materials and capacity building within NGO networks. The main objective of the programs has been and is to provide direct support until a certain level of sustainability is reached. This may mean into the year 2001 for Armenia and Georgia, and until the end of the same year for Azerbaijan.

### **Endnotes**

[back] [1] Parents are another group that may be skeptical of the introduction of new ideas in school.

Children coming home from school talking about their human rights and perhaps even becoming critical of their parent's supervisory methods may cause resentment in societies which traditionally have emphasized children's obedience. To avoid conflicts of this kind, it is important to bring parents into the discussion about the new subjects or topics being introduced to their children. One effective approach may be to have some



basic material to present to parents and invite them to meetings and seminars. The NRC includes these plans in the program, but we have limited experience with this as of yet. However, a recent report from Armenia states that parents were enthusiastic about the material on human and children's rights.

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