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Editorial Introduction: Human Rights in Comparative and International Education

Sara Pan-Algarra

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Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. Human rights are inalienable because they cannot be taken away, interdependent because all rights are interrelated, and indivisible because they are equally important. This Declaration recognizes the right to education under Article 26, a right that has historically informed the field of Comparative and International Education (CIE). This special issue explores the past, present, and future of human rights in CIE.

Our call for manuscripts posed questions for contributors to push the boundaries about research on human rights in CIE. *How have different motivations for and conceptualizations of human rights operated at the levels of policy, curriculum, and pedagogy? What is the legacy of human rights in CIE and how is this legacy shaping research and education reform today? How can human rights education be reimaged and recreated to meet the needs of current and future generations?* From exploring the Colombian National Plan for Human Rights Education to discussing a curriculum where learners can engage in discussions about artificial intelligence (AI) and human rights literacy, this special issue creatively tackles our initial questions. We curated six publications that invite readers to interrogate the universal nature of human rights and the connections between international human rights law, education policy, and sustainable development.

The first section includes four articles focused on the complex and evolving landscape of human rights in education. **Tebeje Molla and Sally Baker** discuss refugees' right to education in Australia. Applying an interpretive policy analysis, the authors examine Australian education policies for refugees vis-à-vis international agreements the country has signed and ratified. Their article highlights to what extent these national policies align with international commitments. The authors shed light on areas where the government has not protected nor fulfilled refugees' right to education.

Naivedya Parakkal explores the dangers of ignoring Indigenous knowledge systems in human rights-based approaches and sustainable development. The author focuses on the Adivasi Indigenous Peoples in Attappady, India. Contrasting Adivasi narratives with a thematic analysis of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) recommendations to advance human rights education, the article reveals a disconnect between top-down policies and the daily realities Adivasi Peoples face. Through interviews with Adivasi interlocutors, the article stresses the significance of paying close attention to Indigenous knowledge systems in human rights education. Similarly, **Angela Sánchez Rojas** applies the Colombian National Plan for

Human Rights Education as a case study to illustrate how Western views have shaped human rights education. Her analysis provides policy recommendations for a more holistic approach through the lens of Pluriversal Rights Education. The articles by Parakkal and Sánchez Rojas emphasize the importance of opening up spaces within human rights education to a pluriversal framework in which local communities—especially in the Global South—are treated as “possibilities and not as things or problems to be solved” (Williams & Bermeo, 2020, p. 14). The fourth article in this special issue engages in a theoretical discussion about emotional engagement in human rights education through the notion of affective justice. **Michalinos Zembylas** discusses the risks of exposing learners to knowledge about human rights violations without providing adequate tools to critically reflect on what they learn.

The second section of the special issue is made of two essays. **Saah Agyemang-Badu, Felisa Tibbitts, and Sage Phillips** write about AI in human rights literacy. The authors shed light on the urgent need for educators and learners to understand the broader ethical implications of AI in their lives. The analysis proposes a series of curricular lessons to raise awareness about such implications. The second essay by **Whitney Hough** evaluates the PeaceJam Foundation’s work. Hough looks at the PeaceJam Foundation Ambassadors Curriculum, assessing to what extent the project aligns with the Transformative Human Rights Education (THRE) framework. THRE aims to promote social change among youth and to cultivate awareness about global injustices. The author considers the curriculum's strengths and limitations, concluding that community engagement and youth participation are essential elements in the design and implementation of human rights education. From a wide range of perspectives, these six publications share the spirit of critical thinking, academic creativity, and hopeful reimagination that CICE actively seeks to enhance.

I take the opportunity in this editorial introduction to celebrate that CICE’s [website](#) is now fully available in Portuguese, Spanish, and English. We envision a journal where voices and ideas in multiple languages are welcomed and distributed. We invite our community of readers to share our calls with educators, administrators, graduate students, policymakers, and specialists from government, non-governmental organizations, and academia who may want to publish their work in Portuguese or Spanish. We hope that future editorial boards will consider integrating other languages into the journal. Aiming to ensure that CICE’s work reaches diverse audiences, this year we will become certified by the [Directory of Open Access Journals \(DOAJ\)](#). This is a key milestone in the process of expanding our journal’s accessibility and outreach initiatives.

Since its first issue in 1998, CICE has been a space for critical thinking, dialogue, and plurality of ideas. CICE would not be possible without the contributions of people representing diverse backgrounds. In times of divisiveness and fear of the other, CICE stands for respect and dignity. This special issue reiterates our commitment to showcase

analyses that critically engage with the current state of education worldwide through context-specific discussions.

The Special Issue on Climate Change, Migration, and Conflict: Lessons in Education will be published in the Summer of 2025 and will follow the same commitment that informed this Special Issue on Human Rights in Comparative and International Education. The two issues for the 2024-2025 academic year exemplify CICE's tradition of creating bridges between the field of CIE and other disciplines. CICE is dedicated to advancing knowledge and rigorous research on the intersection between education and ongoing global social, legal, environmental, and economic challenges.

Acknowledgments

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Refugees and the Right to Education: Reflections on International Frameworks and the Australian Context

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The right to education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right, safeguarded by numerous international declarations and conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Viewing refugee education through the lens of human rights is rooted in the principle that everyone, regardless of citizenship status, should have equal educational opportunities as an integral aspect of their broader human rights. However, such opportunities are variable. Using an interpretive approach to policy analysis, this paper reviews the Australian education policy space in the context of international initiatives, exploring national responses juxtaposed with key global arrangements. In shedding light on the alignment—or lack thereof—between national policies and international obligations, this paper contributes valuable insights to the broader debate on the importance of rights-based refugee education.

Keywords: human rights, refugee education, Refugee Convention, United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Australia.

Introduction

Refugee education, viewed through the lens of human rights, underscores the imperative to ensure that individuals forced to flee due to conflict or persecution have equal access to education and training. The right to education extends beyond mere access; it includes attentiveness to the diverse needs of refugee students (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019). A human rights perspective demands cultural sensitivity, dignity, and respect for linguistic and cultural backgrounds in educational settings (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Protection from discrimination and exploitation, coupled with an emphasis on participation, empowerment, and the continuity of education despite displacement, are crucial to upholding human rights in refugee education.

Over 110 million individuals were forcibly displaced globally in 2023, with an estimated 40 percent being youth (Calaycay et al., 2023). While forcibly displaced people in general can face substantial obstacles in their educational journeys (Abu-Ghaida & Silva, 2020; Dryden-Peterson, 2018; Popescu et al., 2022; UNHCR, 2023), this paper examines the educational opportunities of refugees (forcibly displaced individuals resettled in third countries on humanitarian visas) in Australia. This narrowed approach will enable us to provide a nuanced exploration of their

distinct challenges and facilitate our context-specific assessment of Australia's adherence to international agreements on refugees and their access to education.

Countries of resettlement are expected to provide educational opportunities to support refugee integration (United Nations, 2016). Education can empower refugees to envision futures that transcend present-day challenges, leveraging valuable skills and knowledge. It can serve as a guiding light amidst uncertainty and precarity, representing a crucial pathway toward rebuilding lives (Cha, 2020; Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2017; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017). In other words, "for people who have lost all their other assets, education represents a primary survival strategy" (Flukiger-Stockton, 1996, p. 3). For those who are displaced, education is more than just a fundamental entitlement—it serves as a lifeline, offering stability, hope, and a pathway to rebuilding their futures. However, around 48 percent of refugee children have no access to education (UNHCR, 2023a). Refugee learners are often overlooked in national data collection efforts, impeding governments' capacity to strategically plan and effectively deliver education services to this demographic (Calaycay et al., 2023; Borkowski, 2023). Addressing the pressing issue of limited access to education for refugees, along with their underrepresentation in national data in Australia, warrants analysis of national education policies' alignment (or misalignment) with international frameworks.

Education is enshrined in numerous international declarations and conventions as a human right. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) affirms education as a fundamental human right. The UN has enacted the UDHR through various binding conventions and other mechanisms, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. These global commitments mean that governments that resettle refugees bear a responsibility to uphold their right to education (Goodwin-Gill & McAdam, 2021; Xi, 2017). As refugees integrate into new societies, host countries must ensure that educational opportunities for resettled refugees are accessible without discrimination.

Against the backdrop of the global refugee frameworks that outline states' responsibilities, including ensuring access to quality education for refugees, this paper analyses the framing of refugee education in Australia's education policy space. As a signatory to the 1948 UDHR, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, Australia collaborates with the UNHCR to evaluate asylum claims and ensure individuals in genuine need of international protection are identified and assisted. The partnership emphasizes a commitment to coordinated and humane responses to the growing displacement crisis, aligning with the principles outlined in these international frameworks (Refugee Council of Australia [RCOA], 2023, 2023a, 2023b). Australia voluntarily offers a program of refugee humanitarian settlement support within its commitment to assessing protection needs and offers. This includes equal access to education (pre-school; schooling; and adult English language provision).

Drawing on an interpretive policy analysis approach, this paper reviews international frameworks and national contexts, focusing on selected relevant UN declarations and conventions and the Australian education policy space. The central question guiding this inquiry is: *To what extent do Australia's refugee education provisions reflect its global commitments to humanitarian protection?*

Australia is a signatory to international agreements relevant to the rights of refugees including the 1948 UDHR, the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. Our analysis illustrates how Australia, as a signatory to these international agreements, navigates the tension between its global commitments to protection and the practical realities of incorporating these commitments into domestic education policies. We aim to develop nuanced understandings of how the right to education for refugees is articulated, interpreted, and implemented within a global national policy context. In exploring the alignment—or lack thereof—between national policies and international obligations, the paper contributes valuable insights to broader debates on the importance of rights-based refugee education. We seek to contribute with potential solutions and provide a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding the implementation of international refugee frameworks within global and national contexts. The paper is organized into three main sections. The first section outlines the methodological approaches and data sources of the study. The second section analyzes purposefully selected UN documents and national education policies. The third section problematizes the alignment between the international frameworks and the national refugee education provisions.

Methodology and Data

We used an interpretive approach to policy analysis (Yanow, 2000, 2014), which eschews the view that policies are objective phenomena; instead, perceptions, values, and beliefs of those involved shape policy design and implementation. The interpretive approach views policies as socially constructed artifacts that are influenced by a myriad of factors. The umbrella review includes political ideologies, cultural norms, historical legacies, and power dynamics (Yanow, 2000; Wagenaar, 2015). There is no universally agreed-upon set of issues that objectively demand policy attention. Policy problems are systematically formulated and negotiated within a particular political space (Bacchi, 2009), which entails (sometimes urgently) selecting some issues while neglecting others. Nor are social problems static. What was once a critical or global problem might not get policy attention today or in national contexts. Policies are usually understood and perceived differently by different actors. These varying mixed interpretations can shape the implementation of specific instruments and strategies on the evaluation of their intended and unintended consequences (Bacchi, 2009)

Policy knowledge is not discovered but generated through interpretation, mediated by social contexts, values, and experiences (Yanow, 2000; Wagenaar, 2015). Interpretive policy analysis is particularly suited to examining refugee educational

policies. It can facilitate an in-depth exploration of the meanings, assumptions, and values embedded in both international frameworks and the Australian administration responses. By focusing on the subjective and discursive aspects of policy, interpretive policy analysis enables an analysis that goes beyond the formal content, revealing how various stakeholders construct, understand, and implement refugee education (Yanow, 2000; Fischer, 2003). This approach is advantageous as it highlights the interplay between global expectations and national interpretations. Helping to elucidate how both international obligations and local contexts shape Australia's commitments to refugee education.

Authors' Positionality

In making sense of policies, the interpretivist analyst invariably brings their interests, values, and worldviews to the table. Interpretive policy analysis involves grappling with competing narratives and acknowledging the ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity inherent in policy processes. Methodological choices and theoretical approaches reflect the importance of analysts' assumptions, priorities, and scholarly socialization. Our lenses tacitly guide our gaze and focus our attention on how discourses circulate in particular ways through phrasings, positionings, juxtapositions, and silences. We are both elective and selected migrants to Australia. As an individual of African heritage who journeyed to Australia as an international student, Tebeje's distinctive positionality profoundly influences the research agenda he pursues and the theoretical and methodological approaches he adopts. Leveraging his cultural background and social location, he offers a nuanced understanding of African refugee youth's educational opportunities and adverse challenges. His advocacy efforts have been dedicated to continue improving and reforming refugee educational rights. Sally is an adult migrant who works as an English language teacher, inspired to advocate on refugee education attainability, and a scholar. Her work has examined how people with lived experience of forced migration are aided and constrained in accessing, participating, and succeeding in obtaining higher education. She is the founder and chair of Refugee Education Australia, a not-for-profit organization that works to create better educational opportunities and outcomes for refugees in Australian education systems.

We selected policy documents associated with global refugee frameworks and Australia's education system to respond to our research question. Qualitative data were drawn from three international frameworks—the UDHR (1948), the Refugee Convention (1951), and the Global Compact on Refugees (2018)—and two national (Australian) education policies: the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Australian Government, 2019a) and the Australian Universities Accord Report (Australian Government, 2024). We focus on key documents that hold significant weight in shaping policies related to refugees' right to education. The national policy documents enabled us to contextualize the global frameworks.

Table 1
Policy Documents Reviewed for this Paper

Policy Document	Source	Scope and Purpose
<i>Universal Declaration of Human Rights</i>	United Nations (1948)	Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1948, the UDHR is a foundational international document that outlines the basic rights and freedoms to which all human beings (including refugees) are entitled. It includes rights such as freedom from discrimination, the right to education, and the right to seek asylum from persecution. The UDHR serves as a guiding framework for the protection of human rights globally.
<i>Refugee Convention</i>	United Nations (1951)	The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was initially created in response to the mass displacement in Europe following World War II. The Convention was pivotal in defining who qualifies as a refugee, laying the groundwork for international refugee protection. In 1967, the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees was introduced to broaden the Convention's scope. This Protocol removed the geographical and temporal restrictions, allowing the Convention to apply to refugees worldwide, regardless of when or where displacement occurred.
<i>Global Compact on Refugees</i>	United Nations (2018)	Adopted in 2018, the GCR is a framework aimed at enhancing international cooperation in addressing large movements of refugees and improving the support for host countries and communities. It focuses on four key areas: easing pressure on host countries, enhancing refugee self-reliance, expanding access to third-country solutions, and supporting conditions for safe, voluntary return. The GCR is not legally binding but seeks to guide collective action for refugee protection and support.
<i>Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration</i>	Australian Government (2019)	The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration outlines Australia's national education goals, emphasizing inclusive and equitable education for all young Australians. It highlights the importance of providing targeted support to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including refugees.
<i>Australian Universities Accord</i>	Australian Government (2024)	The Australian Commonwealth Government commissioned the Australian Universities Accord review. The initiative aimed at re-envisioning Australia's higher education system to make it more accessible, equitable, and responsive to socio-economic and theological changes. One of its central goals is to improve pathways to university for underrepresented groups, which includes students from refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds.

We closely reviewed each policy document, with special attention to refugee education framing within the international frameworks and the national policy statements. We identified and focused on terms central to our research question, including 'rights,' 'education,' and 'refugees.' Using these keywords, we conducted an initial sweep to isolate relevant excerpts within each document that directly referenced these terms concerning refugees' access to education. This process enabled us to gather a concentrated set of data points about how refugee education is framed and supported at international and national policy levels. After isolating these extracts, we undertook a comparative analysis to explore how key themes are framed across different policy scales (Molla, 2021). We then identified emerging patterns within the data corpus and developed storylines by collating relevant data extracts under relevant themes. The development of storylines is a pivotal aspect of our interpretive approach. Rather than merely presenting fragmented data points, we sought to weave a cohesive narrative by collating relevant data extracts under specific themes. This narrative construction facilitated a clearer communication of our findings and allowed for a more holistic understanding of the policy context. The interpretive lens allowed us to delve beyond surface content to understand the underlying values and assumptions that shaped the policy landscape. By unmasking and interpreting the representation of refugee education within international frameworks and national contexts, policy frame analysis enabled us to shed light on competing interests within the policy field and who remains invisible in the policies.

Interrogating national refugee education policy provisions concerning human rights and refugee resettlement international agreements is crucial for revealing gaps and inconsistencies that affect refugees' educational access and rights. We can make sense of policy silences and misalignments across different policy scales using interpretive policy analysis (Molla, 2021). We can uncover how global commitments are translated, limited, or redefined within national frameworks. This approach sheds light on how national policies may fall short of international standards, particularly when national equity provisions are vague, contradictory, or selectively applied. By examining these discrepancies, interpretive analysis highlights the spaces where refugee rights are weakened or neglected, often revealing underlying social, political, or economic forces that shape policy priorities.

The analysis focuses primarily on students with refugee backgrounds rather than individuals in the asylum process, internally displaced persons (IDPs), or those who are stateless. This focus is intentional. Our research aims to critically examine Australia's response to international frameworks and refugee education initiatives, specifically addressing those granted refugee status under international law. By honing in on this group, we seek to provide insights into how effectively Australia aligns with global expectations in its educational provisions for refugees, whose protection and resettlement involve distinct legal and policy commitments compared to other displaced groups. Our emphasis on students with refugee backgrounds also reflects the unique educational and social integration challenges this group faces within the Australian context. Focusing on students with refugee backgrounds allows us to explore how Australia's educational policies and practices support (or

hinder) this group's long-term integration and development, thereby offering critical insights for policy improvement and alignment with international standards.

Findings

Global Frameworks

When governments sign and ratify UN conventions and agreements, they undertake a legal commitment to implement the stipulated provisions within these instruments (Betts & Collier, 2017; Loescher, 2021). This obligation is grounded in good faith, requiring a genuine intent to fulfill the terms outlined in the conventions. The implementation process involves incorporating UN principles into national legislation and policies, necessitating the creation or adjustment of laws to align with international expectations (Kneebone, 2017). Signatory governments are expected to submit periodic reports detailing their progress in implementing these agreements, with these reports subject to review by UN committees or monitoring bodies. Bearing this in mind, in this section, we review key international frameworks and Australia's education policies relevant to the issue of refugees and their right to education.

Following the end of the First World War, the United States and its European allies, mainly through the League of Nations, formulated the first collective response to the needs and conditions of forcibly displaced people in Europe. This intergovernmental response emerged during the interwar period, gaining significant momentum from the latter half of the 1930s onward when forced displacement and resettlement issues became a global concern (Betts & Collier, 2017; Loescher, 2021). The collective inter-war refugee organizations include the High Commissioner for Refugees in 1921, the High Commissioner for Refugees from Germany in 1933, and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees in 1938 (Molla, 2024). Following the upheavals of the Second World War and the ensuing humanitarian crisis in Europe, global leaders established pivotal entities such as the United Nations Organization (1945) and the International Organization for Refugees (1946). Three international frameworks are pertinent to refugee education: the UDHR, the Refugee Convention, and the Global Compact on Refugees.

Adopted in 1948, the UDHR unequivocally affirms education as a fundamental human right (UN, 1948/2015). The UDHR aims to safeguard fundamental human rights globally, including civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, promoting the dignity and equality of all individuals. As a foundational document proclaiming the inalienable rights and freedoms to which all individuals are entitled, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or religion, it sets out a common standard of human rights for all people. Subsequently, it has served as the basis for international treaties. Two articles in the UDHR (UN, 1948/2015) cover the right to seek refuge and the right to access education:

Article 14(1): Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. (art. 14.1)

Article 26(1): Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (art. 26.1)

Article 14 reaffirms the fundamental principle that individuals facing persecution have the right to seek safety and protection beyond the borders of their home country. By protecting the right to seek asylum, the UDHR contributes to developing a global framework to foster a world where individuals are not only protected from persecution but are also granted the opportunity to rebuild their lives in an environment that respects and safeguards their human rights. Likewise, Article 26 is rooted in the principle that everyone, regardless of refugee status, should have equal educational opportunities as an integral aspect of their broader human rights.

The intersection of Articles 14 and 26 of the UDHR holds profound implications for the rights of refugees to education in countries of resettlement. Signatories to Article 14 are committed to offering refuge from immediate threats and providing the necessary conditions for individuals to rebuild their lives. Education emerges as a fundamental component of this process, playing a transformative role in the integration and empowerment of refugees. Educational attainment is seen as both a means and marker of refugee integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; OECD, 2019). In practical terms, the rights articulated in Article 26 mean that countries of resettlement should not only permit refugees to access education but also actively work towards eliminating barriers that may hinder their educational opportunities. This includes addressing language barriers, recognizing and validating prior academic achievements, and creating inclusive learning environments to accommodate diverse cultural backgrounds (Stevenson & Baker, 2024). Governments of resettlement countries and countries of first asylum should recognize that education catalyzes social cohesion, economic participation, and overall community development. It equips refugees with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate their new environment, contribute to the host society, and, eventually, become self-reliant individuals.

The UDHR was operationalized through several subsequent covenants and compacts. In direct response to the extensive displacement witnessed in post-war Europe, the UN took a significant step in 1951 by adopting the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, commonly known as the Refugee Convention (1951). This landmark agreement explicitly urged member states to address the resettlement of displaced individuals on humanitarian grounds. Article 1 of the Refugee Convention provides a comprehensive definition of a refugee as an individual outside their home country, unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. The Convention also underscores the commitment of member states to providing refugees with access to education on par with the host country's residents, promoting inclusivity and

equality in educational opportunities. Article 22 of the Refugee Convention outlines the rights of refugees to education:

The Contracting States shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education. [...] The Contracting States shall accord to refugees treatment as favourable as possible, and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certifications, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships. (art. 22)

Member states that are signatories to the Convention are legally bound to provide refugees with the necessary resources and opportunities for successful resettlement and integration. Like other legal instruments that came before it (e.g., the Convention Relating to the International Status of Refugees of 1933 and the Convention of 1938 concerning the Status of Refugees coming from Germany), the 1951 Refugee Convention was Eurocentric in its scope (Ferris & Donato, 2020). Its 1967 Protocol removed temporal and geographical restrictions, expanding its applicability (Horsch & Russell, 2020). The Protocol expects member states to go a step further by recognizing new refugee situations and emerging needs in various parts of the world.

In the wake of the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015, the UN General Assembly Resolution 71/1 adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016). The Declaration was signed by all 193 Member States of the UN. Section 1 of the Declaration stresses movement as an inherent part of human history:

Since earliest times, humanity has been on the move. Some people move in search of new economic opportunities and horizons. Others move to escape armed conflict, poverty, food insecurity, persecution, terrorism, or human rights violations and abuses. Still others do so in response to the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters (some of which may be linked to climate change), or other environmental factors. Many move, indeed, for a combination of these reasons. (sec. 1)

Signatory states have collectively agreed to provide quality education for all refugee children and young people and ensure they acquire essential knowledge and skills for successful integration and participation in society (Sections 81 and 82). Importantly, the New York Declaration paved the way for the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (UNGA, 2018), which Australia, along with 175 other nations, supported. This non-binding international agreement provides a framework for more 'predictable and equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing' in responding to unprecedented numbers of refugees. The Compact encourages the international community to provide increased support to countries hosting large refugee populations and promotes innovative approaches to education financing. Under Article 2.1, the Global Compact on Refugees mandates that states and stakeholders

contribute resources and expertise to enhance the responsiveness of national education systems to the needs and conditions of refugees. The Compact emphasizes the importance of minimizing the duration refugees spend outside education and providing comprehensive support for addressing specific education needs, overcoming enrollment obstacles, and facilitating the recognition of equivalency in academic, professional, and vocational qualifications.

National Education Policy Context: Australia

As a signatory to the international frameworks discussed above, Australia resettles refugees and allocates resources to support integration. Measured on a per capita basis, Australia has one of the most generous refugee intake programs in the world (Mence et al., 2017; Parkinson et al., 2023). Since the end of the Second World War, Australia has resettled close to one million refugees, admitting around 13,000 refugees annually. The largest group of 170,000 displaced persons, predominantly from Europe, arrived between 1947 and 1954. Between 2013 and 2022, the country resettled 13.1 percent (132,180 individuals) of the total 1,008,934 refugees under the UN mandate (RCOA, 2023b). In 2023, the annual humanitarian migrant intake increased to 20,000 (RCOA, 2023b). Commensurately, over the past 75 years, there has been a notable rise in the percentage of Australians born outside the country, surging from 10 percent to approximately 30 percent (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022). The refugee resettlement program is thought to have influenced this demographic shift substantially.

When considering multiculturalism and refugee resettlement in the Australian context, it is important to reflect on its history of colonial-settler violence against First Nations Australians. When Australia's contemporary multiculturalism is juxtaposed with its historic policing of migrants, the gaps that we address in this article are starkly exposed. Two aspects of Australia's history are relevant. Firstly, the disenfranchisement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who have experienced systemic displacement, disempowerment, and abuse, tells us about how Australia is built on colonial violence, raising important questions about how refugees are selected and welcomed (Baak, 2019; Matthews, 2021). A second aspect is the racist White Australia policy that ran from 1901 until the 1970s (National Museum of Australia, 2023), which was enacted to restrict the immigration of 'undesirable' non-white migrants. That this policy was only fully dismantled five decades ago reminds us of the discriminatory underpinnings of colonial Australia's approach to migration.

At present, there are broad initiatives that support the educational opportunities of refugees. In the latest installment of the national Multicultural Statement (Australian Government, 2017), the Commonwealth Government aimed to extend services and programs that meet the needs of people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds while at the same time ensuring the shared values of mutual respect, equality, and freedom are upheld by all Australians. Subsequently, in the Multicultural Access and Equity Policy Guide, the Australian Government (2018) underscored the importance of ensuring 'equality of opportunity and equity of outcomes for all Australians' (p. 5). To this end, the policy calls explicitly for

government agencies and departments to be responsive to the unique conditions and needs of multicultural communities, including 'refugee and humanitarian entrants' and 'visibly different migrants'. The *Policy Guide* states:

We live in a multicultural society and that there is an obligation on Australian Government departments and agencies to ensure their programmes and services are *accessible* by all eligible Australians, *responsive* to their needs, and deliver *equitable outcomes* for them, regardless of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. (p. 3, emphasis added)

Although the Government's 'investing in refugees' agenda falls short of fully acknowledging the educational disadvantage of humanitarian entrants (see Australian Government, 2019; Shergold et al., 2019), there is a consensus on the need for improving the educational attainment of this group. However, the notion of merit is overlooked in this agreement; if the principles of merit that exist for non-refugee/Australian-born students are applied, refugees are left to compete on a deeply uneven terrain that fails to account for educational disruptions and traumatic journeys.

Schooling in Australia

Australia is a federation, comprising six states and two territories. Although school education is primarily the responsibility of states and territories, governments of all levels periodically meet to design and agree on national schooling policies. Social justice goals are prominent in such policies. For instance, through the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), Commonwealth, state, and territory governments recognized that "students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those from remote areas, refugees, homeless young people, and students with disabilities often experience educational disadvantage" and agreed to reduce the effect of such sources of disadvantage as "disability, homelessness, refugee status and remoteness" (p. 7). In the latest installment of the national educational framework—the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Australian Government, 2019)—all governments agreed to provide targeted support for disadvantaged groups, including refugees. One of the key goals of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration is to ensure that "the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity" (p. 5) through *inter alia*, "supporting all young Australians at risk of educational disadvantage" (p. 9). The Commonwealth, state, and territory governments agreed that:

Targeted support can help learners such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those from regional, rural and remote areas, *migrants and refugees*, learners in out-of-home care, homeless young people, and children with disability to reach their potential. This means *tailoring to the needs of individuals* across a system that prioritises *equity of opportunity and that supports achievement*. (p. 17, emphasis added)

The commitment to providing equitable opportunities to refugees varies across the education system. In the school sector, the level of support refugees receive varies by

state and territory. This variation results in considerable differences in terms of access, support, and success for refugee students, not just between states and territories but also between schools. As Tippett et al. (2023) argue from their national study of refugee education, the policy invisibility for refugee students means that schools' capacity to support students and protect their rights to quality education are dictated by their access to funding and strongly influenced by "the multiple and complex forms of disadvantage represented within their student cohort" (p. 12). Since refugee students are most likely to attend public schools in lower socioeconomic areas, schools face "a difficult dilemma in deciding how to distribute funding; a dilemma which was informed by their moral and ethical obligations to support all children in their care" (Tippett et al., 2023, p. 13). Sometimes resources intended for refugee students were shared or used to support other students.

In the states that host the highest proportion of newly arrived refugees and diaspora communities, there are refugee-specific programs, such as the Refugee Education Support Program in Victoria (Foundation House, 2024). In New South Wales, the Department of Education provides Refugee Student Support (NSW Government, 2024). However, such programs and positions are not found in other states or territories; for example, in Queensland, refugee students are caught in the unhelpfully broad inclusion policy (Creagh et al., 2023), with responsibility for English language support devolved to individual schools with the consequence of limited accountability for the education and language rights of refugee students. This national variation creates inconsistencies in the ways that refugee students are supported, hindering consistent policy responses, such as guidelines, support programs, or teacher professional development. The latter is particularly necessary, given the absence of time and attention given to multicultural education in the crowded curricula of initial teacher education programs (Stewart et al., 2019).

Higher Education in Australia

The higher education sector is primarily a federal concern in Australia, meaning that it receives Commonwealth funding.¹ Within this sector, 'equity' is the dominant discourse that governs access for underrepresented groups in Australia, with the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) providing funding to universities to undertake activities and implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses for educationally disadvantaged people. In Australia, priority has been given to improving the retention and completion rates of 'equity groups', who are broadly categorized as people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, and people from regional, rural, and remote areas. The original ambition of the HEPPP was to 'raise aspirations' for higher education, widen pathways to university education, and enhance the engagement and attainment of equity groups (Australian Government 2012). In the last 15 years (2010–2024), the Federal Government has allocated over AUD 1.9 billion under HEPPP (Australian Government, 2024). Other cohorts with intersectional educational disadvantages, such as refugees, are not a focus for the HEPPP, meaning neither

¹ Although higher education is the purview of the federal government, the governance of higher education institutions is a state concern in Australia.

government nor universities are mandated to focus on this cohort. However, we note how under Section 1.50.10 of the HEPPP Guidelines, universities can use HEPPP funding to tailor their programs to 'address the specific disadvantage' within the demographics of the low SES student population (Australian Government, 2024). However, this, again, creates a level of variability and inconsistency across the national education landscape.

Refugees have remained invisible in the national higher education equity policies (Molla, 2021, 2024). For two decades (1990–2010), universities subsumed refugee background students under the category of 'non-English speaking background' (NESB) targets. The categorization overlooked the fact that considerable variations exist within the NESB category in terms of economic status, parental level of education, and cultural assets. In the last ten years, with the government's abandonment of NESB as an equity group,² refugees have been mainly identified by universities as belonging to the low socioeconomic status (SES) group, if at all. This framing has a homogenizing effect, overlooking complex non-economic factors of disadvantage that refugees face, and inhibiting institutions from running tailored resource-intensive programs to benefit the group.

The exclusion from policy considerations means refugees struggle to get access to and be successful in higher education. For example, African refugee youth, even with institutional equity measures, continue to experience low participation and completion rates in higher education. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveal that, on average, more than 85 percent of young people from the primary countries of origin for African refugees settling in Australia lack a university degree and do not engage in higher education within five years of arrival (Molla, 2024). This pattern has remained largely unchanged since the mid-1990s. Despite access to alternative pathways and adjusted admission requirements, successful completion of a degree remains a formidable challenge for refugee students, therefore destabilizing the 'merit-based' requirement of Article 26 of the UDHR.

On a positive note, here are new promising developments. In 2022, the federal government commissioned the Australian Universities Accord Panel to review the sector and propose policy ideas. The panel delivered the final report in February 2024. The Panel acknowledged the invisibility of refugees in equity policies: "There is evidence to suggest other cohorts, such as care leavers, refugees, and some language groups from non-English speaking backgrounds, experience significantly lower higher education participation and attainment outcomes" (O'Kane et al., 2024, Section 3.2.2). A key issue that has stymied more support for refugees has long been that universities do not collect relevant data on the enrollment, progression, and completion rates of refugee students. In response to this gap, the Universities Accord Panel recommends that the proposed Australian Tertiary Education Commission measures and monitors the outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students by

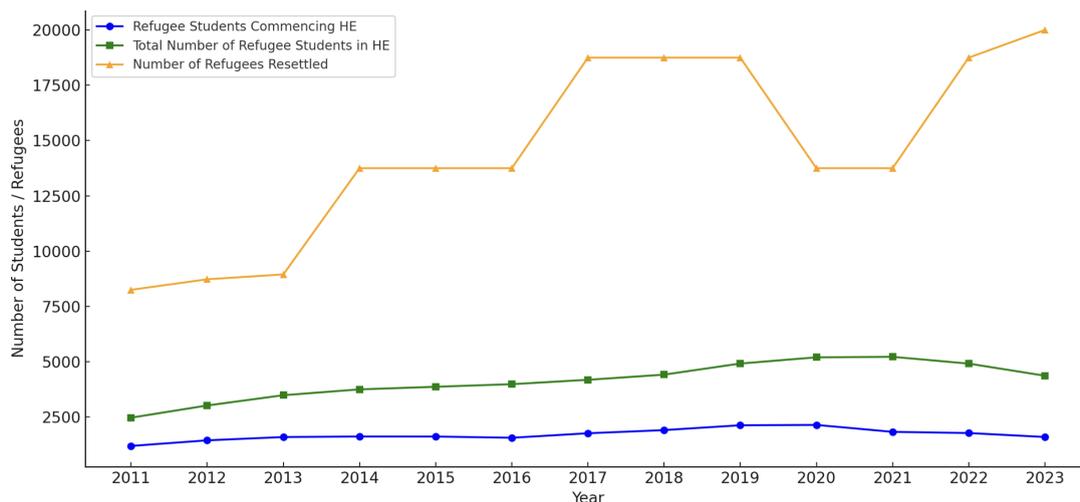
² While not an 'equity group' of concern in the HEPPP, the federal government still collects NESB student data, but this does not capture migration journey, visa category or duration in Australia, which are key markers of forced migration.

collecting “new types of data such as more granular equity indicators (e.g. students who are care leavers, carers or refugees) and course delivery costs to inform analysis” (O’Kane, 2024, p.241). This is a welcome measure. If implemented, this policy change can help track refugee students’ educational trajectories and outcomes in Australian higher education.

As illustrated in Figure 1, access to higher education for refugee students has steadily increased over the past decade. From 2011 to 2019, there was a consistent increase in both the number of refugees commencing HE and the total number of refugee students in the sector. This increase aligns with a steady rise in the number of refugees resettled, particularly in the years 2014 through 2019, which saw significant surges in resettlement figures (Department of Home Affairs [DOHA], 2023; Refugee Council of Australia [RCOA], 2024). However, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on global migration patterns, including the resettlement of refugees. In 2020, while there was still a high number of refugee students commencing higher education, the total number of refugees resettled dropped from 18,750 to 13,750. By 2023, there was a slight recovery in the number of refugees resettled, rising to 20,000. However, the total number of refugee students in higher education continued to reflect the declines in previous years, indicating that despite the increase in resettlement, the long-term impacts of the pandemic and the existing barriers faced by refugee students may still linger. As the number of refugees resettled fluctuates, education systems must adapt to provide adequate resources and support tailored to the unique challenges faced by refugee students.

Figure 1

Refugee Resettlement and Access to Higher Education in Australia, 2011–2023; based on data from DOHA (2023), RCOA (2024), and Commonwealth Department of Education website



Another key development can be found in the Department of Home Affairs, rather than the Department of Education. A key response for resettlement countries like Australia to the UNHCR’s 15/30 campaign (to get 15 percent of refugees into higher education by 2030) is the development of complementary education pathways.

Complementary pathways are “safe and regulated avenues for persons in need of international protection that provide for a lawful stay in a third country where the international protection needs of the beneficiaries are met” (UNHCR, 2023b).

Education complementary pathways offer a protection-focused pathway to a durable solution through an academic program of study. As of 2022, at least 33 coordinated education pathways are operating in 27 countries, a remarkable increase from the three pathways that were operating in 2019 (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024; Evans et al., 2022). Australia is not one of these 27 countries, despite calls for them—as a generous resettlement host—to create one. However, given the new Labor government’s commitment to extending Australia’s humanitarian response through the creation of 10,000 additional complementary pathway places³, the country’s time has come. To this end, the Department of Home Affairs has co-designed a blueprint for a new *Refugee Student Settlement Pathway* (RSSP) with the new Australian Refugee Welcome University Sponsorship Consortium (ARWU SC).⁴ The ambition of RSSP is to create a shared opportunity with the Australian tertiary education sector to increase resettlement options, with institutions contributing to the costs of settlement and utilizing the goodwill and energy of campus support groups to help students meet settlement outcomes for a year after arrival. That this has happened under the Minister for Immigration rather than the Minister for Education tells an interesting story about where responsibilities for refugee education (are seen to) lie. This illuminates the absence of a clear connection between the Departments of Home Affairs and the Department of Education, except for where there is a clear visa pathway. This hinders rights-based education for new arrivals because, once a person has arrived in Australia, responsibility for refugee education is lost in the gaps between these siloed divisions of government.

Problematizing the National Commitment

International frameworks recognize the importance of refugee education, urging signatory governments to ensure that refugees have substantive educational opportunities. Australia’s national multicultural policies and educational declarations reflect its commitment to multilateral efforts to support refugee resettlement and integration. The operationalization of national commitments is far from perfect. In this section, we illuminate the key limitations of refugee education in Australia.

Sectoral misalignments mean that refugees are explicitly recognized as equity targets in school education but not in the higher education sector. Refugees remain invisible in the Australian higher education policy space (Molla, 2021, 2024). Although some universities offer refugee-focused support, without sector-wide equity provision, institutional arrangements remain inconsistent and insufficient for refugees’ needs. Consequently, refugee students continue to face structural barriers to entry to and

³ The Australian government made this pledge at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023. Details can be found [here](#).

⁴ The ARWUSC is a consortium of 13 public universities with a strong commitment to social inclusion who have come together to co-design a blueprint for the Refugee Student Settlement Pathway with the Australian government.

progression within higher education institutions. To use Fraser's (2008) logic of participatory parity, policy invisibility reproduces injustice in three ways. First, in the absence of targeted policy provisions, refugees lack the necessary institutional support to succeed in their studies (*maldistribution*). Second, against the prevalence of negative stereotypes towards refugees in the public sphere, refugee students continue to experience racial bias at the institutional level and are construed in deficit terms (*misrecognition*). Third, the policy invisibility of refugees also implies their limited involvement in equity-related policy debates and decisions (*political misrepresentation*).

The invisibility of refugees in higher education equity policies appears to be a calculated omission. The Australian Government spends millions of dollars supporting refugee settlement. By focusing on developing 'foundational' English language, education (schooling), and employment, there is no targeted support for improving refugees' participation in tertiary education (Australian Government, 2019; Shergold et al., 2019). In many cases, refugee settlement policies are motivated by local needs for low-skilled workers—the humanitarian policy has an economic intent: refugees fill less-skilled, low-paying jobs at low wages (Legrain, 2016). Anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2003) refers to governments' tendency to educate refugees for positions that would not be taken by local workers as 'calculated kindness'. However, such stratified educational and occupational expectations signify political short-sightedness. By providing quality education to refugees, society has the opportunity to empower them to become self-sufficient, valuable citizens. For improved outcomes, the Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration program (Parkinson et al., 2023) and the Transition to Work services for young refugees who leave school early (Australian Government, 2019b) need to be complemented by widening access to and targeted support in higher education.

The invisibility in policy has long inhibited the imperative (of governments and educational institutions) to collect data on refugee participation in education, which is matched by a lack of international data on this matter. This invisibility is policy violence, interpreted by Calaycay et al. (2023) as an act of (deliberate) exclusion, which creates an additional layer of harm and arguably constitutes a violation of Article 26 of the UDHR. If the education system does not know who our refugee students are educationally (in terms of sector, performance, and potential), and where they want to go, it will be unable to respond. This requires careful and ongoing consultation with refugee communities, families, and individuals to ensure that needs and responses are co-established, specific, targeted, and flexible. This currently does not happen at any level, meaning that disconnections—between different governments (Commonwealth, states, and territories), departments (Education, Home Affairs), and sectors (school, vocational, higher education)—are deepened. It is thus heartening to see refugees recognized in the Universities Accord report. New challenges will emerge, such as how to identify refugees, particularly in the case where people have become Australian citizens, and whether people with refugee-like circumstances should be included. More debate is needed, which must extend across the silos within government, departments, and sectors.

The mandate within Article 26 of UDHR that “higher education [being] equally accessible to all based on merit” is critically endangered by a lack of connectivity and ecological thinking throughout the system. It is not feasible for new arrivals to compete on even ground ‘on merit’ lines without a clear understanding of the inequitable circumstances that many refugees experience, resulting from a plethora of factors (such as trauma, fragmented educational trajectories, learning new language/s, academic literacy acquisition, cultural unfamiliarity, financial precarity). As Creagh’s (2014) analysis clearly illustrates, refugee students are disadvantaged in national standardized testing instruments such as NAPLAN; it therefore follows that this is worse with high-stakes exams, such as the High School Certificate or English language tests needed for entry to professional programs such as nursing, especially when the impacts of trauma are factored in (Morrice et al., 2021).

We turn to the wicked problem of skills and qualifications recognition. According to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (Barker & Tofts-Len, 2024), “On average, migrants who have been in Australia for two to six years earn more than 10 percent less than Australian-born workers” (p. ii) and this gap has in part to do with issues associated with recognition of skills and qualifications. Without efficient systems to identify and enhance refugees’ skills, many highly qualified individuals may resort to driving for services like Uber instead of pursuing their professions. Establishing streamlined mechanisms for skill recognition and upskilling is not only imperative for the successful integration of refugees but is also crucial for maximizing the societal benefits of their diverse talents and experiences.

Conclusion

Our primary objective was to understand the alignment between global initiatives and national responses regarding refugee education, using the case of Australia. International human rights and refugee frameworks collectively underscore the right of refugees to quality education, highlighting the intrinsic dignity of displaced individuals. These frameworks urge host governments to demonstrate unwavering commitment to affording refugees access to educational opportunities. In particular, host governments have a responsibility to ensure refugees can access education and can rebuild their lives. Australia, as a signatory to these international frameworks, is bound by legal commitments to align its education policies with these global expectations. In their comparative analysis of the implementation of international legal frameworks, Horsch and Russell (2022) emphasized the need to enhance the enforceability of refugees’ right to education. Our analysis supports their point and suggests promising developments, such as the Australian Universities Accord Panel’s recognition of refugees as worthy of consideration for future equity policies and the co-creation of a blueprint for the Refugee Student Settlement Pathway (RSSP).

Our analysis reveals sectoral inconsistencies within the Australian education policy space. While explicitly acknowledged as equity targets in school education, refugees remain invisible in the higher education sector. This misalignment perpetuates structural barriers for refugees, hindering their entry into and progression within

higher education institutions. The absence of a sector-wide equity provision for refugees results in inconsistent institutional arrangements, leaving them without the necessary support for academic success and meaningful employment.

We argue that a more comprehensive approach to refugee education is imperative to recognize the multifaceted challenges and unique circumstances that displaced populations face. This should encompass a holistic framework that recognizes and addresses disadvantageous factors, such as language barriers, disrupted educational trajectories, financial hardship, trauma, and cultural adjustment. Further, an ongoing commitment to monitoring outcomes, collecting detailed data, and implementing targeted policies will be pivotal in ensuring that refugees receive the support they need to thrive in both school and higher education settings. Australia can genuinely fulfill its international commitments to refugee education through concerted, compassionate, and interconnected efforts.

Our analysis underscores the importance of critically examining how national policies translate international commitments into actionable provisions for refugee education. The disparities identified in the Australian context suggest the value of comparative studies with other nations, such as Canada, to uncover best practices and common challenges in aligning national policy with global standards. Future research should further investigate how different countries operationalize international frameworks and identify the factors that facilitate or impede effective implementation.

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Rights Deferred, Sustainable Futures Denied: Indigenous/Adivasi Lessons for Interrogating Tensions in Rights Education

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Human rights have been framed as integral to development. Yet, despite decades of development programming, human rights violations prevail. This article examines Adivasi/Indigenous Peoples' encounters with development in Attappady, India, especially in relation to their identity and expertise as casteist-colonial India's Indigenous Peoples. Comparing Adivasi interlocutors' counter-colonial narratives with a thematic analysis of UNESCO's recent recommendations on human rights education reveal how interlocutors are noting the disconnect between policy promises of the right to dignity and everyday assaults on Adivasi personhood. Meanwhile, development programs that prioritize profits over ecological balance continue to jeopardize their right to sustainable futures. These findings emphasize the relevance of redirecting gaze in rights education, from the perceived deficits of Global South actors towards those who benefit from sustaining unjust global hierarchies, while legitimizing the rights violations that arise from them. As the often-overlooked experts of relational living in a world rendered precarious by an inherently unsustainable development paradigm, this article's interlocutors emphasize the significance of centering Indigenous/Adivasi expertise in imagining systemic shifts in rights education.

Keywords: coloniality, Global South, human rights education, Indigenous expertise, unsustainable development.

Introduction

"I know the forest and the forest knows me," explained Murugan,¹ an Indigenous/Adivasi man from the Irula tribe in the South Indian state of Kerala. We were sitting by the banks of the Bhavani River, surrounded by the forests and mountains that were an important part of Murugan's childhood. As a boy, Murugan could roam the forests freely without being afraid of wild animals because he had "learned that the beings in the forest will do no harm if they know that we respect them." Murugan's adventures in the forest ended in the mid-2000s when development and conservation projects supported by the Kerala State Schedule Tribes (ST) Development Department introduced restrictions on Adivasi peoples' entry into forest land (Suchithra, 2013; Thomas, 2018). Today, access into Murugan's home hamlet, Thanchiyoor, which is one of 192 hamlets in the 'tribal development block' of Attappady, Kerala, is regulated through a police check-post, and Indigenous Peoples' entry into the forest is mediated through

¹ Names of research sites and people are pseudonyms.

the state's development and forest departments. For Murugan, this means that he and his fellow Irular "no longer share the relationship [they] had with the forest and land."

Murugan is joining Indigenous Peoples in India and around the world who assert that various forms of development interventions are severing relations that they have nurtured with sentient beings around them for centuries (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019; Quay, 2021; Todd, 2016). Moreover, burgeoning scholarship demonstrates how development programs in the Global South, which neither consult nor substantively engage with Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and expertise, are introducing new forms of socio-political and environmental precarities (bodhi & jojo, 2019; Huaman, 2019; Tuck, 2009). Yet, mainstream global education recommendations and their national adaptations continue to frame development as essential for ensuring human rights (UNESCO, 2023; Uvin, 2007).

Against this background, this article reflects on a key question posed by this special issue—how should human rights education be reconfigured to meet the needs of current and future generations? This inquiry is guided by the following research question: How do people living in a 'tribal development block' navigate daily encounters with development, especially in relation to their identity and expertise as Adivasi peoples? The goal of this exploration is to interrogate the tensions between policy promises and Adivasi peoples' lived experiences and their implications for human rights education. To do this, I draw on semi-structured narrative interviews (Clandinin, 2022; O'Toole, 2018) with six Adivasi interlocutors whose "counter-colonial narrative" excerpts (Ritchie & Rau, 2010) illuminate the link between development and rights violation in Attappady.

As a comparison between these narratives and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Recommendation (UNESCO, 2023) and Explainer (UNESCO, 2024) on Education for Peace and Human Rights highlights, policy promises to affirm the right to dignity and the right to sustainable futures remain unfulfilled. With these very policy interventions exacerbating precarities in Attappady, the presumed "vulnerable" and "disadvantaged" targets (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020; UNESCO, 2017) of these policies are adopting strategies to navigate an inherently unsustainable development paradigm. Drawing on the tensions between policy and narratives, this article makes a case for the urgent relevance of centering the intellectual and pedagogical expertise of Indigenous/Adivasi Peoples to transform the interconnected structures of exclusion and colonial violence that have come to define mainstream education, development, and the human rights agenda (Patel, 2016; Spivak, 2004; Sriprakash, et al., 2020). The paper invites those involved in what Stein et al. (2022) refer to as "low-intensity" struggles, in which I include myself, to cultivate an openness to learn from "high-intensity learners" to understand what stands in the way of reimagining Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on Quality Education and Human Rights Education (HRE). According to Stein et al. (2022), "people in low-intensity struggles have had their sensibilities forged by privilege or aspirations for privilege"

(p.280) while benefiting differentially from the injustice wrought by an inherently unsustainable and exclusionary status quo. Conversely, those involved in high-intensity struggles “are fighting for their lives as a result of the very system that many of us in low-intensity struggles are fighting to maintain” (Stein et al., 2022, p. 280).

Adivasi interlocutors who are engaged in high-intensity struggles illustrate how mainstream education policy is steeped in the principle of separability (Battiste, 2005; Silva, 2016), which normalizes the separation of the world’s peoples through manufactured categories based on caste, race, and species. They also demonstrate how educators and policymakers involved in low-intensity work are “cognitively and affectively” ill-equipped to imagine educational alternatives outside the dominant worldview (Andreotti, 2016, p. 105). By centering Indigenous/Adivasi Peoples and their insights, this article contributes to growing voices in the field of Comparative and International Education that are calling for multi-scalar, pluriversal, and geo-epistemically diverse reimaginations of education (Manion et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2010; Sultana, 2019). Additionally, the tensions between mainstream HRE policy and Adivasi Peoples experience presented in this article respond to critical policy scholarship advocating for a redirection of gaze in education, development, and human rights—from the manufactured deficits of actors in the Global South to the denials and interconnected structures of colonial violence that Global North² actors perpetuate through education (Becker, 2021; Patel, 2016; Simmonds, 2022; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

Research Context and Background: Indigenous Peoples in Casteist-Colonial India

Adivasi, Indigenous Peoples of India, Scheduled Tribes (ST),³ and tribals are just a few of many names and categories attributed to one of the earliest inhabitants of the South Asian subcontinent (bodhi & ziipao, 2019; Da Costa & Da Costa, 2019). Adivasis, translatable in many Indian languages as ‘*Adi-First, vasis-inhabitants,*’ are not categorized as Indigenous Peoples by the Indian state and therefore do not come under the jurisprudence of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007. However, in a historical exploration of Indigeneity in South Asia, Adivasi scholar and poet Virginius Xaxa (1999) asserts that over 750 tribe groups that live across the country are indeed the

² My use of this terminology is informed by decolonial scholarship and the assertion that Global North and South are not geographical descriptors, but a relational, onto-epistemic orientation (Dados & Connell, 2012; Kamal & Courtheyn, 2024). Global North actors are largely oriented towards and benefit from the dominant but destructive, modern-colonial status-quo, irrespective of their physical location in the world (Byrd, 2014; Spivak, 2004).

³ In this article, I use the abbreviation ST (Scheduled Tribe) to refer to young Indigenous interlocutors because they have stated it to be their preference. Indigenous elders in Attappady generally use the term ‘Adivasi’, the English term ‘tribe’, and/or the name of their tribe group.

Indigenous Peoples of India, even if the state continues to draw on colonial anthropology to classify people as ST.

Home to members of three tribe groups—the Irula, the Muduga, and the Kurumba, Attappady is designated as a “tribal development block” primarily due to a concentrated population of Adivasi communities in the region. This means that the everyday lives of ST peoples, including education, health care, housing, and access to public services, are mediated through a state and state-supported development apparatus (Escobar, 2012; Ferguson, 1994; Kjosavik & Shanmugaratnam, 2004). This apparatus operates under the conviction that the “path to ST development lies in the transition from low-income jobs to high income occupations [...] sustainable means of livelihood, and industrial production” (Kerala State Planning Board, 2021, p. 270). Adivasi peoples are noting the colonial continuities embedded in the development apparatus that shape their everyday experiences. Preetha, one of the interlocutors in this article, articulates this significant aspect of the research context when she states, “whatever the British used to do, the way they used to see Indians, that is how these [development] officers and Malayalees look at STs now.”

Guiding Concepts: Coloniality, Education, and the Human Rights-in-Development Regime

Linking SDG 4 and HRE through the “Human Rights-in-Development” Regime

This paper regards global education agendas like SDG 4 and HRE as part of a “human rights-in-development” regime, which has redefined human rights as a sub-category within global development goals (Donnelly, 1999; Sano, 2000; Uvin, 2007). As Uvin (2007) argues, the incorporation of human rights into development is relatively recent and can be traced back to the 1970s and debates on the ‘right to development’ in the New International Economic Order (pp. 597-598). Education is designated a central role in the human rights-in-development regime as a tool that can provide the skills to achieve development goals and ensure universal rights (Kendall, 2008; Moghli, 2020; Zembylas, 2020), and to facilitate the incremental inclusion of ‘developing’ nations into the ‘developed’ world (Ferguson, 2005). For instance, in target 4.7 of SDG 4, knowledge of human rights is listed as one of many skills that learners must acquire to ensure sustainable development (UNESCO, 2016). UNESCO’s (2023) most recent recommendation for ensuring peace, human rights, and sustainable development, which is a revision to the 1974 Recommendation for Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom, asserts that the revision was done with a view of “firmly embedding the role of education in fostering human rights... and sustainable development” (p. 1). Even though this article’s findings focus on interlocutors’ encounters with development and how they navigate rights violations, the policy connections between education and the human rights-in-development regime make interlocutors’ pedagogical insights crucial for reimagining HRE.

Multiple Logics and Practices of Coloniality

This research is informed by scholarship that insists education, development, and human rights are ensconced in the logic and practices of coloniality (Pashby & Sund, 2020; Shahjahan, 2013; Takayama et al., 2017). Decolonial scholars use the term coloniality to refer to the hierarchies and patterns of power (Grosfoguel, 2007; Quijano, 2007) that continue to “define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production” (Maldonado-Torres, 2017, p. 97) in the modern world. Coloniality, therefore, is the “darker side” or shadow of modernity (Mignolo, 2011), and as an analytical category it highlights the “spatiality (expansionist control of land), onto-epistemic racism (elimination and subjugation of difference), and the geopolitics of knowledge production (Andreotti, 2016, p. 103), that constitute the “colonial-modern” (Mignolo, 2011) world we live in.

South Asian scholars have extended this framing of coloniality by challenging the tendency within strands of decolonial scholarship to “begin, end, and orient all conversations about colonialism, nationalism, and imperialism to Europe and the West” (Da Costa & Da Costa, 2019, p. 58). Such an orientation is relevant in this research context since the Indian state and dominant caste/class Indians have long regarded Adivasi/Indigenous dispossession as an inevitable aspect of national development (bodhi & jojo, 2019; Xaxa, 1999). This research begins with the assumption that the interlocutors in this article have already stated—we live in still-colonial conditions characterized by multiple, co-existing articulations of colonialism generated via “development projects, conservation-led displacement, and various uneven forms of migrations that foster ongoing settlement on Indigenous land” (Da Costa & Da Costa, 2019, p. 54). I employ the term “counter-colonial” (Ritchie & Rau, 2010) to refer to scholarship and perspectives that interrogate the workings of multiple colonialities in education and development. I view counter-colonial theorizing as including postcolonial, decolonial, Indigenous, and Southern perspectives and aiming towards a “proactive dialogical openness to ‘counter-ing’ colonized thinking with alternative narratives reflective of hope, regeneration, and transformational shifts” (Ritchie & Rau, 2010, p. 362).

‘Otherwise’ Possibilities in Education

This article builds on scholarly explorations for ‘otherwise’ possibilities in education to make a case for centering the intellectual and pedagogical expertise of Indigenous/Adivasi Peoples in reconfiguring education outside the logic of coloniality (Nakata et al., 2012; Ritchie, 2013; Smith et al., 2019). ‘Otherwise’ possibilities, as Crawley (2016) asserts, “announces the fact of infinite alternatives to what *is*... as a means to disrupt the current configurations of power and inequity” (p. 3). It also underscores that ongoing rights violations and inequity are not simply the consequences of development gone wrong. Rather, exclusion and violence constitute development and

are what divides the world into ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ (Ferguson, 2005; Stein et al., 2022).

Methodological Framework: Comparing Narrative Interviews and Policy

My professional and personal experiences while living in Attappady for two years (2014–2015 and 2021–2022), and over a decade-long engagement with ST youth and activists in India have informed the development of this article. Specifically, I draw on interview data that was generated during a Comparative Case Study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) of inclusive education that I conducted in Thanchiyoor from September 2021 to July 2022 as part of my dissertation research.

Six Interlocutors: Brief Profiles

The interlocutors of my dissertation included 40 Irula and Muduga tribe members between the ages of 17 and approximately 70 years old, engaged in formal education and employment, political activism, daily wage labor, and storytelling. In this article, I draw on the insights of five Irula tribe youth and one Irula elder living in Thanchiyoor, since they make explicit connections between development, rights, and alternate possibilities for education. Bhuvi and Jinu, who were interviewed together, are currently pursuing post-secondary education in Palakkad town, an hour-long bus ride from Thanchiyoor. Murugan is a storyteller and farmer who discontinued formal education after tenth grade and has been dabbling in daily wage and contract work in and around Attappady for over a decade. Soumya has a diploma in Teacher Education and recently received a permanent position as an elementary teacher in a government school near Thanchiyoor. Preetha is a student in a master’s program in sociology and an activist holding leadership positions in multiple youth and ST advocacy groups. Nenjan Moopan is the head of Thanchiyoor hamlet. He withdrew from political activism in his late 40s after what he described as “having had enough” and is now pursuing intermittent daily wage work.

Relevant Data Generation Methods

The data I present in this article is drawn from larger dissertation research in which I combined multiple ethnographic methods⁴ with thematic policy analysis. This article draws on five audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated semi-structured interviews.

⁴ I lived near Thanchiyoor hamlet for a year, and hamlet elders invited me to participate in everyday activities, which included helping with the community kitchen, teaching conversational English, and accompanying hamlet women to their work site. A few of the hamlet’s youth who are members of a prominent, left-wing youth organization graciously included me in their meetings and activities. Eight of these youth and I co-founded the Youth Researchers of Attappady Collective (YRAC) and we employed YPAR methods (Bellino, 2023; Cammarota & Fine, 2008) to make sense of the persistent exclusion that ST youth experience in educational spaces and everyday life. The participant observation conducted over a period of eight months was documented through field notes and memos. Data generation methods also included group discussions and life-story interviews (Atkinson, 1998).

Interviews were conducted between January and June 2022 and lasted between one and a half and two hours. Daily field notes and analytical memos (Maxwell, 2013) informed the interview guides, which were tailored specifically for each participant. Semi-structured interviews were followed up with unstructured, member-checking interviews, documented through jottings and reflective memos (Emerson et al., 2011), and appended to the interview transcript.

I employed a narrative analysis lens (Clandinin, 2022; Hickson, 2016; O’Toole, 2018) to conduct and analyze interviews, which means that I paid attention to how interlocutors tell and employ stories to interpret their experiences. During data analysis conducted using the qualitative analysis software, NVivo, I employed initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) to generate “storied themes” (Hunt et al., 2006) related to the research questions. A key limitation of my data selection is that I draw from interviews that were conducted based on interview guides that addressed my dissertation research questions, which centered on inclusive education within the SDG 4 agenda, rather than on rights education. Therefore, this article draws on a smaller number of interlocutors who made explicit connections between rights and development in their interviews. Additionally, as I discuss next, policy selection was limited to recent global documents, which have not yet been adopted by India’s Human Rights Commission.

Comparing Policy and Narratives: Rationale and Analysis

The core assumption of SDG 4 policies is that providing skills will eventually lead to universal development and human rights (Mason et al., 2019; Wulff, 2020). However, the world is more formally educated than it has ever been, and yet actors involved in high-intensity struggles continue to experience persistent rights violations under populist and techno-bureaucratic regimes (Benavot & Smith, 2020; Wulff, 2021). To make sense of this conundrum, it is not sufficient to study the definitions and dividing practices (Ball, 1998) of policy texts. Rather, it is crucial to understand the constructions and experiences of development as “embodied in the social, cultural, and ideological underpinnings of the local context” (Nguyen, 2010, p. 353). To compare the tensions between policy and narratives, I purposefully selected two policy documents published recently by UNESCO: (1) a Recommendation on education for peace and human rights, international understanding, cooperation, fundamental freedoms, global citizenship, and sustainable development, which was adopted by United Nations members in November 2023, and will be referred to from hereon as the Recommendation; and (2) Recommendation on education for peace, human rights, and sustainable development: An explainer (UNESCO, 2024), which outlines the practical implications of the Recommendation for educational stakeholders, and will be referred to from hereon as the Explainer.

Policy selection was purposeful and based on two criteria. One, as I described in a previous section, these documents affirm the link between education and human rights-in-development. Two, India’s national education policy is guided by the targets

and indicators of the SDG agenda and draws directly from United Nations policy recommendations (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020, p. 3; Ministry of Education, 2022, p. 12). This means that the new Recommendation is likely to be adapted into national and state policy implementations that this article's interlocutors may encounter. The policy documents were thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and to examine the tensions between policy and experience, I compared the policy themes with ST interlocutors' storied themes. The comparison was guided by the following questions: (1) How are education, development, human rights, and the relation between the concepts framed? (2) What goals and actions are assigned to education in relation to human rights and SDG 4?

Researcher Positionality and Negotiating Access

I am a dominant caste, lighter-skinned, middle-class person with what Adivasi interlocutors will refer to as "high-level" education. Even though I was born and raised in Kerala, my early engagements with ST peoples in Attappady (2012–2015) were shaped by a mode of solidarity critiqued by Indigenous Peoples around the world—the impulse to 'help' (Cook, 2008; Grande, 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). This means that my work was driven by an uncritical belief in the transformative power of education in fulfilling the promises of tribal development and empowerment. Over the years, Adivasi co-workers, teachers, and collaborators have taught me to shift from what Tuck (2009) refers to as a "damage-centered" orientation, which highlights the imaginary deficits and real pain of Indigenous while obscuring colonial violence and the Global North's complicity. It is this shift in orientation, rather than official permission letters from state departments or my prior experiences in Attappady, that facilitated my access and ability to build trust and reciprocal relationships in Thanchiyoor hamlet. This is implied by Sradha Chechi, who is a hamlet member and one of my research mentors, when she told me that people in the hamlet would engage with me if I were able to demonstrate that I wasn't interested in "surveys" or their "difficulties" (Fieldnotes 2021, December 2).

Findings: Right to Dignity Deferred, Sustainable Futures Denied

The Right to Dignity: Policy Assumptions versus Lived Experiences

The right to dignity has been central to policy conceptions of human rights. For example, Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) asserts that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (p. 2). This assertion is revised and affirmed in UNESCO's (2023) Recommendation, which defines transformative education as teaching and learning that "recognizes and valorizes the dignity and diversity of learners" (p. 5). Amidst reports of an alarming rise in cases of human rights abuse in India following the ascent of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (Human Rights Watch, 2024), it is important to note that the Indian state has been violating ST peoples' right to dignity for decades (Hembrom, 2022; Xaxa, 2016). Most relevant to this article are the assaults against ST peoples' dignity and personhood

enacted by the state, the news media, and dominant caste Indians through the classification of ST peoples as “backward sections.” For example, in the annual reports published by India’s Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020), the criteria for specifying a community as a Scheduled Tribe include “primitive traits,” “shyness of contact,” and “backwardness” (p. 40). The Kerala State Planning Board (2021) proclaims that the “present status of the tribal community is characterized by social backwardness... and low educational standards” (p. 13).

ST interlocutors are noting the disjuncture between the promises of the right to inalienable dignity and the realities of life in a casteist-colonial context. For example, Bhuvi and Jinu explained that they are tired of being categorized as “pinoka vibhaagam” (backward section). In the following narrative, they describe how they are intentionally sidelining the knowledge passed on by their grandparents to get a job and hopefully be respected:

Jinu: I used to go to the forest with my grandfather and he would show me different types of plants, and how to take honey without angering the bees... but knowing all that will not bring us respect among others... my parents do not allow me to go and play in the forest anymore. I have to sit at home and study all the time. In school we must study all the subjects and become big, big doctors or government officers, only then we will receive respect from society.

Bhuvi: Respect is very important. But everyone calls us backward. If we go out of Attappady and say that we are from here, Malayalees will ask if we are Adivasis and they will mock and laugh at us... but if an Adivasi girl gets a high-level position like doctor or Indian Administrative Service officer then maybe she will get respect from society.

– Jinu and Bhuvi, Interview transcript, May 2022

In this discussion, Bhuvi and Jinu are responding to Keet's (2012) call to “make visible the complexities of human rights as both a discourse and a material reality” (p. 9). Unlike mainstream human rights policy and discourse, which insists on the right to dignity as an “inalienable right,” Bhuvi and Jinu must choose formal education over intergenerational knowledge to be worthy of respect. This difference between policy and experience may be attributed to a taken-for-granted assumption about the ‘human’ in human rights.

Rights Deferred: Unsettling the ‘Human’ in Human Rights

UNESCO’s Recommendation (2023) and explainer (2024) mirror prior policy assumptions that human rights are an inherent and universal right that people have simply because they are human (Zembylas, 2017a). However, such a conceptualization does not account for how the human in human rights is founded on the assumption that only certain kinds of subjects are intelligible as human while Others are constituted as “(non)(sub)(in)human” (Khoja-Moolji, 2017, p. 380), through racialized, gendered,

caste-based, and other normalized practices (Mignolo, 2009; Wilkerson, 2020; Wynter, 2003). There is robust literature mapping how universalizing concepts like development, rights, and freedom affirm and affect the colonial division of humanity. For instance, Lowe (2015) illuminates how modern promises of universal development and rights are shaped and sustained by an “economy of affirmation and forgetting,” affirming the rights of a privileged few while relegating the majority of Others to spaces “that are constituted as backward” (p. 39) and forgetting the violent encounters that have naturalized these divisions. In the context of global development, this economy also upholds a “damage-centered” (Tuck, 2009) hierarchical division of humans. That is a majority of the world’s peoples are assumed to be delayed or set back in their path to development because of imaginary deficits and are expected to “catch up (but never can) to the settler/unpained/abled body (or community or people or society or philosophy or knowledge system)” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 231).

The disavowal of this colonial division of humanity is central to mainstream human rights policy commitments (Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Spivak, 2004). Therefore, even though the “inherent dignity of the human person...is universal, indivisible, inalienable, and interrelated” (UNESCO, 2023), Bhuvi and Jinu are noting that in reality, their right to dignity is inextricably linked to their geo-politic (“backward” Attappady) and body-politic (“backward” Scheduled Tribe) situatedness (Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Mignolo, 2009). Moreover, they are keenly aware that their right to dignity is not contingent upon their humanity but on their ability to catch up by getting a prestigious job. This path to acquiring that right to dignity aligns with mainstream global education policy promises of social mobility through education—be educated, get a “high level” job, and “fight for the respect that everyone else is given without question” (Jemisin, 2015, p. i).

Right to Sustainable Futures: Development as Rights Violation

The SDG 4 agenda expresses a concern for future generations and their well-being (UNESCO, 2016). UNESCO’s (2023) Recommendation is grounded in a rights perspective and is invested in “empowering learners as rights-holders” (p. 7), promoting an “ethic of solidarity” by encouraging “convivial relations, neighborliness and a sense of belonging” and raising awareness about the “interdependence of individuals...societies...natural resources and ecosystems” (p.8). To meet these guidelines, the Explainer (UNESCO, 2024) recommends that all educational activities and programs should be geared towards the achievement of 12 learning outcomes that include “respect for diversity” and “a sense of belonging to a common and diverse humanity and planet earth” (p. 8). The Explainer also provides examples of actions for achieving these outcomes, which include “ensuring that textbooks are anti-racist and checked for biases and stereotypes,” “integrating multiple and diverse perspectives into history teaching,” and “using the outdoors as learning spaces to teach about sustainability and climate change” (UNESCO, 2024, p. 12). Even as HRE policies emphasize the interconnectedness between individuals and ecosystems, in the next

section, Murugan, Soumya, and Nenjan Moopan illustrate how ongoing development programs that prioritize profits and exclusion are breaking relations between ST peoples and their more-than-human kin.

Broken Relations and Precarious Living in Attappady

When I was a boy, I used to accompany my uncles and cousins into the forest... I have always felt that the forest knows me, and I know the forest. Like we understand each other. And the animals won't hurt us if they know that we respect them... All this changed when AHADS (Attappady Hill Area Development Society) started in Attappady. They and the forest department limited our entry into the forests. They still justify it saying that they want to protect the forests, but we never harmed the forest. In the late 2000s, AHADS started recruiting young ST men as forest guards and watchers. Their duty was to roam the forest and to report anyone who entered the forest to take firewood or collect honey. And that is how they turned our own people against us... About six years ago, a DFO (district forest officer) passed an order stating that ST peoples must not enter the forest with any type of sharp object... Many of us protested at the check-post until the order was revoked... But we no longer have the relationship we had with the forest and the land.

– Murugan, Interview transcript, February 2022

Murugan's narrative highlights the role of a specific development project that separated him from the forest that he loves. Stories by Indigenous Peoples in India and around the world are replete with themes that emphasize the importance of maintaining reciprocal and respectful relations with sentient beings with whom humans share space (bodhi & ziipao, 2019; Ormond et al., 2020; Tynan, 2021). However, relation-breaking and rendering more-than-human beings as property that must be sold, protected, or destroyed for profit is a defining feature of development (Battiste, 2013; Coulthard, 2014; Grande, 2019). Therefore, Murugan's quiet sense of loss about being denied entry into the forest is not merely about losing access to the land and its resources. Rather, his assertion that he and the forest "understand each other" affirms the experience of Indigenous Peoples around the world who view the loss of relations as an abnormal severance of a spiritual and ontological bond with the land and the beings around them (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019; Quay, 2021; Todd, 2016).

Mainstream conservation-for-development projects have traditionally been aimed at resource and biodiversity protection for future generations and the planet (Mitchell, 2020; Spash, 2022). However, critical examinations of such projects have revealed numerous instances of Indigenous dispossession and habitat loss. (Chattopadhyay, 2014; Domínguez & Luoma, 2020; Murdock, 2021). The Kerala State Planning Board, KSPB (2010) report on the AHADS project that Murugan refers to describes it as the most comprehensive development and ecological restoration project implemented in Attappady (p. 5). However, news reports from the time add that even though AHADS

restored over 12,000 hectares of land, it was done by planting non-native species of trees. The KSPB's (2010) report confirms these assertions by stating that forest regeneration was achieved by planting "suitable income-fetching tree plantations" (p. 10).

The consequences of an ecological conservation project that prioritized the planting and protection of "income-fetching" trees are being experienced by ST peoples living in hamlets like Thanchiyoor that are close to the forest. Soumya, explains how:

...we have a lot of elephants and wild boars coming down from the forest into the hamlet. You saw the land just behind my house? My sister and I had a little fruit and vegetable garden there. We grew tomatoes, spinach, some peppers, a couple of plantain palms. And a small pineapple. We were so proud... But just after the big rains a few months ago, an elephant came and took it all. I am grateful that we were all safe because you know that elephants have already killed three people in the past month. Still, I was really sad about losing everything that we grew. Especially that pineapple.

– Soumya, Interview transcript, April 2022

The precarities described by Soumya are becoming frequent in Kerala, and in other forest regions of India that were previously under the guardianship of Adivasi peoples. For instance, in the year 2023-2024, 98 people were killed by elephants in Kerala alone, and at least 25 elephants were electrocuted (The Indian Express, 2024; Kallungal, 2023). Even though Adivasi households are disproportionately affected by wildlife incursions, I rarely observed electric fences around ST farmlands in Thanchiyoor—a mechanism that is commonly used to deter wildlife from entering human settlements. When I asked Nenjan Moopan about the absence of fences, he said:

Why do you think they started coming down from the forest? The forest department and AHADS planted eucalyptus, sandalwood, and some other trees in the forest. Elephants like variety. They want grass and bamboo and fruits. There is hardly any grass in the forest now. The sandalwood trees are guarded by the forest police, and elephants hate eucalyptus. So, they have no choice but to come down here for food. And here we have plantains and jackfruits and black plums. They take it and become happy, we become sad. All we can do is bow in obeisance and hope that they don't take our lives.

– Nenjan Moopan, Interview transcript, February 2022

For Nenjan Moopan, elephants who come to feed in and around the hamlet are not problems to be fixed by installing electric fences or through capture and removal. Rather, they are beings whose rights have been violated and whose homes have been dispossessed by a development paradigm that prioritizes economic gain over ecological balance. Despite being at the frontline of the consequences of development planning, Moopan's response to the elephants coming into his home is rooted in humility and kinship rather than violence. Such a response is akin to what Trawlwulwuy scholar

Lauren Tynan (2021) refers to as a “relational reality,” which is not simply an understanding of the world as relational “but [to] feel the world as kin” (p. 600). To feel the world as kin is not a skill that can be learned as part of a rights-based curriculum. Rather, it requires embracing relationality as a practice and a responsibility (Graham, 1999; Kovach, 2021). As Moopan explains, this relational reality is a complex one to navigate and requires employing strategies to respect the rights of beings with whom they share the land while simultaneously confronting everyday precarities (Bishop & Tynan, 2022; Jukes, 2023; Tynan, 2021)

The tensions between UNESCO’s Recommendation and the everyday experiences of people like Murugan, Soumya, and Nenjan Moopan are stark. The Recommendation’s declarations of respect and interconnectedness and the Explainer’s examples of action, like outdoor learning for sustainability, do not prepare current or future learners to navigate the precarities that those in the Global South are navigating currently. Additionally, the Recommendation does not acknowledge that the dominant development paradigm and the worldviews it normalizes are instrumental in perpetuating the most violent human rights crises of our times—climate change. This denial presents a dilemma for reorienting HRE. HRE in its current form is inextricably linked to a destructive development model that breaks relations between human and more-than-human interlocutors while exacerbating precarities in the Global South (Andreotti et al., 2015; Bryan, 2022; Manion et al., 2019). Therefore, policy promises about the right to sustainable futures for all are bound to be broken as long as the human rights-in-development paradigm remains unchanged.

Discussion

Interrogating Separability and Unintelligibility in Rights Education

In a scathing critique of the “rhetorical-formulaic” discourse that has come to define the human rights-in-development regime, Uvin (2007) asserts that declarations affirming that development is a universal human right are “surely beautifully worded” but is “operationally meaningless” (pp. 598-600). This sentiment remains valid and lives on in UNESCO’s (2023) Explainer, for instance, in the following recommendation for educators:

“Raise awareness of the increasing interdependence of individuals, communities [...] and ecosystems, and cultivate an ethic of shared responsibility for peace, human rights and sustainable development” (UNESCO, 2023, p. 7).

While this guideline may be worded to highlight the importance of an educational agenda that attends to some form of relational responsibility, it does little to acknowledge the kind of rights violations that actors involved in high-intensity struggles like this article’s interlocutors experience daily. Vague assertions that HRE must “instill an ethic of care, compassion and solidarity” are supported by simplistic calls for

developing “collaborative skills, adaptive skills, citizenship skills, and respect for diversity” (UNESCO, 2024, pp. 9-10). This might register as a necessary action for most low-intensity actors since it is compatible with the status quo that we benefit from, albeit differentially. However, as Adivasi interlocutors demonstrate, such recommendations do not address ongoing rights violations for those involved in high-intensity struggles. What are the implications of these findings for educators involved in low-intensity struggles?

Recognizing Separability

These tensions between policy and experience suggest that the “principle of separability” stands in the way of reconfiguring rights education. In an invitation to imagine a social world in which difference is understood without separability, Denise Ferreira da Silva (2016) argues that the modern-colonial social world is invested in constructions of cultural difference that require separation between human and more-than-human beings, as well as between groups that are considered to possess fixed attributes and identities. Battiste (2005) has long asserted that formal education in its current form is “diffusionist” in that it divides the world into two categories—those who invent, progress, and provide, and those who “receive progressive innovation by diffusion” from the former (p. 124).

The normalization of separability in SDG 4 and HRE (Brissett & Mitter, 2017; Maldonado-Torres, 2017) means that global and national policies consistently represent the Global South as the vulnerable and disadvantaged ‘beneficiaries’ of human rights-in-development interventions (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020; UNESCO, 2017). However, as Adivasi interlocutors illuminate, this categorization is intensifying different forms of rights violations. Bhuvi and Jinu’s everyday right to dignity is deferred through categories (the backward Adivasi) imposed by the state and dominant caste Indians. AHADS separated Murugan and the forest through colonial strategies that “remake land as property” (Coulthard, 2014). The presumed superiority of the state’s scientific expertise in reforestation justified the decision to replace trees that are native to the region with “income-fetching” species. What, then, is the ‘otherwise’ educational task of reconfiguring HRE, especially for actors whose worldviews normalize the separation and categorization of beings?

The Challenges of Intelligibility

Learning from the insights of the interlocutors in this article and the work of decolonial and post-humanist scholars, I argue that the ‘otherwise’ educational task for actors involved in low-intensity struggles not only involves understanding and relaying information about colonial strategies like the normalization of separability in education policy. Rather, it requires intervention at the relational and ontological levels of learners’ framing of rights and their investments in ways of knowing and being that implicate them in rights violation. (Amsler, 2019; Kerr & Andreotti, 2018; Zembylas, 2017b). In her

vision for an 'otherwise' education, Preetha emphasizes the significance of this relational shift:

I have two important principles that I try to follow. Do not hurt anyone intentionally and have respect for everyone and their different circumstances. That is what I have learned through my own 'life experiences.' This is an important lesson, but I did not learn it in school or college...There can be competition, no problem, but people must learn to care and respect others. This should be taught in school, especially to 'upper caste' people because they don't know how to think about other peoples' situations. They only know how to think about their job, their family, their 'status'...I am not blaming them. That is what society teaches them.

– Preetha, Interview transcript, May 2022

At first glance, Preetha's elegantly articulated call for education that prioritizes dignity aligns with UNESCO's (2024) Explainer and its emphasis on respect for diversity and self-awareness (p. 10). However, unlike this conception of human rights that is rooted in depoliticized and generalized notions of respect and belonging, Preetha's vision for transforming education addresses what Andreotti (2016) refers to as the cognitive and affective "challenges of intelligibility" (pp. 105-106). The greatest challenge, Andreotti argues, that educators involved in low-intensity struggles encounter while attempting to imagine educational alternatives is that *we* are cognitively and affectively ill-equipped to imagine outside the dominant worldview, especially when this worldview is considered "neutral, universal, [and] benevolent" (Andreotti, 2016, p. 105). It is this challenge of intelligibility that Preetha *makes legible* when she asserts that "upper caste people" cannot be blamed for only prioritizing "their job, their family, their status" since "society teaches them" to prioritize individual success and well-being over collective care and respect.

Conclusion: Indigenous/Adivasi Lessons for Rights Educators

As a testament to Ghosh's (2016) assertion that the Anthropocene is characterized by a "reversal of the temporal order of [colonial] modernity" (p. 46), ST peoples of Attappady and their more-than-human kin are part of a majority who are the first to experience the most devastating precarities and violence induced by the current human rights-in-development paradigm. Yet, the global education agenda and its national adaptations rarely consult people like Bhuvi, Jinu, Murugan, Soumya, Preetha, and Nenjan Moopan, who are navigating development-induced precarities and are experts in sustainable and relational living. This article highlights the expertise of Indigenous/Adivasi Peoples in interrogating the tensions between human rights-in-development policy promises and their lived experiences, while also illuminating the implications of these tensions for rights education, particularly for educators and policymakers involved in low-intensity struggles.

Adivasi interlocutors in this article highlight two key tensions between policy and experience. One, they are noting the disconnect between policy promises of the inalienable right to dignity (UNESCO, 2023) and the everyday assaults against Adivasi personhood, especially through the classification of ST peoples as “backward sections” of society. Two, interlocutors highlight the tensions between HRE policy affirmations of the right to sustainable futures and their experiences of development programs that introduce new forms of precarities. Drawing on these findings, I argue that two principles stand in the way of reconfiguring HRE in ways that are especially significant for low-intensity actors who are learning to imagine education outside the logic and practices of coloniality. One, the principle of separability normalizes education policy representations of the Global South as vulnerable beneficiaries of human rights-in-development interventions, while low-intensity actors in the Global North are assumed to possess the expertise to design and implement these interventions. Two, actors involved in low-intensity struggles are those who benefit from the unsustainable and destructive development paradigm, which means that strategies and actions for justice that are outside the dominant worldview are often unintelligible to these actors.

The task of learning to live in an increasingly uncertain world requires an education that does more than acknowledge the interconnectedness of rights and cultivate depoliticized and decontextualized skills in the hope of ensuring rights for all. Rather, it requires an openness to be taught by actors like this article’s interlocutors, who are experts in entangled and relational living. This article contributes to educational imaginings arising out of scholarly collaborations between low and high-intensity actors (Bellino & the Kakuma Youth Research Group, 2018; Nixon et al., 2022; Wadhwa, 2021). This means that even though this research does not include the perspectives of “settlers”⁵ living on alienated Adivasi land, these findings open up opportunities for collaborative learning and for further research. Notably, it invites inquiry into how the critical expertise and knowledge of Global South actors are experienced by learners in the Global North, especially when their normalized worldviews and sense of self are unlikely to be upheld.

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⁵ Adivasi peoples, government officials, and the migrants themselves refer to non-Adivasi peoples living in Attappady using the English term “settler.”

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From Universal to Pluriversal: Transforming Human Rights Education Policies in Colombia

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This paper examines Colombia's National Plan for Human Rights Education (Plan Nacional de Educación en Derechos Humanos, PLANEDH) as a case study to discuss how positivistic, Eurocentric, and Western constructions have influenced a hegemonic understanding of human rights education. While the PLANEDH policy aligns with the United Nations human rights education mandates, its implementation remains largely symbolic, with minimal territorial impact and limited community participation. This paper encourages a shift of perspectives applying the Pluriversal Rights Education framework. It discusses the importance of integrating diverse ways of knowing into human rights education dialogues and fostering participatory, community-driven policy design. The analysis offers recommendations to reenvision a more plural implementation of the PLANEDH policy in the Colombian education system.

Keywords: Human Rights Education, Pluriversal Rights Education, policies, Colombia.

Introduction

Since the adoption of the United Nations Charter (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948), the United Nations (UN) has worked toward advancing human rights education (HRE). HRE is seen as a tool to strengthen respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as to foster human development (Russell & Suárez, 2017). In 1993, the UN reaffirmed the significance of HRE in promoting mutual understanding and harmonious relations among communities through the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (VDPA) (1993). This international framework specifically recommended that all member states develop national plans for human rights education (NPHRE) to integrate HRE into national education policies. The UN has developed an international approach to HRE establishing guidelines and priorities for countries to implement policies at the country level.

Colombia's National Plan for Human Rights Education (*Plan Nacional de Educación en Derechos Humanos* [PLANEDH]) was adopted in 2009 and updated for 2021-2034. It represents an ambitious effort by this conflict-affected country to embed human rights principles and HRE international mandates into a national educational policy framework. PLANEDH has remained a legal declarative document that has not been fully executed and implemented across all Colombian territories. PLANEDH's organizational mechanisms have not been established, specifically the National

Council and the Technical Regional Committees. This situation impedes an effective policy implementation.

Despite the relevant influence of civil society in Colombia through peace and popular education, there was limited participation by local communities, ethnic and vulnerable communities when enacting and implementing the most recent national HRE policy. For the previous PLANEDH version, the International Center for Human Rights Education studied more than 150 experiences (Velásquez Villate, 2020). The PLANEDH was developed following a top-down model approach that prioritizes normative frameworks of international human rights law over co-creation processes of HRE policies involving local experiences and community voices. Applying the case of Colombia, this paper calls for a shift from a standardized, top-down legalistic model toward a participatory, community-driven approach that integrates local practices and decolonial pedagogies.

Critical HRE scholars have highlighted how HRE policies often remain tied to legalistic human rights regime approaches, presenting challenges to engaging with its content (Zembylas, 2023). Mainstream HRE frameworks have been mostly developed at the international level by international organizations such as the UN and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). As a result, there is a dominant universal human rights discourse rooted in Western and Eurocentric values. While the universalization of HRE represents a milestone in human rights globally, it also exposes a 'one-size-fits-all' universalism and Eurocentric model (Zembylas, 2017). Other ways of knowing can contribute to mutual understanding, peace, and sustainability, such as Indigenous and Afro-Descent knowledge and cosmovision. These ways of knowing have been omitted and silenced from HRE international frameworks (Becker, 2021). Uncritical adoption of the UN global discourse may narrow and manufacture a single HRE discourse that validates certain types of knowledge while ignoring others (cultural, Indigenous, and civil society knowledge) (Coysh, 2014).

The analysis of Colombia's national HRE policy is highly relevant to the field of Comparative and International Education for several reasons. It is a country where Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have been systematically excluded from dialogue and participation for more than three centuries as a consequence of colonization. Most recently, Colombia has emerged in the global arena as a leading example in the recognition of ancestral knowledge. The country has made significant steps in establishing decolonial educational programs, such as the Pedagogy of Mother Earth (*Pedagogía de la Madre Tierra*) at the *Universidad de Antioquia*, which integrates Indigenous worldviews and ancestral knowledge into a formal education program. Two pioneering decolonial universities have been founded: the *Universidad de Saberes Ancestrales* (UDSA), associated with the United Nations of the Spirit, and the *Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural* (UAIIN), a higher education public institution created by and for the Indigenous community of Cauca. Colombia's Ministry of Education accredited UAIIN in 2020. Colombia has actively pursued initiatives to integrate diverse ways of knowing and worldviews into its educational

landscape despite persistent structural discrimination. These efforts reflect a growing commitment to decolonizing education and fostering inclusive spaces that honor knowledge systems and cosmovisions of historically marginalized communities.

Decolonizing HRE in Colombia entails moving beyond UN frameworks' universalist assumptions and embracing a transformative pluriversal perspective of human rights and education—one that recognizes diverse worldviews and ways of knowing. This approach is critical to amplify voices and perspectives from the Global South. This paper invites policymakers and human rights scholars to approach national human rights policies through a transformative paradigm that can contribute to reimagining HRE's role in fostering equity, sustainability, human rights, and peace. The paper presents examples of how these concepts could be integrated into educational policies or practices that can also inspire policy reforms in other countries.

To this end, I propose the Pluriversal Rights Education framework (Williams & Bermeo, 2020), which challenges Western-centric dominant ideas of human rights to integrate other ways of knowledge that have been excluded from the construction of the international education field of HRE. Pluriversal Rights Education invites scholars and practitioners to re-imagine education and de-center the humans. It entails shifting from anthropocentric human rights to a more expansive, pluriversal model in which both sentient and non-sentient beings and our shared connection with Mother Earth are recognized. This framework urges moving beyond a singular, universalized Western approach to human rights and instead incorporating diverse epistemologies while maintaining openness for future transformation.

This paper starts by contextualizing Colombia's educational system and its national laws and policies related to HRE, focusing on the historical evolution of the *Plan Nacional de Educación en Derechos Humanos* from 2009 to the updated version in 2021. Next, I examine the development of HRE as a global framework and the UN influence in the international institutionalization of HRE (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsu, 2005; Russell & Suárez, 2017). Then, I detail the alternative transformative paradigm of Pluriversal Rights Education (Williams & Bermeo, 2020), outlining its core principles and pedagogical goals, which serve as the foundation for a critical analysis of Colombia's PLANEDH. The fifth section analyzes the national HRE plan in Colombia, focusing on its main declaratory and legalistic nature, the policy's lack of impact nationally, and the participation of diverse communities, especially those historically marginalized by colonial powers. Finally, I propose concrete recommendations to broaden the HRE framework in Colombia. Such expansion can contribute to transformative perspectives in HRE. This includes examples for re-indigenizing pedagogies and existing local practices that can inspire policymakers to build national policies that reflect diverse ways of knowing and being.

Background: HRE in Colombia

National Laws Involving HRE

The Colombian Constitution embeds International Human Rights and Human Rights Education. Article 67 of the Colombian Political Constitution (1991) positions education as an essential element of human dignity. It mandates that education in Colombia should promote citizen awareness of human rights, peace, and democracy (para. 2). Besides the constitutional mandate, several laws and national policies are related in one way or another to education for human rights. In 1994, Colombia's legislative body adopted the General Law of Education (Law 115), which defines education as a personal, cultural, and social process of training grounded in the integral conception of the human being, the dignity of its rights, and its duties (Article 1, Number 16). It establishes respect for human rights, peace, democratic values, and pluralism (Article 5) as one of the main aims of education. Some dispositions in the 2013 School Coexistence Law (*Ley de Convivencia Escolar*, Law 1620) state the importance of creating a National System of School Coexistence to promote citizenship and the exercise of human rights, as well as to prevent and mitigate school violence. In 2015, the President of Colombia incorporated all the regulations related to education into the Unique Regulatory Decree of the Education Sector (*Decreto Único Reglamentario del Sector Educación*, Decree 1075). This decree unified primary and secondary education regulations, covering aspects such as school governance, ethno-education, the National System of School Coexistence, HRE, and school violence mitigation.

National Policies for HRE

Following UN HRE mandates, Colombia implemented a National Plan of Human Rights Education in 2009, adopting the UN HRE international policies as its conceptual framework (see OHCHR, 2024). The President of Colombia, through the Vice President and the Presidential Program for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (*Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario*, now the Presidential Advisory Office for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (*Consejería Presidencial para los Derechos Humanos y el Derecho Internacional Humanitario*) decided to create a strategic framework to integrate HRE into the national educational system. The decision was made in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and with the technical support of the National Human Rights Institution of Colombia or Ombudsman's Office (*Defensoría del Pueblo*). The PLANEDH aims to foster a culture of human rights and democratic values, formulating guidelines and strategies and developing educational programs and materials on human rights through education—as mandated by the UN after the Decade of Human Rights Education.

Although the PLANEDH 2009 marked a significant step toward integrating HRE across all levels in Colombia, its implementation faced several challenges. The policy did not have public funding or the institutional structure to oversee its implementation and evaluation. The absence of an HRE Operational Plan made it difficult to translate the policies into strategies and programs for human rights. Twelve years later, Colombian policymakers decided to update the PLANEDH 2009

through the *Actualización y Fortalecimiento del Plan Nacional de Educación en Derechos Humanos* (PLANEDH, 2021-2034). This updated policy evidenced Colombia’s effort to strengthen and renew its commitment to HRE and emphasized integrating HRE across all educational levels, formal, non-formal, and informal education while addressing diverse social, cultural, and territorial challenges. The updated PLANEDH recognized new national peace and HRE challenges after the 2016 Peace Agreement and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The PLANEDH 2021-2034 emphasizes the importance of integrating human rights across all education spaces, respect for human rights, peaceful coexistence, and harmony. It considers inclusivity for vulnerable and systematically excluded populations, participation, and dialogue to enhance collaboration among public institutions and civil society for effective HRE implementation. It recognizes the challenges and realities of diverse groups and communities in achieving human rights. The current HRE policy has five central values articulated in Table 1. Table 1 describes each value, providing a description and an example of its application. The values show how PLANEDH 2021-2034 invited more inclusive and participatory education practices.

Table 1

Core values of the PLANEDH 2021-2034

PLANEDH Value	Description	Application
Universality and Indivisibility of Human Rights	Recognizes that all human rights apply to humans considering their human dignity. Identifies the struggles of diverse groups to secure fundamental guarantees.	Incorporates a multidimensional view of rights, ensuring inclusivity for all vulnerable and marginalized populations.
Participation and Dialogue	Fosters active engagement and spaces of dialogue with diverse civil society and public institutions.	Creates participatory educational forums to cultivate empowerment and mutual respect.
Critical Consciousness	Develops awareness to understand the challenges and realities of diverse groups and communities in achieving human rights. Promotes critical thinking and awareness to challenge structural and systemic injustices.	Encourages critical thinking to address social inequalities and systemic barriers to rights. Encourages the training of citizens mediated by a critical pedagogy that has human rights as an imperative.
Peace and Reconciliation - Positive Response	Focuses on guiding students in their learning process with an optimistic and proactive approach.	Promotes positive behavioral change and empowerment in

		students while recognizing the efforts for peacebuilding.
Recognizing the Context	Acknowledges the socioeconomic and cultural dynamics that shape the interactions of individuals within their communities.	Adapts educational strategies to local realities to ensure relevance and cultural sensitivity.

Despite the formal commitment to advancing HRE in Colombia, the national plan continues to be a legal document with limited implementation and tangible outcomes. The policy has not been able to advance or impact actions, strategies, and plans at the national level. Since its recent adoption, the national government has not provided budgetary support for this policy. The inter-institutional coordination mechanisms intended to monitor the implementation of the PLANEDH have not been established.

Methodology

This paper employs a conceptual and critical policy analysis approach to examine Colombia’s PLANEDH policy (2021-2034), acknowledging that it remains largely a legal document without substantial implementation. The choice of this methodology is grounded in the absence of empirical data on the PLANEDH’s execution and one institutional report from the Ombudsman Office of Colombia (2024). The policy analysis is based on a two-level exploration of the PLANEDH legal and discursive construction. First, this approach allows for a critical examination of the policy’s legal foundations, values, premises, and understandings of human rights. Second, this study examines the UN HRE framework, including soft law documents, legal instruments, and international organization education guidelines, such as the World Programmes on HRE, to situate the PLANEDH within a global framework. The latter will contribute to analyzing the extent to which the national policy focuses on universalized and Western-centric notions of human rights and the international educational framework for human rights.

After situating the PLANEDH within this framework and its main values, I examine the national policy through the theoretical lens of Pluriversal Rights Education to evaluate to what extent new paradigms and perspectives can be incorporated into the HRE policy, bringing an innovative vision of education. My analysis through the lens of Pluriversal Rights Education seeks to critically explore how integrating pluriversal and decolonial education approaches can contribute to the evolution of Colombia’s human rights educational policies.

Literature Review

Human Rights Education International Framework

Several empirical studies in education have examined how global human rights discourses, particularly those promoted by international organizations, have influenced the institutionalization of the field of HRE internationally. HRE has

emerged as a global framework that diverse global actors mainstream, in particular intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) like the UN (Suárez, 2006; Suárez & Ramirez, 2007; Russell & Suárez, 2017). The significant growth in HRE can be attributed to the expansion of UN initiatives encouraging states to fulfill their international human rights legal obligations. In this context, HRE has become an emerging global institution that influences political dynamics and national educational policies (Russell & Suárez, 2017).

The literature on comparative and international education strongly suggests that the adoption of national plans and the spread of HRE are highly influenced by a global model promoted by the UN, which is disseminated through globalization (Robertson, 1994). Russell (2015) emphasizes how national education policy increasingly responds to the global environment and international actors. The institutionalization of HRE began expanding in the mid-1970s under the influence of the UN (Suárez & Ramirez, 2007). This expansion was accelerated during the 1990s with the Program Action for Human Rights, which marked international organizations' definite involvement in HRE through the UN and UNESCO. By adopting various HRE instruments and policies, the UN reaffirmed that all countries are duty-bound to introduce education for human rights into national policies, plans, and strategies. One year later, the UN proclaimed the Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004), encouraging states to build and strengthen programs and capacities for HRE (GA Res. 49/184, 1994). In 2005, the UN implemented the World Programme for Human Rights Education, and countries were encouraged to develop education policies related to human rights in separate phases (GA. Res. 59/113, 2004).

These international policies were invigorated by adopting the 2011 UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (GA. Res. 66/137, 2011). This international instrument determined that HRE is a human right and that countries have the primary responsibility to promote HRE (Article 7.1). It also mandated that all UN state parties must develop policies, action plans, and programs to implement HRE (Article 8). The 2011 international soft law document provides the latest definition of HRE by the UN. This definition entails educational efforts to prevent human rights violations and empower citizens to build and promote a universal culture of human rights. Article 2, paragraph 2, outlines the three dimensions of HRE:

- (a) 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;
- (b) Education through human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners;
- (c) Education for human rights, which includes empowering individuals to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others.

The UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7, adopted in 2015, requires nation-states to ensure learners acquire knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development. This includes education for human rights, gender equality, and peace.

These antecedents highlight the major UN influence in the evolution of HRE at the international and national levels. Within this context, several countries in Latin America and globally have implemented National Human Rights Action Plans in line with the UN human rights framework. In some cases, this includes a specific National Plan for HRE. Most Latin American countries have implemented and updated diverse National Plans: Brazil (2003-2018), Bolivia with the *Plan Plurinacional de Educación en Derechos Humanos* (Plurinational Plan on Human Rights Education) (2012), Mexico (2002), Peru (2021), Uruguay (2016), Colombia (2009, updated in 2021), and Paraguay (2012).

Pluriversal Rights Education Framework

International and national HRE policies have been created in public institutional spheres by multilateral organizations where, inevitably, some individuals, groups, and communities lack the privilege to have a seat and voice. This has influenced having a universalized discourse on human rights that has excluded other ways of knowing which can also align with human rights goals and values. Modern and northern epistemologies have influenced how societies perceive and understand human rights, the idea of humans, and our relationship with other living beings on this planet, invalidating any alternative cosmovision. Zembylas (2023) critically assesses how the concepts of 'human' and 'rights' are deeply rooted in European intellectual traditions. The idea of human rights is mainly based on the Western idea of self, which emphasizes the separation between entities, humans, and non-humans, as well as the differentiation between humans and the environment.

In response, recent comparative and international education scholars have called for implementing decolonial approaches to HRE (Zembylas, 2017; Becker, 2021; Zembylas, 2023). These different approaches offer an opportunity to radically re-imagine or re-indigenize how the field thinks about education, pedagogies, beings, and humans' interactions and connections with the world. Williams and Bermeo (2020) propose a decolonial HRE and peace education framework that reimagines HRE as a Pluriversal Rights Education. Rooted in the minds of two educators from the Global South, these scholars propose a paradigm for a holistic understanding of HRE. It invites to approach HRE colonial-modernity structures critically and to question the colonial inheritance from which human rights notions have been constructed (Williams & Bermeo, 2020).

The Pluriversal Rights Education framework, successor to HRE and peace education, has four main pedagogical aims or principles: (i) pluriversal sentience, (ii) pluriversal equilibrium, (iii) abolitionism and decoloniality, and (iv) radical hope. The four principles reflect shifts required to change our understanding of humanity, its nature, and its relationship with other beings and nature. It equips learners with knowledge, skills, dispositions, and values to recognize and respect the pluriverse, the rights of all earth beings or sentient entities, and foster peace through planetary equilibrium.

Pluriversal sentience recognizes all sentient beings' interconnectedness and interdependence (human and non-human). This principle challenges colonial,

anthropocentric worldviews and promotes the de-centering of the human. Pluriversal equilibrium recognizes Mother Earth as a living entity that is in “a permanently dynamic condition of growth, evolution, and complementarity” (Williams & Bermeo, 2020, p. 14). Abolitionism and decoloniality call for a deeper understanding of structures of marginalization and oppression causing social injustices. Radical hope refers to the integrative and proactive support to orient the other three principles. It values the future without losing sight of the past and recognizes the resources embedded in each of us. “It sees and treats communities as possibilities and not as things or problems to be solved” (Williams & Bermeo, 2020, p. 14).

Together, these four principles offer a transformative way of re-imagining HRE. They challenge the dominance of Western-centric paradigms and open space for other perspectives that include more ways of knowing to achieve peace, harmony, and well-being. Table 2 illustrates the Pluriversal Right Education framework:

Table 2
Pluriversal Rights Education Framework

Pillar	Description
Pluriversal Sentience	Recognizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings, decenters human beings, and questions anthropocentrism.
	Goes beyond the pedagogical principle of <i>mutual vulnerability</i> by recognizing all beings, not just humans (Keet et al., 2009; Zembylas, 2013). There are sentient and non-sentient beings.
Pluriversal Equilibrium	Mother Earth is seen as a vibrant living system in permanent growth.
	Earth’s equilibrium is a dynamic, ever-changing state of growth and balance.
Abolitionism and Decoloniality	The need to recognize the patriarchal and colonial structures and systems as a consequence of our history.
	It is necessary to decolonize our minds (Williams & Bermeo, 2020). It involves unlearning harmful structures that separate us and give priority to one way of thinking or knowing. It is essential to have a critical awareness of the self and have transformative competencies to understand the world’s different thinking systems.
Radical Hope	A future-oriented hope that acknowledges the past.
	Actively works toward a better future even if it is beyond our full understanding (Lear, 2006).
	Recognizes the potential of human beings and the resources of each community on this planet.

Applying the Pluriversal Rights Education pillars requires a profound and significant shift in how we think, feel, and experience the world and ourselves (Williams & Bermeo, 2020). Those who decide to engage in pluralist rights education require paradigmatic shifts in our modes of thinking, feeling, and experiencing. Learners should engage in border thinking, which requires navigating the unknown world and understanding different cosmologies. It requires engaging in the process of conscientization (*consciência crítica*) (Freire, 2018/1970), in which learners actively recognize socio-political and economic structures, but also a spatial conscientization. Learners should develop transformational competencies that enable them to read the world's interrelation and dynamics as well as understand diverse knowledge systems, including Indigenous knowledge.

Recognizing pluriversal knowledge within HRE can contribute to pluricultural understanding and honoring multiple ways of being and diverse perspectives of seeing the other, the earth, and the cosmos (Hardbarger, 2019). The Pluriversal Rights Education conceptual framework questions the idea that knowledge comes from one unique source. It affirms that knowledge is rooted in lived experiences, diverse cultures, and world conceptions. The goal is to foster skills that enable learners to perceive a more interconnected whole within themselves and other sentient and non-sentient beings.

Policy Discussion

This section presents an analysis of the PLANEDH focusing on three main aspects: the influence of the international HRE framework on the national policy, the exclusions of alternative ways of knowing despite the policy core values and premises, and the lack of operational and institutional mechanisms to implement the national document. These limitations have hindered the implementation of the PLANEDH at the territorial level and have resulted in limited community participation and involvement.

The Influence of the International HRE Framework in the PLANEDH

After analyzing the educational framework and discourse of Colombia's PLANEDH 2021-2034, it is evident that PLANEDH is legally grounded upon an UN HRE framework. Colombian policymakers adhered to the mandates expressed in the Decennial Plan of Actions for Human Rights and Article 8 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011) for the creation of national plans for HRE.

The PLANEDH discourse emphasizes the universality, indivisibility, interdependence, and interrelatedness of human rights. Consistent with Phase 4 of the UN World Programme for Human Rights Education, it invites the implementation of HRE in all instances of education (formal, informal, and non-formal education) and prioritizes the principle of equality and non-discrimination in all actions or strategies. Considering discrimination and the unequal Colombian context, policymakers from PLANEDH decided that the national policy would have a 10-year duration, stressing the importance of different

territorial and ethnic approaches as essential to building a country that respects diversity (PLANEDH, 2021-2034).

The core values of the PLANEDH (see Table 1) include inclusivity of vulnerable and systematically excluded populations and participation and dialogue among public institutions and civil society to cultivate a diversity-based dialogue. However, in practice, the PLANEDH has been maintained mainly as a declarative national policy that has not evolved beyond a legal document aligned with international human rights standards. This legalistic and declarative universal nature of the national policy has resulted in a single idea of 'human' and 'rights' that invalidates any alternative cosmovisions or ways of knowing that resonate with human rights.

The idea of human rights is based on the Western idea of the self, which emphasizes the separation between humans, sentient and non-sentient beings, and between humans and the environment. The latter has led to the separation of other living beings, the planet, and each other, which hinders the development of community feeling, cooperation, and understanding (Lehner, 2023). By neglecting these diverse epistemologies, PLANEDH reinforces a framework prioritizing Western-centric paradigms and universalized understandings of human rights. This approach overlooks local communities' unique cultural, historical, and social contexts, limiting the potential for transformative HRE that resonates with the lived experiences and systems of knowledge of the Colombian population. For instance, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian pedagogies, which often emphasize community-based learning and the interconnectedness of all beings, are notably absent from the PLANEDH framework.

The Top-down Approach Excluding Other Ways of Knowing in the PLANEDH

The top-down approach to create and implement the PLANEDH has limited local communities' active participation and engagement in its policy design and implementation. The PLANEDH recognizes the importance of a territorial approach to education by acknowledging the socio-economic and cultural dynamics that shape the interactions of individuals within their communities. But it fails to integrate perspectives and pedagogies from alternative ways of knowing, including those from Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. This exclusion perpetuates historical patterns of discrimination and marginalization, silencing knowledge and wisdom that have been suppressed since colonization. There were some instances of civil society participation, such as the virtual meetings held in 2021 while updating the latest PLANEDH. However, the policy does not evidence a meaningful impact on the population at the territorial level or sustained engagement with civil society.

Lack of PLANEDH Operational and Institutional Bodies

The absence of territorial institutions, such as the PLANEDH National Council and the Technical Regional Committees initially tasked with translating HRE policies into relevant educational strategies and territorial development plans, resulted in a policy that is disconnected from the experiences of education, pedagogies, and

didactics of local communities. This has driven a disconnection of the national policy from human rights realities in the conflict-affected territory.

Policy Recommendations

The limitations of the PLANEDH have resulted in a passive role for local and ethnic communities and a lack of territorial impact of the national policy at the territorial level. The diversity and unique cultural and historical context and systems of knowledge have been overlooked, as the national policy assumes the knowledge of HRE from one only source, the universal. This assumption limits other possibilities where HRE policies are co-created through community-driven processes. This section provides strategies to transform the policy into a dynamic and inclusive framework that genuinely fosters a culture of human rights. Through the Pluriversal Rights Education lens, it aims to bring new paradigms and perspectives on human rights that can be incorporated into the HRE policy. Challenging the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach can provide transformative insights that question universalism and evidence of how other ways of knowing can be included to foster mutual understanding, achieve peace, and enhance a culture of human rights.

Table 3 presents three key policy recommendations. Colombian HRE policy can move toward a more inclusive, community-centered policy on human rights education. Afterward, I illustrate how the Pluriversal Rights Framework can be integrated into the PLANEDH 2021-2034 core values.

Table 3

Key recommendations and actionable steps

Limitation	Recommendations	Actionable Steps
Legal and universal human rights nature of the national policy	Incorporate other ways of knowing in HRE frameworks and integrate the Pluriversal Rights Education framework, resonating with other ways of knowing in Colombia.	Facilitate dialogues with Afro and Indigenous local communities to identify culturally relevant educational pedagogies and didactic. Include the Pluriversal Rights Framework into the core values of the PLANEDH 2021-2024 (as exposed in Table 4 below).
Top-down approach	Create spaces of intercultural knowledge with decolonial higher education initiatives. Transform the top-down approach design of the	Partner with institutions such as <i>Universidad de Antioquia</i> or <i>Universidad de Saberes Ancestrales</i> to incorporate ancestral wisdom into HRE policy. When updating the policy, create regional advisory councils composed of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders to ensure the incorporation of their ways of thinking and

	PLANEDH to a community-driven approach.	knowing into the policy. Invite excluded groups to participate in the Territorial Technical Bodies of the PLANEDH to create intercultural dialogues among human rights.
Lack of PLANEDH operational and institutional bodies	Strengthen territorial institutions to operationalize HRE strategies effectively.	Develop regional implementation plans for operational and technical mechanisms.

Recommendation 1. Spaces of intercultural knowledge with decolonial higher education initiatives

Initiate a dialogue between ways of knowing that have been historically silenced. A dialogue between Eurocentric views and other ways of knowing as ancestral wisdom from our Indigenous ancestors or communities can be a path to broadening the scope of curricula and instruments for HRE. Including other pedagogies of HRE that create skills, values, and knowledge can help the non-recurrence of violence and embrace human rights values.

In practice, there should be a constant dialogue between Colombian HRE policymakers with communities, groups excluded, leaders, and practitioners to incorporate new epistemological frameworks for specific communities, educators, and teachers. As expressed by Cortina et al. (2019), it is important to listen to each other, as no culture is superior to the other, and nobody knows more than the other. We must converse and strengthen each other. An authentic dialogue of knowledges or an *ecology of knowledge* can change perspectives in HRE. Applying Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2007) notion of the *ecology of knowledge*, it is important to create equal opportunities for various kinds of knowledge to coexist to foster a more democratic, diverse, and just society. Intercultural translation is essential for articulating diverse forms of knowledge.

The concept of intercultural translation can contribute to bridging different knowledge systems and ways of knowing, such as Indigenous knowledge that has been excluded because of coloniality. In that sense, Pluriversal Rights Education can be a framework that helps integrate other forms of knowledge into education and invites people to rethink how they interact with the world. From this perspective, human rights values will be seen from a hegemonic Western perspective and other ways of knowing, often marginalized or silenced. This is a strategy to heal the production of knowledge rather than destroying it.

Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have been systematically excluded from dialogue and participation for more than three hundred years in Colombia. In this context, it is restorative to start bringing alternative ways of learning and

thinking that can contribute to radical transformations in how human rights are taught in schools. PLANEDH policymakers can start building activities to include other ways of knowing, ancestral wisdom, and community-based education initiatives that exist in the local territory. This can help incarnate intrinsic values of human rights such as dignity, equality, freedom, and diversity and have them be reflected in the national policy.

Cortina and colleagues (2019) have drawn attention to intercultural programs in higher education, particularly intercultural experiences with diverse ways of knowing (epistemic diversity). Colombian HRE policymakers can create new possibilities of dialogue and pluriversal pedagogies. Policymakers can build a dialogue of multiplicities of knowledge that can contribute to finding more peaceful ways to live and create a culture of human rights.

Policymakers can engage in a co-creating process with other higher education initiatives in the Colombian local context. Colombia is a unique case study, as it has several higher education institutions that are developing decolonial methodologies and practices where Indigenous knowledge and other ways of knowing have been translated into pedagogies and formal educational spaces. The *Universidad de Saberes Ancestrales*, *Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural*, and the *Licenciatura en Pedagogía de la Madre Tierra* of the *Universidad de Antioquia* in Medellín are unique examples of decolonial understandings of education in South America. This approach can help HRE policymakers understand how human rights values are taught in these universities. It can aid the process of finding opportunities to establish alliances with these universities and their decolonial pedagogies that can help build programs and curricula celebrating pluriversal ways of knowing and being in the world.

Inter-institutional alliances between the first public Indigenous university in Colombia, *Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural* (UAIIN), can contribute to encouraging intercultural dialogue between Indigenous knowledge of issues related to human rights and Western understandings of human rights. The *Universidad de Sabiduría Ancestral* was founded in 2012 in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta, Colombia. Its mission is the following:

Serve ancestral peoples around the world, through the training of leaders who will guide humanity towards a level of consciousness conducive to awakening Universal Love, encouraging actions that favor the well-being of all, life in harmony with Mother Earth, promoting native spirituality and the values of Indigenous peoples. (*Universidad de Sabiduría Ancestral*, n.d.).

Intercultural conversations can help embrace the principles of the Pluriversal Sentient and Pluriversal Equilibrium of the Pluriversal Rights Education framework. Universities and policymakers should form intercultural alliances to complement the national HRE framework. Fostering the presence of diverse educators can contribute to alternative practices in human rights learning experiences.

Recommendation 2. Reconceptualizing the PLANEDH core values with the Pluriversal Rights Education Framework

The PLANEDH 2021-2034 proposes five central values or pillars that integrate HRE practices (see Table 4 below). Although these values are based on a vision of HRE constructed by UN global education mandates, I found similarities with the Pluriversal Rights Education framework. As illustrated in Table 4, the national HRE policy values resonate with the Pluriversal Rights Education framework. Table 4 offers conceptual guidance for policymakers to understand the relationship between pluriversal values and the national HRE policy. The left column outlines the national policy value. The right column elaborates on the Pluriversal Rights Education principle aligned with the PLANEDH value.

Table 4

PLANEDH core values integration with principles of Pluriversal Rights Education

PLANEDH Value	Pluriversal Rights Education Principle Aligned
Universality and indivisibility of Human Rights	Pluriversal Sentience: Recognizing interconnectedness among all beings. There are sentient and non-sentient beings. Pluriversal Equilibrium: Mother Earth is a vibrant living system.
Participation and Dialogue	Radical hope: Work toward active engagement of communities with a future-oriented hope that acknowledges the past but also desires to build a better future.
Critical Consciousness	Abolitionism and Decoloniality: Promote critical thinking and awareness to challenge structural and systemic injustices, including patriarchal and colonial structures.
Peace and Reconciliation - Positive Response	Radical Hope: Envisioning transformative futures grounded in peace and reconciliation.
Recognizing the Context	Abolitionism and Decoloniality: Acknowledge the socioeconomic and cultural dynamics that shape the interactions of individuals within their communities.

Conclusion

The global UN model, through international human rights instruments and soft law mandates, has shaped Colombia’s National HRE policy. Consequently, the prevailing HRE model in Colombia is an HRE framework built upon Western perspectives, leaving other ways of knowing aside. I situate this paper in a recent decolonial dialogue about the future of HRE. I aimed at providing a space to reflect on how diverse knowledge systems can interact in HRE. Given Colombia’s colonial history, my key recommendation for policymakers is to start questioning the universalized and legalistic approach sustaining HRE. As Becker (2021) pointed out, “globally

there is a need for otherwise knowledge and conceptualizations of being human, and human rights education is crucial to this” (p. 63). My analysis is an invitation to focus on transforming HRE to create spaces for more epistemologies.

Pluriversal Rights Education emerges as a decolonial approach to expand national education policies, introducing alternative philosophies and pedagogies that can resonate with the Colombian context. Colombia has promising examples of intercultural knowledge production such as Pedagogy of Mother Earth of the *Universidad de Antioquia*, *Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural* (UAIIN) and the *Universidad de Sabiduría Ancestral*. These institutions can be a path for human rights to engage and encourage intercultural conversations about Indigenous knowledge on human rights-related issues. Educational policies can serve as a tool to reimagine human rights and foster a continuous process of critical self-reflection on human’s interconnectedness with Mother Earth. In her 2018 Presidential Address at the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), comparative and international education scholar Regina Cortina emphasized the importance of producing knowledge with and from the Global South—particularly in contexts where neoliberal logics dominate educational discourse (Cortina et al., 2019). My paper contributes to South-driven perspectives on HRE. It envisioned generating a policy analysis to reimagine education in alignment “with all of our energy on what is possible, moved by our deepest ethical aspirations for a just and human world” (Cortina et al., 2019, p. 468). I hope it does.

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Rethinking Emotional Engagement in Human Rights Education through Affective Justice

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This conceptual paper suggests the notion of 'affective justice' as a means to critically address the problem of sentimentalism within Human Rights Education (HRE). Originating in sociolegal studies affective justice focuses on how legal frameworks for human rights generate embodied, affective experiences that allow learners to engage deeply with notions of justice. By examining how these affective dimensions shape learners' understanding of human rights, the paper argues that affective justice offers a valuable framework for countering critiques that emotional engagement with human suffering risks devolving into 'cheap sentimentality.' The analysis suggests that affective justice not only enriches HRE theory but also fosters meaningful, reflective practices among learners. The paper concludes by outlining future research directions to further explore how affective justice might be applied in educational contexts to deepen critical engagement with human rights and promote ethically grounded responses to global injustice.

Keywords: sentimentalism, Human Rights Education; affective justice; theory; emotion/affect.

Introduction

Sentimentalism in Human Rights Education (HRE) refers to the tendency to evoke strong emotions in learners through exposure to stories of suffering or injustice without fostering deeper and more critical engagement (Zembylas, 2016). The intention is for learners to develop more empathy, sympathy, and compassion through such exposure. However, while emotional responses can be powerful in the process of learning about human rights, sentimentalism risks oversimplifying complex issues. This may entail reducing learners' reactions to transient feelings of pity or sympathy that may not translate into meaningful understanding or action. Hannah Arendt (1994) used the term "cheap sentimentality" to warn against emotional engagement that lacks a foundation in thoughtful and ethical reflection as it can lead to superficial responses rather than a sustained commitment to justice (p. 251). Applied to this conceptual paper, the design and implementation of HRE can run the risk of falling into the trap of "cheap sentimentality" Arendt (1994) discussed. An ongoing challenge for HRE scholars and practitioners is the question of how to develop theory and practice that circumvent superficial sentimentalism and guide learners toward a balanced approach combining affective engagement with critical analysis and ethical responsibility.

This conceptual paper introduces the notion of affective justice as a tool to critically address the risks of sentimentalism in HRE. Originating in sociolegal studies, affective justice emphasizes how legal frameworks for human rights produce embodied, affective experiences that enable deeper engagement with justice (Clarke, 2019). Kamari Maxine Clarke (2019) defines affective justice as “people’s embodied engagements with the production of justice through particular structures of power, history, and contingencies” (p. 5). Clarke (2019) highlights the need for a balanced approach that combines emotional engagement with awareness of the structural dimensions of justice and power. This paper draws on affective justice to explore how human rights as legal instruments shape affective and embodied experiences, through which learners interpret and enact their understandings of human rights and justice. By examining how emotions influence learners’ perceptions, this paper argues that affective justice provides a robust framework to counter critiques that emotional engagement with human suffering may lead to superficial or “cheap” sentimentality.

This paper extends the concept of affective justice and its three interrelated components (Clarke, 2019) to articulate how understandings and practices of justice and human rights in the context of HRE are affective. These three components—legal technocratic practices, embodied affects, and emotional regimes—come together to provide compelling conceptual tools for exploring the affective mobilization of human rights and justice in HRE. The analysis discusses how the concept of affective justice may help scholars and practitioners in HRE to pay attention to the complexities of efforts to inspire such feelings in learners while avoiding the pitfalls of sentimentalism in education.

The field of HRE is situated between two major critiques. On the one hand, the literature has criticized HRE for promoting a predominantly juridical approach—one that frames human rights primarily as legal entitlements. This emphasis risks neglecting the affective and embodied aspects of human rights violations globally, potentially leading learners to adopt a detached, rationalist view of human rights (e.g., Zembylas & Keet, 2018, 2019). On the other hand, critics warn against an uncritical sentimental approach in HRE that uses narratives of suffering merely to ‘emotionalize’ human rights learning in superficial ways as it can trivialize complex issues (Zembylas, 2016). Sentimentalism in HRE should not be framed as an either/or choice. A third pathway exists.

Understanding and learning about human rights occurs through a juridical lens and in relation to the affective and embodied realities of human suffering. The combination of both can enable educators and scholars to grasp the nuanced interplay between human rights as legal frameworks and as lived felt experiences. This is where the concept of affective justice provides a lens that integrates legal understanding with emotional and embodied dimensions of justice. Such a framework can create a more holistic and transformative approach to HRE. This paper aims to expand the theoretical and analytical toolkit available to HRE scholars and practitioners. By theorizing affective

justice, this paper seeks to illuminate how human rights can be understood not just as legal instruments, but also as embodied, emotional experiences that shape how learners come to comprehend, challenge, and advocate for human rights and justice. While it draws upon relevant literature in human rights historiography and pedagogy, its central purpose is conceptual—to propose affective justice as a generative lens for reconsidering the intersections of emotion, law, and social change within the domain of HRE. This theoretical intervention may spur further applied inquiry into the affective dimensions of HRE, both in terms of scholarship and practice.

The paper unfolds in four sections. First, it examines emotion's role in human rights historiography, discussing how anti-emotionalism has influenced the United Nations' (UN) approaches to human rights and humanitarian issues. Second, it analyzes sentimental education of human rights, addressing critiques of suffering-centered narratives in HRE while exploring recent proposals to move beyond these limitations. Third, the paper discusses the concept of affective justice and demonstrates how it enriches our understanding of human rights and justice. Finally, applying this framework to HRE the paper shows how such lens can productively bridge the gap between human rights as legal instruments and as embodied experiences while remaining mindful of the pitfalls of sentimental approaches.

Emotion in the Historiography of Human Rights

The body of scholarship dedicated to exploring histories of emotion has risen since the turn of the 21st century (e.g., Plamper, 2015; Reddy, 2001; Rosenwein, 2005). Despite these developments, the intersections between human rights and histories of emotion “have been unusually few” (Burke, 2017b, p. 125). Roland Burke (2017b) examines how:

For a subject that necessarily speaks to some of the most primordial concerns and needs of the human person, the study of the postwar human rights project has often been sterilized of passion. [...] The disciplinary formations that tended to dominate the scholarship have been impersonal and structural; long catalogues of legal treatises and procedural evolutions, intricate disquisitions of the philosophical basis for particular sets of rights, and highly theorized analyses of the political order implicit in the international human rights system. (p. 125)

There have been exceptions, of course, such as the work of Lynn Hunt (2007), who provides a history of human rights that recognizes the crucial role of empathy ('sympathy' in the 18th century) in coming to imagine that all humans are equal. The author's analysis of the 18th-century novel and its sentimentalism (see also, Schuller, 2018) makes the important point that all people are fundamentally similar because of their inner feelings. Hunt's (2007) discussion of torture and cruel punishments is crucial in understanding how the dominant way of thinking rooted in instilling pain in others

fell apart and was replaced by a new understanding that recognized in all people the same sentiments.

Burke's (2017a, 2017b, 2020) analysis traces a significant shift in the role of emotion within the historiography of human rights over the past two centuries. The histories of 18th and 19th-century social movements, such as abolitionism, demonstrate that the latter successfully incorporated emotion to mobilize humanitarian and human rights projects. However, the postwar period from 1950 to 1980 reveals an interesting ambivalence. Human rights diplomacy at the UN during this time exhibited an anti-emotional tendency, perceiving emotionalism as pejorative, particularly within the United States (Burke, 2020). In contrast, the history of modern rights movements shows that emotional mobilization is crucial to human rights advocacy (Burke, 2017a, 2017b). According to Burke (2017b), the postwar human rights movements built upon the empathetic mobilizations of the abolitionist movement that came before. While these later human rights efforts manifested in diverse ways and addressed diverse causes, Burke asserts they were ultimately driven by the same deep-rooted, centuries-old impulse—the power of human empathy.

Revisiting the emotional history of modern human rights movements, then, reminds us that mobilizing emotions is important for the promotion of human rights. For example, Keys (2014) shows that human rights in the United States (US) during the 1970s moved to the center of public concern as a response to dramatic events such as the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. Human rights mobilization during this time entailed an emotional dimension that reacted to the US's foreign policy failings (Keys, 2014). The emotions of guilt and shame emerging from the Vietnam War played a significant role in US political debates between liberals and conservatives, who interpreted these and other emotions (e.g., patriotism) differently. Keys' (2014) attention to emotions and their influence on human rights mobilizations highlights that exploring human rights through the lens of emotion is important in human rights theory and practice.

Contrary to the vital role of emotion in human rights movements, human rights diplomacy has historically displayed a marked hostility toward emotionalism. In his analysis of UN human rights diplomacy from 1950-1980, Burke (2017a, 2017b, 2020) identifies a clear "unease about any emotional component to human rights advocacy" (2017b, p. 128)—what he describes as a "structural feature of Western diplomacy and rights advocacy" (Burke, 2017b, p. 128). The historiography of human rights highlights the importance of emotion in this field of activism and struggle. It also reveals diplomats' persistent reluctance to openly embrace emotion as a legitimate source of power and influence. Specifically, Burke (2020) analyzes how a "self-conscious aversion to 'emotionalism'" (p. 306) has shaped American engagement with human rights and humanitarian issues from the early 1950s onward. This dynamic, Burke (2020) argues, relied on an unhelpful binary that denigrated emotion—readily identified in other countries—"as a marker of immaturity and impropriety" (p. 307).

In the immediate years after the adoption of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which inspired countless human rights movements in subsequent decades, hope was abundant especially among ‘Third World’¹ representatives in the UN’s Commission on Human Rights (Burke, 2017a, 2017b, 2020). In this initial period of the UN, “the battle for the soul of human rights was defined by hyper-ambitious developing countries versus quibbling, and allegedly heartless, legalists from the Western world” (Burke, 2017b, p. 129). For example, Third World diplomats were accused of voting based on ‘feelings’ (e.g. concerning South Africa’s apartheid regime or the Israeli-Arab conflict). The US delegations in the decades following the 1950s expressed their skepticism about the ‘emotional’ approach to diplomacy that developing countries adopted (Burke, 2017b).

The hopeful outlook that had previously characterized the human rights movement underwent a significant shift in the decades following the 1960s and 1970s (Burke, 2017a). During this period, according to Burke (2017a), a palpable mood of anger and rage dominated the UN’s human rights program. This shift occurred as it became increasingly apparent that the world’s major powers, including Western nations and the Soviet bloc, remained largely oblivious to the cries of vulnerable countries who fought for decolonization and liberation struggles. Instead, these powers had adopted a narrowly legalistic, juridically codified view of human rights (Burke, 2017b).

This brief and certainly incomplete historiography of emotion in human rights movements and diplomacy highlights two important insights into human rights theory and practice. First, while older human rights movements from the eighteenth 18th and 19th centuries were overtly sentimentalist in language to purposely invoke empathy, postwar human rights movements seemed to have become gradually more modest (Burke, 2017b). Human rights diplomacy, especially that of Western powers, was consciously anti-emotional, branding any responses from Third World countries as overly sentimentalist (Burke, 2017a, 2017b, 2020). The second insight is that regardless of this discrepancy about the role of emotion—i.e., aversion to emotionalism in human rights diplomacy at the states’ level; embrace of emotions in human rights advocacy at the level of social movements—emotions are crucial in understanding and advancing human rights. Paying attention to the emotional dimension of human rights, then, is an important aspect of human rights theory and practice. The next section discusses how a sentimental education of human rights can entail risks that should be addressed to overcome the skepticism that exists from bringing into the classroom sentimental narratives about the suffering of humanity.

¹ Although the term ‘Third World’ has since been critiqued and abandoned, this is the term Burke uses (following the historical use of the term in the initial period of the UN), so I want to be consistent with both history and the literature.

Navigating the Pitfalls of Sentimental Human Rights Education

Two major concerns have been expressed in recent years in debates about the philosophical and moral foundations of human rights and HRE (Zembylas & Keet, 2018, 2019). On the one hand, a purely juridical foundation of HRE may lead learners to an impersonal and rationalist understanding of human rights. On the other hand, an overly sentimental approach that aims to invoke certain emotions (e.g., empathy) about human rights violations and injustices may lead learners to superficial or ‘cheap’ sentimentality. Both of these concerns highlight the need to find a balance in the interplay of human rights as both legal instruments and affective embodiments. An either/or approach is unproductive; a binary understanding is unreflective of the complexities entailed in understandings and practices of human rights.

Over 25 years ago, Richard Rorty (1998) proposed an approach to the education of human rights that focused on the concept of ‘sentimental education.’ Rorty (1998) contended that the emergence and spread of human rights culture owed more to evoking emotional narratives and empathy than to simply increasing moral knowledge. He argued that what is truly needed is cultivating “an increasing ability to see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as outweighing the differences” (Rorty, 1998, p. 181). The aim of this sentimental approach to the education of human rights is to foster sympathy and solidarity, which would make individuals less inclined to view those who are different from themselves as somehow less than human (Rorty, 1998). Other discussions of Rorty’s views highlight how sentimental education represents a broader cultural, historical, and political project focused on re-educating people as emotional and moral beings, rather than just as rational actors (Barreto, 2011, 2017).

Previous research argues that Rorty makes a significant contribution to discussions surrounding the role of emotions, particularly sympathy and solidarity, in the context of human rights and HRE. However, there are two major pitfalls to his proposition (Zembylas, 2016). First, the line between ‘sentimental education’ and ‘affective indoctrination’ (Zembylas, 2022) is thin. As Rorty (1998) himself points out, we achieve better results if we try to “manipulate” (p. 176) people’s feelings by telling them sad and sentimental stories like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*² that stir sympathy for others whose rights are violated. As he writes: “The goal of this sort of manipulation of sentiment is to expand the reference of the terms ‘our kind of people’ and ‘people like us’” (Rorty, 1998, p. 176). Affective indoctrination—understood as the emotional coercion or manipulation that, arguably, any form of education might use to be effective—is likely to invoke harm in learners, even if it is justified under the premise of good intentions (Zembylas, 2022).

² *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe is an anti-slavery novel that follows the lives of enslaved individuals, particularly Uncle Tom, a deeply religious and compassionate man who endures cruelty under different owners. Through its emotional storytelling, the novel seeks to evoke sympathy and inspire moral outrage against slavery.

Rorty's proposition for sentimental education may constitute a form of affective indoctrination in that it entails a conscious 'manipulation' of learners' feelings.

The second problem is that Rorty's proposition for sentimental education may unwillingly invoke uncritically and cheap sentimentality in two ways (Zembylas, 2016). First, by reducing justice to individuals' feelings of sympathy and solidarity, there is a risk of backgrounding structural conditions of inequality; and, second, by assuming that promoting sympathy and solidarity will automatically lead to transformative action, there is a risk of instilling pity and what Megan Boler (1999) calls 'passive empathy'. The former way entails the danger of individualizing and psychologizing human rights violations and injustices, leaving it up to the individual to take action rather than encouraging structural changes. The latter limits itself to a superficial sentimentalist reaction in which individuals feel momentarily 'bad' for witnessing others' pain and then move on with their everyday lives. Both of these concerns are also raised in Berlant's (1998, 2000) landmark critique of sentimental narratives that injustices and human rights violations cannot be reduced to feeling bad about others' pain.

In response to the question of how to sensitize individuals and societies in contemporary times to respond to global human rights violations, Barreto (2017) suggests bringing these two perspectives together:

Being an individual and collective endeavor, the actualization or strengthening of the human rights culture is to be pursued in a long-term process aimed at advancing the sentimental education of individuals and societies concerning the virtue of sympathy – a “global moral warming” of the political culture of our times. (p. 68)

According to Barreto (2017), the resources based on which to advance this sensibilization are to be found in a variety of spheres, including religion, philosophy, science, ethics, law, literature, and the arts. The project of advancing the sentimental education of individuals and societies in human rights and HRE is based on the idea that sentimental narratives will sensitize individuals and societies, leading them to take transformative action. However, as noted earlier, these assumptions are pragmatically and morally questionable. As Woodward (2004) reminds us:

The experience of being moved by these sentimental scenes of suffering, whose ostensible purpose is to awaken us to redress injustice, works instead to return us to a private world far removed from the public sphere. Hence, in a crippling contradiction [...] the result of such empathetic identification is not the impulse to action but rather a “passive” posture. [...] The genre of the sentimental narrative itself is morally bankrupt. (p. 71)

This critique highlights the risks of narratives of sentimentality such as voyeurism and passivity; these risks evoke superficial feelings of sympathy and pity for sufferers, rather

than transformative actions that make a difference in sufferers' lives (Zembylas, 2016). It is for this reason that in this paper I have argued for a critical-sentimental orientation in HRE, namely, an approach that values sentimental education as a point of departure for nurturing the role of emotion in human rights and humanitarian struggles, yet it takes a critical stance towards the fetishization and sentimentalization of narratives of suffering.

A critical sentimental education in HRE approaches stories of human rights violations and injustices with *both* criticality *and* affective engagement, highlighting the importance of criticality towards structures of power and injustice and inspiring affective engagement that addresses human rights violations through specific actions (Zembylas, 2016). I have claimed that there are three important dimensions for a critical sentimental education of human rights. First, a critical orientation to sentimental education of human rights does not only recognize the role of emotions and suffering in human rights struggles and injustices but also identifies and addresses the dangers of cheap sentimentality. Second, a critical orientation to sentimental education of human rights offers an alternative vision of agency and solidarity for learners, by engaging them in pragmatic everyday actions that lay the seeds for systemic and structural change. Third, a critical orientation to sentimental education of human rights creates pedagogical spaces for cultivating self-empowerment, solidarity, and action-oriented empathy with others. These three dimensions provide a conceptual grounding for reframing the sentimental education of human rights in ways that address productively the concerns described earlier. However, this grounding would benefit from other concepts to address the risks of superficial sentimentality in the design, implementation, and delivery of HRE. One of these concepts, as suggested next, is affective justice.

Affective Justice and Human Rights

Clarke (2019) discusses the notion of affective justice to highlight that the production of justice is entangled with affects and embodied practices that are embedded in structures of power and history. Seeing justice through the workings of these affective embodiments demonstrates that justice mobilizations do not gain their power through legalistic processes, but rather through the entanglements between legal and embodied practices (Clarke, 2019). For example, legal instruments such as the UDHR and subsequent covenants on civic, political, and economic rights make sense through practices that are manifest as both legal processes and embodied practices. Seen through this lens, affective justice "reflects the way that people come to understand, challenge, and influence legal orders through the biopolitical instrumentalization of technocratic knowledge as well as through their affective embodiments, interjections, and social actions" (Clarke, 2019, p. 5). It may be argued, then, that the notion of affective justice provides a way of conceptualizing how affects are intertwined with justice and human rights as discourses, practices, and legal orders.

Justice and human rights as discourses, practices, and legal orders cannot be fully grasped without attending to “the various affects that are grounded in the deep-seated histories and inequalities whose dispositions are sometimes already inscribed in people’s psychic or emotional worlds” (Clarke, 2019, p. 8). The feelings of injustice expressed through anger by Black communities in the US constitute a key component of mobilizations against racial oppression and human rights violations. These affective responses are inextricably linked to complex histories of slavery and structural inequalities. To understand human rights mobilizations, it is crucial to examine how the legacies of the past continue to shape people’s embodied and emotional experiences. Comprehending justice and human rights within a specific site requires exploring not only the formal application of human rights as legal frameworks but also the complex affective landscapes through which individuals and communities come to ‘feel’ and engage with human rights and justice in their everyday lives.

This emphasis on the affective dimensions of understanding and learning about human rights occurs not solely through a juridical lens for HRE. By incorporating an analysis of affective justice, HRE can move beyond a narrow focus on the legal and institutional aspects of human rights and instead cultivate deeper understandings of how the lived, emotional experiences of rights-holders shape their capacities for critical consciousness, empowerment, and social transformation. By foregrounding the role of emotion, embodied experience, and the effects of history and power, the affective justice lens can enable more contextually grounded and critically informed approaches to teaching and learning about human rights. Rather than presenting human rights as abstract legal principles, HRE informed by affective justice can cultivate a deeper engagement with how rights are felt, negotiated, and enacted in the lived realities of diverse rights-holders and communities. This, in turn, can encourage learners to engage more meaningfully with human rights as transformative tools for addressing systemic injustices and promoting social change. In the following, I discuss in more detail the components of this framework. The last section of the paper focuses on the contributions of this approach to HRE.

Clarke’s (2019) framework of affective justice consists of three key components: legal technocratic practices, embodied affects, and emotional regimes. Analyzing these interrelated elements can help scholars recognize that human rights instruments, such as the UDHR, are not neutral tools that inherently create justice. They operate within complex fields shaped by histories, power relations, and structural inequalities. Human rights instruments can serve to reproduce the very power structures that have influenced their development and application. However, they also embody spaces where global and local manifestations of human rights can play out in new, potentially more transformative ways. Understanding these nuanced complexities is crucial for examining how human rights discourses and practices should be promoted and engaged in different contexts around the world.

Legal Technocratic Practices

The first component that underlies Clarke's (2019) framework of affective justice is legal technocratic practices. According to Clarke, this component examines how legal codes, instruments, and procedures are formulated and then leveraged to exercise power over bodies and communities. For instance, in the journey leading up to the drafting, negotiation, and ratification of the UDHR, as well as subsequent international human rights covenants, the process was imbued with a range of affects and emotions. The diplomatic deliberations, political bargaining, and cultural translations involved in codifying these landmark documents gave rise to feelings of hope, frustration, compromise, and historical significance among the various stakeholders. Similarly, the management of human rights violations in different contexts produces classifications of 'perpetrators' and 'victims,' which are underpinned by affective narratives and visual representations about the suffering of those whose rights have been abused. These legal technocratic practices of categorization and representation can have profound emotional resonances, shaping public sympathies and mobilizations around human rights issues. Clarke (2019) argues that these legal technocratic practices often work to displace or background other conceptualizations of human rights. For example, the formal legal language and jurisprudence of human rights can sometimes obscure the deep-seated political, economic, and historical factors driving mass rights violations. Comprehending the affective dimensions of these juridical perspectives is therefore vital for grasping the complex realities of human rights in practice.

Embodied Affects

The second component of Clarke's (2019) framework is embodied affects—how physical, bodily experiences of emotion become embedded within particular social and cultural conditions. For example, powerful sentiments like anger, pain, and hope are often deeply felt and manifested through the body concerning global and local human rights controversies. When people feel that their rights have been violated and that justice has not been delivered, these embodied affective experiences can produce powerful forms of refusal, resistance, or attempts to redirect the emotional effects into alternative practices and understandings. Clarke provides illuminating examples of how such processes of actively refusing, directing, and redirecting the meanings of justice and human rights can shift perceptions of culpability and instill empathy in particular directions. Sentimental narratives of human suffering, for instance, may operate as key resources through which embodied affects and understandings about rights and justice are generated, circulated, and transformed. How activists, survivors, and bystanders physically inhabit, express and mobilize these sentimental portrayals of violation and injustice can have profound impacts on how human rights issues are framed, responded to, and ultimately engaged with by diverse audiences. Importantly, these embodied affective experiences are always grounded within specific social, cultural, historical, and political contexts. The physical sensations, emotional registers, and expressive practices associated with human rights struggles are never autonomous or universal but are profoundly shaped by the particularities of people's lived realities, identities, and

positionalities. Attending to the component of embodied affects, therefore, requires situating human rights within the complex intersections of the body, affect, and the social conditions that structure how rights are felt, articulated, and mobilized.

Emotional Regimes

The third component that underlies Clarke's (2019) framework of affective justice is emotional regimes. This component is intimately connected to the other two, as it involves the normative emotions, emotional displays and embodied affects that shape understandings and practices of human rights and justice. The notion of emotional regimes, drawn from Reddy (2001), refers to the "set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and emotions that express and inculcate them" (p. 129) within a given social and cultural context. Clarke (2019) uses this concept to examine how these emotional regimes shape the affective climates that underpin people's engagement with human rights issues. For example, public campaigns that frame human rights as universal and non-discriminatory instruments serve to reinforce affective, embodied, and discursive meanings of inclusion. As Clarke (2019) explains, "Appeals to sympathy or empathy mobilize the power to activate citizens, crafting the human rights citizen-consumer as an actor who has choices about what to prefer and how to engage" (p. 19). In this way, particular emotional norms and imaginaries are produced and circulated about human rights. However, people's actual emotional responses may not always align with the dominant emotional regimes operating within a specific site. Individuals and communities may experience, express, and redirect their feelings about human rights and justice in ways that resist or transform the normative emotional landscapes. Attending to this third component of emotional regimes is therefore essential for grasping the full complexity of how affects, embodied experiences and legal-political frameworks intersect in the lived realities of human rights.

HRE and Affective Justice

This last section proposes that the concept of affective justice holds significant conceptual potential to enrich the field of HRE. By offering a framework that foregrounds the role of emotion, embodiment, and situated cultural contexts in human rights, affective justice enables scholars and practitioners in HRE to address the limitations and pitfalls of sentimentalism in productive ways. The notion of affective justice provides a means of articulating the affective and embodied dimensions of justice and human rights, reorienting understandings, and practices in both critical and emotive terms. This conceptual lens can expand the vocabulary available to HRE theorists and educators, turning greater attention to the affective modes through which learners see, engage with, feel, and speak about human rights and their violations.

Building on this foundation, this section outlines how the framework of affective justice can inspire new affective, moral, and political imaginaries within the field of HRE. By emphasizing the centrality of emotion, embodiment, and social context, affective justice

offers a generative pathway for reconceiving the pedagogical approaches, curricular materials, and learning objectives that animate HRE theory and practice. An affective justice-informed approach to HRE might prioritize cultivating learners' capacities for empathetic engagement, embodied understanding, and critical self-reflection around the complex, culturally situated realities of human rights struggles. Rather than presenting human rights as abstract legal principles, this perspective encourages educators to facilitate deeper explorations of how rights are felt, negotiated, and enacted in the lived experiences of diverse rights-holders and communities. Ultimately, the aim is to demonstrate how the conceptual lens of affective justice can enable more holistic, contextualized, and transformative approaches to human rights learning and teaching. By bridging the affective and the juridical, this framework holds the potential to mobilize the emotional, ethical, and political dimensions of human rights in ways that empower learners to become more engaged, empathetic, and effective advocates for justice.

The concept of affective justice offers HRE scholars a valuable theoretical framework for situating justice and human rights within the realm of embodied affects. This approach foregrounds how the enactment and expression of emotions are fundamentally shaped by historical, social, and political contexts. For example, when learners within a particular setting feel and articulate their affective responses to human rights violations, these embodied practices directly inform what ultimately comes to be understood and accepted as justice and human rights. By introducing a conceptual language that illuminates the inextricable links between affective practices and normative understandings of justice and rights, the affective justice framework enables HRE scholars and practitioners to examine these processes in much greater nuance. They can trace how certain situated conceptions of justice and human rights become produced and consolidated through the very emotional expressions they give rise to.

To illustrate this, consider a community that has experienced systemic discrimination and abuse of their rights. Within this community, feelings of anger, trauma, and a deep sense of injustice may manifest in public protests, grassroots organizing, impassioned calls for accountability, and educational settings. The affective register of these actions—the embodied ways in which rights-holders articulate their suffering and demand redress—directly shapes what 'justice' comes to mean and demand in that setting. Conversely, the dominant emotional regimes and norms upheld by state institutions or international bodies may work to delegitimize or sideline the affective articulations of marginalized groups, privileging alternative justice imaginaries. By foregrounding these dynamics, the affective justice framework enables HRE scholars and practitioners to move beyond simplistic notions of human rights as abstract legal instruments. Instead, they can illuminate the contingent, culturally embedded processes through which the very meanings and practices of justice and rights are continually negotiated, contested, and transformed through affective modes of engagement. This, in turn, can inform more contextually grounded, critically-reflective approaches to HRE.

The second component of Clarke's (2019) affective justice framework—that of embodied affects—offers particularly generative insights for scholars and practitioners in the field of HRE. This lens provides guidance to closely examine the entanglements between affects/emotions and the discourses surrounding justice and human rights, as these play out within specific cultural, historical, and political settings (Zembylas, 2023). For instance, studying these affective entanglements in a postcolonial context such as Australia, Canada, and South Africa may help HRE scholars identify how learners, educators, and their broader communities express embodied emotions about the colonial past, and how these shape their understandings of ongoing injustice and human rights violations. A sentimentalized discourse around the colonial era, characterized by the circulation of emotionally charged narratives and images, can be approached critically through the lens of affective justice. This framework enables an analysis of the contours of affect that not only structure modes of emotional expression, but are themselves conditioned by histories, power relations, and individual/collective responses. By turning attention to how affects and emotions become linked to justice and human rights within educational discourses, practices, and policies HRE scholars and practitioners can begin to illuminate the affective and biopolitical dimensions of coloniality. This includes interrogating the risks of continuously reproducing and sustaining sentimental practices that serve to obscure or background structural injustices against marginalized communities (e.g., Indigenous populations). This affective justice-informed approach contributes to enriching understandings of how embodied affects about justice and human rights are generated, distributed, reproduced, sustained, and/or transformed through the pedagogical spaces and public discourses of HRE.

The affective justice-informed approach to HRE raises several broader questions that warrant further exploration through research and pedagogical practice. What new moral and political imaginaries might be invoked in educational settings when sentimental narratives about justice and human rights are reoriented in both critical and affective terms? How might this reorientation change how learners and educators come to “see, engage, feel, and speak about both perpetrators and those victimized by violence” (Clarke, 2019, p. 39)? Delving deeper, what do the specific affects and emotions expressed by learners tell scholars and practitioners in HRE about how they respond to structural injustices and human rights violations, both locally and globally? How might unpacking their privilege and complicity shape these affective responses?

These lines of inquiry create openings for rich, contextually grounded empirical investigations of affective justice within HRE. Such investigations have the potential to reveal how embodied affects are expressed, circulated, and negotiated within classroom spaces and beyond, and how they may work to reinforce, challenge, or transform the normative emotional regimes surrounding justice and human rights. HRE scholars and practitioners equipped with an affective justice framework can leverage these insights to develop more nuanced, ethically attuned pedagogical approaches that empower learners to grapple with the emotional complexities of rights-based struggles. For example, an

affective justice-informed HRE curriculum might guide learners to critically examine their affective investments in dominant human rights narratives, while simultaneously creating opportunities for them to explore alternative, marginalized articulations of justice rooted in the lived experiences of oppressed communities. This could involve engaging with embodied testimonies, artistic expressions, and grassroots activist practices that foreground the felt dimensions of rights violations and social change. By pursuing this line of inquiry, HRE can move beyond simplistic notions of human rights as abstract, universal principles, and instead cultivate learning environments where the political, moral, and emotional stakes of rights-based struggles are authentically grappled with. This, in turn, can empower a new generation of human rights advocates who are equipped to navigate the complex, contextual, and affective realities of justice-making.

The third component of Clarke's (2019) framework—emotional regimes—provides a valuable lens for analyzing how educational discourses, practices, and policies shape particular emotional climates within classrooms and schools, particularly concerning notions of justice and human rights. Emotional regimes dictate the types of feelings deemed acceptable or expected within educational settings, thereby influencing how students perceive and react to social issues. For example, an emotional regime that promotes pity and cheap sentimentalism in schools is likely to portray children in a poor African country as 'victims to be saved' by Western benevolence and compassion. This framework suggests that by casting justice and human rights in terms of sentimental responses to suffering, such practices may inadvertently promote a sense of pity rather than genuine solidarity. As these responses circulate—through images, words, narratives, and social media—they perpetuate Eurocentric perspectives, portraying Western actors as compassionate saviors while obscuring the complex histories of colonialism and the ongoing impact of Western interventions (Clarke, 2019; Zembylas, 2023). Incorporating the concept of affective justice may allow HRE scholars and practitioners to critically engage with these emotional regimes. They can question and challenge how emotional responses are constructed within different cultural, educational, historical, and political contexts and historical eras. This approach encourages a more nuanced understanding of justice and human rights; one that resists oversimplified narratives of pity and instead emphasizes accountability, relational understanding, and an ethical commitment to equity.

Conclusion

Incorporating the concept of affective justice can advance theoretical and empirical work in HRE highlighting how affective responses to (in)justice and human rights violations manifest in specific educational settings. Affective justice can enable HRE scholars and practitioners to investigate further how justice and human rights are experienced emotionally in daily life, revealing the connections between juridical perspectives and the embodied, affective dimensions of these concepts. By examining justice and human

rights in classrooms through this dual lens, HRE practitioners can discern how certain affective mobilizations—such as anger or solidarity—have the potential to inspire transformative action. Emotions and responses to human rights violations create a powerful, critical space where human rights mobilization takes shape, both within and beyond the classroom.

Expanding HRE beyond a strictly juridical framework is essential, allowing for a richer, multidimensional understanding of justice and human rights. This shift need not lead to superficial sentimentality; rather, as this paper suggests, concepts like affective justice offer a robust foundation for critically examining how emotions and affects are mobilized concerning justice and human rights. Such an approach opens pathways for HRE where emotions, legal frameworks, and historical contexts converge to bring justice and human rights into everyday understanding and practice. The intersections of power, history, and embodied affect offer an opportunity to reconceptualize how HRE is organized, practiced, and evaluated. Embracing these complexities in the classroom and beyond invites HRE scholars and practitioners to create spaces where justice and human rights are not only learned but also lived and experienced in meaningful, transformative ways.

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AI Human Rights Literacy

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The treatment of artificial intelligence (AI) in the field of education has so far been typically characterized by (a) information about how AI can assist educators in carrying out their work, and (b) concerns about the misuse of AI by learners, for example, concerning plagiarism. The links between AI and ethics within the field of education are much more complex. Beyond the concerns about the organization of teaching and learning with the rise of AI—and the associated rights to privacy and safety—there are legitimate needs for instructors and learners to understand how AI affects their daily lives. What are the wider ethical considerations for using AI, particularly from the perspective of human rights norms? This paper critically analyzes some of the human rights at stake regarding the use of AI and its implications for the organization and content of formal education (K-12 and higher education). The human rights perspective on AI's dynamic and changing field—AI human rights literacy—is critical to convey to instructors and learners as they navigate these new technological developments. This paper overviews human rights relevant to everyday encounters with AI in education. It proposes an AI Human Rights curriculum to help both learners and educators become critically aware of these human rights implications.

Keywords: AI, human rights, human rights education, AI literacy.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) technology presents some of the most profound opportunities and challenges for humanity in the 21st century. AI systems are being integrated across nearly every domain of society, from healthcare and transportation to finance, media, and education. While advocates are enthusiastic about AI's potential to enhance efficiency, automation, and data-driven policy decision-making, a rising chorus of voices has begun to sound the alarm about the risks of AI posing threats to human rights (Zuboff, 2019), and the endurance of democratic values such as non-discrimination and equality (Noble, 2018). AI is not neutral; it operates within frameworks shaped by the biases and inequalities embedded in the data it processes and the systems it supports (Noble, 2018; Eubanks, 2018). These dynamics

make it important to consider AI's impact on human rights worldwide. This is particularly relevant in the educational sector given how education has emerged as a high-stakes arena for upholding human rights.

Human rights, broadly defined, are the fundamental rights inherent to all individuals, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status. These rights are codified in international legal frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989). Within these frameworks, the right to education (Article 26 of the UDHR) is considered a cornerstone for the development of individuals and communities. Human rights education (HRE) is a field of practice specifically focused on fostering knowledge, skills, and values to promote dignity, equality, justice, and democratic engagement (Tibbitts, 2002). As AI becomes increasingly integrated into educational systems, human rights can offer a critical lens for assessing the opportunities and risks of using AI in education. HRE can provide a guiding framework to prepare educators and learners to maximize AI's benefits while addressing its risks (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021).

Two areas of focus have typically characterized the treatment of AI in education: (a) information about how AI can assist educators in carrying out their work, and (b) concerns about learners' misuse of AI, for example, concerning plagiarism. The links between AI and ethics within the field of education are much more complex. In addition to concerns about the organization of teaching and learning, and the associated rights to privacy and safety, there are legitimate needs for instructors and learners to understand how AI affects their daily lives inside and outside educational settings. In this paper, we examine the intersection of AI and HRE, addressing two interrelated questions: *What human rights are at stake with AI integration in education? And in what ways can HRE support educators and learners to engage critically with AI?* We argue that addressing these challenges is a moral imperative for educators and policymakers, ensuring that the transformative potential of AI benefits all learners equally.

We undertook a literature review to identify key debates about AI and human rights implications within the field of education. This literature review involved research using the online database EBSCO, open-access scholarship, and grey literature on Google Scholar. Based on these results, we explore key human rights at stake when using AI in formal education: privacy, equity, and the right to education. Following this literature review, we propose key AI human rights literacy aims for educators and learners that can be contextualized to a wide range of educational settings. The explicit link between AI and HRE in our paper advances aims to foreground the moral obligations when using AI in learning environments. The final section of this article proposes an AI human rights literacy curriculum designed to equip educators and learners with tools to navigate these challenges.

Definitions of AI

AI scientist John McCarthy coined and defined the term 'Artificial Intelligence' in 1956 as "the science and engineering of making intelligent machines" (McCarthy et al., 1955). This definition encapsulates the dual aspects of AI: the scientific pursuit of understanding intelligence and the engineering challenge of creating machines that exhibit such intelligence. AI can be categorized into different types based on the capabilities and functionalities exhibited by systems. The earliest approaches in the 1950s and 1960s focused on general AI attempting to demonstrate human cognition but faced challenges scaling to handle complex real-world tasks. This evolved into specialized *Narrow AI* typically focused on excelling at a single application area like translating languages (Hernández-Orallo & Dowe, 2010). Narrow AI powers many modern technologies by automatically extracting insights from patterns in data using machine learning without explicitly programmed rules. Meanwhile, advanced systems are beginning to incorporate different narrow AI capabilities like computer vision, speech recognition, and natural language processing in an integrated manner, demonstrating some properties of general intelligence across multiple domains. Narrow AI or Weak AI focuses on performing specific tasks, like recognizing your voice when you chat with Siri. This type of AI has a limited context, meaning it doesn't have a broader understanding or awareness. Currently, Narrow AI is the most advanced form of AI we have.

Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), sometimes called *Strong AI*, refers to AI that can perform any intellectual task that a human can. It can understand, learn, adapt, and apply knowledge in a broad range of tasks, much like a human being. Current systems still rely heavily on training data rather than conceptual knowledge and remain brittle outside fixed contexts. However, innovative approaches keep expanding the boundaries of how algorithms can efficiently learn complex functions, plan using internal models, communicate via language, and transfer expertise between related tasks – bringing science closer to realizing Artificial General Intelligence (Goertzel & Pennachin, 2007). Theories about AGI posit that future systems will self-improve and design ever smarter generations of AI potentially leading to superintelligence surpassing humans across all cognitive faculties. This is *Superintelligent AI*, which goes beyond AGI and is, theoretically, smarter than humans in all aspects (Bostrom, 2014).

The AI revolution has likely only begun scratching the surface of AI's transformative impact. More sophisticated systems integrating multiple AI capabilities like computer vision, speech recognition and natural language processing in general AI architecture could one day match or exceed human-level intelligence across diverse domains. Despite skepticism around the possibility of self-improving superintelligent AI or technological singularity, the accelerating pace of AI breakthroughs hints at paradigm shifts in short order (Marcus & Davis, 2020). The integration of AI into education often focuses on narrow AI technologies, such as personalized learning systems or automated grading tools. These systems have the potential to improve educational access and

outcomes by offering tailored learning experiences and real-time feedback. However, this increased reliance on AI raises fundamental questions about ethics and governance in education. The educational sector must grapple with how to leverage AI's capabilities while safeguarding learners' rights and ensuring equitable outcomes.

Human Rights at Stake with AI

Human rights frameworks, such as the UDHR, establish education as a universal right, emphasizing principles of equitable access, privacy, and dignity. The integration of AI into education presents significant opportunities to advance these rights but simultaneously raises profound ethical concerns. This section examines three critical rights that are at stake in the age of AI, with a specific focus on implications for education settings: the right to privacy; freedom from bias, discrimination and right to equality; and the right to education. Berendt et al. (2020) underscore the need to highlight essential human rights as a starting point for implementing AI in educational systems. These rights-related concerns are critical for evaluating the use of AI in education and serve as a foundation for designing curriculum content to foster AI Human Rights Literacy. The final section of this paper will expand on this potential curriculum, offering insights into how AI can be approached through a human rights lens, empowering students to understand and navigate its implications.

The Right to Privacy

The integration of AI into education offers the promise of enhanced learning personalization and operational efficiency. However, it also raises significant concerns about the fundamental human right to privacy. Machine learning systems routinely collect vast quantities of data, including students' academic performance, behavioral analytics, and sensitive personal or biometric information. While often justified as necessary for improving educational outcomes, this data collection poses critical risks to students' autonomy and dignity, particularly given the opacity of these technologies (Park & Humphry, 2019). Without robust safeguards and democratic oversight, these practices can lead to significant privacy violations, undermining trust in educational institutions.

These AI systems collect and analyze user data through diverse methods such as online activities, purchases, location tracking, and surveillance technologies. Within educational contexts, learning management systems (LMS) and adaptive learning platforms use similar methods to optimize learning pathways, gathering granular details about student interactions (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2014). While these tools enhance personalization, the lack of transparency regarding how data is used or who has access to it raises ethical concerns. Students, parents, and educators are often unaware of the extent to which these systems collect, store, and utilize data, which limits their ability to make informed decisions about participation. Studies underscore the limited awareness students have of data privacy risks. For example, research by Selwyn (2019)

found that over 70% of students using AI-based learning platforms were unaware of the extent of data collected about them. This lack of awareness undermines their ability to give informed consent and leaves them more susceptible to exploitation by opaque systems.

One of the most concerning aspects of AI in education is its potential to exacerbate existing power imbalances. Students in marginalized communities are particularly vulnerable to privacy violations. Many of these students lack the digital literacy or institutional support needed to understand their data rights, leaving them disproportionately exposed to potential misuse (Slade & Prinsloo, 2013). Schools serving under-resourced populations often rely on free or low-cost AI tools with inadequate privacy protections or unclear data ownership policies. This dynamic perpetuates systemic inequities, disproportionately exposing vulnerable communities to exploitation.

Children, as a demographic, are uniquely at risk. Their limited capacity for informed decision-making about privacy and data sharing makes them particularly vulnerable. The normalization of data collection in educational settings erodes their expectation of privacy from an early age. Scholars like Zuboff (2019) caution against the unchecked expansion of surveillance systems, which shift societal norms toward control and monitoring rather than empowerment. In education, this shift not only jeopardizes individual rights but also undermines the trust necessary for effective learning environments.

The lack of regulatory clarity further compounds these issues. While frameworks like the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) establish principles for data consent, minimization, and transparency, many of these systems in education fail to adhere to these standards consistently. Human rights advocates argue that the rapid pace of technological change necessitates updated regulations emphasizing both data protection and user empowerment (European Council, 2023). Current practices, which often prioritize optimization over transparency, fall short of these ideals.

To address these challenges, educational institutions and policymakers must ensure that privacy is a core principle in the design and implementation of these AI systems. Data collection should be minimized and strictly limited to what is necessary for educational purposes. Anonymization techniques must be rigorously applied to ensure data cannot be traced back to individual students (UNESCO, 2021). Systems must operate with full transparency, explaining how data is collected, stored, and used. Students and their families should have the right to opt out of invasive practices without forfeiting access to educational benefits. These measures are crucial for fostering trust and ensuring AI in education empowers learners rather than exploiting them.

Safeguarding the right to privacy in educational AI demands a paradigm shift prioritizing student empowerment over technological efficiency. This shift requires

rigorous oversight, robust regulatory frameworks, and an ethical commitment from all stakeholders to uphold the dignity and autonomy of students. Without such measures, the promise of AI in education risks being overshadowed by its potential to normalize surveillance, undermining the very rights it should protect.

Freedom from Bias and Discrimination and the Right to Equality

The integration of AI into educational systems raises critical ethical and practical concerns regarding bias, discrimination, and systemic inequality. AI, often perceived as neutral and objective, operates within frameworks shaped by historical data and algorithmic design, frequently amplifying pre-existing societal inequities. This section explores the structural roots of bias in AI, its manifestations within educational contexts, and its broader implications for the right to equality as enshrined in international human rights frameworks.

Bias in AI systems stems from their dependence on historical data and algorithmic processes, both of which often reflect entrenched social inequities. Data used to train AI systems frequently encode biases present in society, leading to discriminatory outcomes. For instance, hiring algorithms trained on data from male-dominated industries have consistently favored male candidates, perpetuating gender disparities (Dastin, 2018). In educational contexts, similar biases emerge in automated grading systems and predictive analytics, which disproportionately penalize students whose cultural or learning styles deviate from majority norms.

A particularly concerning example of bias in AI is its racial dimension. Facial recognition technologies deployed in schools, for instance, have been shown to misidentify individuals with darker skin tones at significantly higher rates than those with lighter skin tones (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018). This misidentification not only undermines the reliability of such technologies but also exposes students of color to heightened surveillance and punitive measures, mirroring broader societal patterns of over-policing and systemic marginalization.

Algorithmic discrimination is further evident in predictive analytics, which often relies on socio-economic markers associated with lower academic performance without accounting for structural inequities. Tools designed to identify "at-risk" students can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and limit opportunities for marginalized populations. Eubanks (2018) highlights how such systems, while intended to support interventions, often perpetuate cycles of disadvantage by lowering expectations for certain student groups. This underscores the pressing need to integrate ethical training and bias mitigation strategies into AI development and deployment.

The principle of equality, as articulated in Article 1 of the UDHR, asserts that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." However, the deployment of AI in education risks undermining this cornerstone of human rights by entrenching systemic inequities. The reliance on historical data within AI systems often results in the

replication and amplification of social biases, particularly in areas such as student placement, scholarship allocation, and grading systems. These biases have profound implications for the educational experiences of marginalized communities. Automated grading systems, for example, tend to prioritize surface-level correctness, often penalizing the creativity and critical thinking skills exhibited by students from diverse cultural or linguistic backgrounds (Benjamin, 2019). Similarly, predictive analytics used to monitor student performance often classify students from underprivileged backgrounds in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes, ultimately limiting their opportunities for growth and advancement. This cycle of bias not only perpetuates existing inequalities but also fundamentally undermines the goal of equitable education.

The digital divide constitutes a significant barrier to the equitable deployment of AI in education. Access to AI-driven tools is predicated on reliable internet connectivity, technological infrastructure, and digital literacy, resources that are unevenly distributed across socio-economic lines. Rural and underfunded schools often lack the means to adopt advanced AI technologies, leaving their students at a significant disadvantage compared to their peers in wealthier institutions. A study by the World Economic Forum (2020) found that students in low-income households were twice as likely to lack basic digital literacy skills compared to those from higher-income households. This disparity exacerbates educational inequities, limiting the ability of underserved communities to benefit from the transformative potential of AI.

The intersection of AI and equality is particularly concerning for students with disabilities or those from minority linguistic and cultural groups. AI systems, such as speech recognition tools, frequently perform poorly with diverse speech patterns or accents, alienating students whose needs are not represented in the training data (Noble, 2018). Similarly, adaptive learning platforms often operate on assumptions about 'typical' learning trajectories, further marginalizing students and requiring alternative approaches to education.

Tackling bias and promoting equality in educational AI systems requires deliberate, multifaceted interventions. The development of AI systems must prioritize the use of diverse and representative datasets that capture the experiences of all learners, particularly those from historically marginalized groups. Scholars such as Buolamwini and Gebru (2018) advocate for inclusive data collection practices as a foundational step toward equitable AI design. Regular audits and fairness assessments are critical to identifying and mitigating biases before they result in harm. These processes should be integrated throughout the lifecycle of AI systems to ensure accountability and transparency. Participatory policymaking is equally essential, involving educators, students, and community stakeholders in decisions about AI deployment to ensure that the voices of those most affected are centered.

Investments in digital infrastructure and literacy programs must be prioritized to bridge the digital divide. Policymakers and educational institutions should provide

underfunded schools with the resources necessary to adopt AI technologies while equipping students with the skills to navigate these tools responsibly. Finally, transparency mechanisms must be embedded in AI systems to explain decision-making processes and establish avenues for redress in cases of unfair outcomes. Ethical training programs for technologists and educators can further ensure that the deployment of AI aligns with principles of equity and human dignity.

Right to Education

The right to education is recognized as a fundamental human right essential for empowering and developing individuals and societies. This right emphasizes not only access but also the quality and inclusivity of education, aiming to foster the full development of human potential and promote social equality UNESCO (2021). The introduction of AI into educational systems presents both opportunities to enhance this right and significant challenges that could undermine it if left unaddressed.

AI technologies have demonstrated considerable potential to enhance education. Personalized learning platforms, for example, adapt content and pacing to individual students' needs, enabling more tailored and effective educational experiences. Intelligent tutoring systems can provide real-time feedback, helping students overcome specific challenges and facilitating more efficient learning processes (Luckin et al., 2016; Kulik & Fletcher, 2016). Such innovations hold promise to address some of the longstanding gaps in education, particularly for students requiring additional support. However, these advancements are unevenly distributed, often exacerbating existing disparities and raising critical questions about the universal realization of the right to education.

Over-reliance on AI in education can narrow the scope of learning to metrics that are easily quantifiable, potentially sidelining broader educational goals such as critical thinking, creativity, and social-emotional development. Automated grading systems, for instance, often prioritize surface-level correctness over more nuanced skills like problem-solving or collaborative reasoning (Luckin et al., 2016). This emphasis risks reducing education to a transactional process, undermining its role as a transformative force that nurtures holistic personal and intellectual growth.

The integration of AI also presents risks to teacher roles and autonomy. While AI can serve as a valuable supplementary tool, excessive reliance on it may erode the essential human elements of education (Selwyn, 2019). Teachers play a critical role in mentoring, fostering empathy, and cultivating relationships that contribute to students' emotional and social well-being. AI, no matter how advanced, cannot replicate these human interactions. Instead, they must be designed to support educators, amplifying their capacity to address diverse learning needs without replacing their unique contributions.

The right to education is fundamentally tied to the principle of inclusivity. AI systems often fail to adequately accommodate the needs of students with disabilities, those from linguistic minorities, or those with non-standard learning trajectories (Kleinberg et al.,

2020). For example, many adaptive learning platforms rely on language models that do not account for regional dialects or non-native speakers, alienating students who may already face barriers to learning. Inclusive design, informed by diverse user inputs, is therefore essential.

To align AI-driven education with the right to education, deliberate policies and practices are required. Policymakers must prioritize investments in digital infrastructure to bridge the technological divide, ensuring that all students—regardless of their socioeconomic background—have access to the tools necessary for effective learning. Equally important is the need for teacher training programs that equip educators with the skills to integrate AI into their teaching while preserving the human-centered values of education. AI should be viewed as a complement to, rather than a replacement for traditional educational practices (Heffernan & Heffernan, 2014).

Governance frameworks must place equity and inclusivity at the center of AI adoption in education. This includes regular audits of AI systems to identify and address biases, participatory policymaking that involves marginalized communities in decision-making, and clear accountability mechanisms to ensure that these systems align with the broader goals of education (UNESCO, 2022). Without such measures, the promise of AI in education will remain unrealized for many, leaving the right to education as an unfulfilled aspiration rather than a lived reality.

Human Rights Education and Critical Engagement with AI

After acknowledging some key human rights at stake with the use of artificial intelligence in education, we now turn our focus on how educators and learners can critically engage with AI through HRE. Children, youth, and adults all need to have their human rights protected as AI becomes integrated into education systems. In this section, we first examine what educators and administrators need to know about AI from a human rights perspective in terms of the use of AI in schools and educational systems. Second, we explore what learners need to know about AI from a human rights perspective in terms of their functioning in wider society. We then overview the implications for curriculum development and training of teachers and administrators.

What do administrators and educators need to know about AI use in the classroom from a human rights perspective?

To ensure that education is protected, upheld, and promoted through a human rights lens when incorporating AI into school curricula and culture, educators and administrators must be vigilant about potential human rights violations. Earlier in this paper we mentioned ways that teachers are using AI in the classroom. Administrators are also using AI in their roles, such as in educational monitoring, where AI replaces the manual inputting and generation of information and data. Administrators may also

interact with AI to predict funding needed in their schools. However, school leaders must not lose sight of the risks that come with these new technologies.

Scholars are concerned that the biggest winners of AI in education are technology companies who collect data from AI educational initiatives (Berendt et al, 2020). Administrators require critical training to understand the essential ways that AI can be used in the classroom and school, and how to mitigate any threats to children's human rights. Administrators should support educators in their classrooms through education and training on the responsible use of AI technologies, as well as access to the AI technologies themselves. Educators need to understand the AI applications and software they are using and be critically aware of the strengths and weaknesses of AI in learning, to be "empowered – not overpowered – by technology" (Holmes et al., 2022, p. 11).

Many areas within AI need to be researched and addressed concerning K-12 education, such as machine learning integration, teaching assistant systems, as well as computational processes. However, the main human rights concerns are privacy, data protection, and collection surrounding AI to ensure that there is an effort to address human rights at stake with AI in the classroom.

One of the key worries about educators using AI is the use of predictive systems. Here, the generation of data used to monitor student performance and generate tasks to benefit their learning on behalf of the teacher is effective insofar as the data being used has not been produced with an influence of biases (Berendt et. al, 2020). With the increased reliance on machine learning to generate predictive data, the direct monitoring of student progress by the teacher in the classroom is greatly reduced, with potentially less oversight by the teacher on predictive data that has been influenced by bias. Another potential negative side effect is that teachers will have less personal interaction with students.

Educators must be aware of AI technologies such as natural language processing (NLP) that can produce "auto-journalism" (Miao et. al, 2021, p. 9) and can prove to be a risk to their critical thinking development. We have seen NLP perform with ChatGPT, producing paragraphs or whole essays that students attempt to use as a final project. There is another layer we must analyze with not only NLP's potential to complete a student's task(s) but also the chance that with such a resource, students may inevitably hinder their ability to critically think and develop solutions to problems on their own without any awareness of their doing so.

What do learners need to know about AI's presence and be responsible users of AI from a human rights perspective?

Returning to the risks at stake with the right to education, learners need to be made aware of how AI collects their data for algorithm and academic purposes and how it can affect their learning. Students should know that their right to privacy is at stake if AI tools are collecting their data. Berendt et. al (2020) discuss "the ability to opt-out" of data

collection and state that students who are facing obligatory participation may face “a reduction of fundamental human rights, including the right to exercise autonomy and to make choices” (p. 5). However, opting out may influence the overall quality of a data set, through the underrepresentation of learners coming from groups who have opted out.

One way forward lies in the hands of policymakers to ensure this can happen through students taking action to protect their rights, as noted by UNESCO, “facilitate the participation of student representatives in countrywide initiatives that promote new competencies in the curriculum” (Miao et. al, 2021, p. 34). Learners should be able to choose when and where their data and records of achievement are utilized, but those with less privilege might have less access to support on how to make these decisions in ways that help them in the future (Berendt et al, 2020).

As AI continues to permeate educational environments, formulating and implementing proactive policies that uphold principles of diversity, interpretability, and universal inclusion is imperative to prevent the inadvertent instrumentalization of inequality. Human rights frameworks emphasizing participation, transparency, and non-discrimination should serve as guiding principles to ensure that educational AI empowers diverse learners equitably (UNESCO, 2022).

Overview of AI and Human Rights Literacy Curriculum

The human rights perspective on the dynamic and changing field of AI, AI human rights literacy, is critical to convey to both educators and learners as they navigate these new technological developments in their everyday lives. UNESCO’s *AI and Education: Guidance for Policymakers* reports “future learning and training systems must equip all people with core AI competencies, including understanding of how AI collects and can manipulate data, and skills to ensure safety and protection of personal data” (Miao et. al, 2021, p.1). Arguably, before students are allowed to utilize AI tools in the classroom, they must be made aware of this phenomenon and understand that if granted access to AI alongside learning, it cannot be trusted one hundred percent. That is, AI is generated through data input, and users would be remiss to assume that that data is completely trustworthy and accurate. AI has much to offer the next generation of learners, however, the responsibility to identify the risks does not fall solely on policymakers. Educators and students must engage in dialogue about the consequences of fully entrusting AI technologies before assuming that they can solely rely on them.

Empirical evidence underscores the importance of integrating AI ethics into education. A study by UNESCO (2021) found that students who participated in AI ethics workshops demonstrated a 25% increase in their ability to identify biases in algorithmic outputs and improved digital literacy by 30%. Similarly, programs at Stanford University focusing on ethical AI use have shown that students who engage with real-world case studies are better equipped to critically analyze the societal implications

of AI technologies (Li, 2018). These findings highlight the potential of such curricula to empower learners and mitigate risks associated with AI integration.

The AI, Human Rights, and Education module of six lessons is a collaborative effort between Human Rights Education Associates (HREA) and Pedagog.ai.¹ This curriculum assumes that learners and educators need to know both the basis of AI as well as human rights. Although this curriculum is not able to address all of the human rights and AI topics presented in this article, it offers a gateway into understanding the human rights at stake and what are the areas requiring not only vigilance but good governance.

This module will be open access as of January 2025 on both websites. Below is an overview of the lesson themes, which are eligible to be used by human rights education organizations as well as educational institutions and schools interested in addressing basic AI literacy through the lens of human rights. These lessons will ideally all be taught, and sequentially. However, educators might opt to use a fewer number of lessons, according to their interests and opportunities to implement.

Lesson 1: The Basics of AI and Ethical Frameworks

In this lesson, learners will explore the basic definitions of artificial intelligence and examples of how AI is already being used by governments, schools, corporations, and other institutions in ways that are impacting lives around the world. Learners will then dive into the ethical and human rights implications of AI use through short scenarios and small group discussions. Learners will be able to:

- Define artificial intelligence and name common AI technologies
- Identify the benefits and harms of various uses of AI technology
- Identify frameworks that human society uses to codify ideas of right and wrong including religion, ethics, and human rights
- Apply these frameworks to a specific AI use case.

Lesson 2: Critical Analysis of AI and Human Rights

In this lesson, learners will learn about international human rights standards and how these apply to the area of generative AI. Learners will then work in small groups to investigate various examples of AI use and discuss both positive and negative human rights implications. Learners will be able to:

- Describe the origins and key features of human rights
- Critically analyze examples of AI use from a human rights perspective.

¹ HREA is an international non-governmental organization that supports human rights education; the training of human rights defenders and professional groups; and the development of educational materials and programming. (See hrea.org) Pedagog.ai is a platform that empowers educators with AI-driven tools and resources to create engaging lesson plans, assignments, assessments, and more. The curriculum was developed by Felisa Tibbitts, Nina Bamberg and Jay Pier.

Lesson 3: AI Governance from a Human Rights Perspective

In this lesson, learners explore the various actors responsible for writing principles and policies related to AI. Learners will understand the current AI policy landscape and will explore a key resource in AI governance to discern how such documents are developed to deduce the major themes and human rights considerations relating to AI. Learners will be able to:

- Explain the nature and purposes of AI governance documents
- Identify institutional actors with a responsibility to create AI Governance and defend the special role of international organizations
- Define AI Governance and describe potential mechanisms, such as principles, policies, and laws
- Analyze common themes found within AI governance documents from a human rights perspective.

Lesson 4: Impacts of AI on the Right to Education – Opportunities and Risks

This lesson begins with a discussion on the right to education, as it relates to access and quality. Learners then work in small groups to discuss the ways that AI-supported Personalized & Adaptive Learning might enhance or impede the right to education. The class concludes with a general discussion of ways that any negative consequences of this, and other AI, technologies might be minimized. Learners will be able to:

- Understand the fundamental principles of the right to education and its importance
- Identify the potential opportunities that AI can provide in enhancing educational access, personalized learning, and teaching effectiveness
- Recognize that unequal access to AI technology exacerbates educational inequalities
- Analyze the risks and ethical concerns associated with the use of AI in education, such as privacy, bias, and the digital divide
- Identify recommendations for leveraging the benefits of AI while mitigating its risks in the educational context.

Lesson 5: AI and Human Rights Literacy Building

In this lesson, learners will be introduced to the ways that biases and factual inaccuracies can be present in outputs from AI tools like chatbots. Learners will work in small groups to analyze key differences between AI-generated and human-written text. Learners will be able to:

- Articulate how AI chatbot tools can produce human-like writing
- Compare and contrast human-written and AI-generated texts
- Discuss the qualities of a reliable source
- Discuss the potential impacts of AI tools that can produce human-like writing on society.

Lesson 6: Researching AI and Human Rights in Public Services

This lesson prepares learners to do a research project in which they choose an AI tool being used in a public sector (e.g., healthcare, the justice system) and research how it might be used to promote HR, how it might have HR challenges, and how to promote responsible use. These results are presented in a physical poster or an online digital environment. Learners will be able to:

- Identify and research the functions of one or more AI tools/technologies in use in a public sector setting
- Critically assess the outcomes of the use of these AI tools and technologies from the perspective of human rights
- Propose strategies for reducing or removing negative human rights impacts of the use of these AI technologies in a public sector setting
- Communicate these findings in a poster for public viewing.

Conclusion

As the integration of artificial intelligence into education continues to accelerate, the imperative for comprehensive governance frameworks that uphold fundamental human rights has never been more urgent. The analysis presented in this paper has underscored the profound risks AI poses to core principles - like equality, privacy, freedom of expression, and democratic participation within learning environments - if deployed without rigorous safeguards. Conversely, this technology also holds immense promise to enhance access, personalization, and efficiency in education, provided it is harnessed in service of empowering students rather than optimizing for narrow metrics. Ultimately, establishing a balanced, rights-respecting approach to AI in schools will require collaborative policymaking that centers the voices of diverse stakeholders - from technical experts and educators to marginalized community members directly impacted. Robust transparency, accountability, and redress mechanisms must be enshrined to ensure algorithmic decision-making is fair, contestable, and aligned with human dignity. Moreover, comprehensive digital and AI literacy programs empowering both students and teachers are crucial to cultivating their agency and critical thinking in an increasingly automated world.

As AI's disruptive power continues to reshape fundamental structures of teaching and learning, the moral imperative to place human rights at the center of this technological revolution has never been clearer. By proactively defining ethical frameworks and inclusive governance models, policymakers and stakeholders can help ensure AI becomes a great equalizer empowering the next generation, rather than an instrument of oppression and control. The stakes are high, but the opportunity to create a more just, enlightened future through technology-enabled education remains within our grasp.

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The PeaceJam Foundation: An Analytical Program Review through a Transformative Peace Education Lens

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This article focuses on the PeaceJam Foundation Ambassadors Curriculum, analyzing how its content and structure align with a Transformative Human Rights Education (THRE) approach. A THRE approach centers on creating social change and encourages youth to analyze structures and conditions that lead to injustice. It embraces emancipatory learning strategies and promotes social change through both individual actions to address human rights violations, as well as through collective action to work toward wider community development. In this article, the author examines the strengths and limitations of how the curriculum's content, structure, and context align with a THRE approach. The analysis includes takeaways for the wider field about developing quality human rights programming centered on community-engaged praxis, youth participation, transformative agency, and empowerment.

Keywords: Peace Education, Human Rights Education, Social Justice, Youth Participation, Transformative Learning.

Introduction

The world continues to face the highest number of violent conflicts since the Second World War (United Nations, 2023). Currently two billion people, or nearly a quarter of the world's population, live in a country affected by such conflict (United Nations, 2023). Now, more than ever, it is important to promote the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will help people prevent the occurrence of conflict, resolve conflicts peacefully, or create social conditions conducive to peace, including those that further human rights. Education is an essential path to this goal.

While multiple definitions of Human Rights Education (HRE) exist, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines HRE as "education, training, and information aiming at building a universal culture of human rights through the sharing of knowledge, imparting of skills and molding of attitudes" (Tibbitts & Fernekes, 2011, p. 1). HRE scholar Felisa Tibbitts (2017) distinguishes the Transformative models of HRE from two other HRE models outlined below, emphasizing their distinct inclusion of critical pedagogy and deep reflection on the societal structures and conditions that lead to injustice (Tibbitts, 2017). Transformative Human Rights Education (THRE) also centers on the goal of creating social change (Tibbitts, 2017). HRE models that adopt a transformative approach embrace emancipatory learning strategies that include

education *about, through, and for* Human Rights (Bajaj, 2017). This article highlights one specific peace and human rights curriculum, the *PeaceJam Foundation Ambassadors Curriculum*, analyzing how its content and structure align with a THRE approach.

The PeaceJam Foundation is a youth development nonprofit organization led by 14 Nobel Peace Prize Laureates. PeaceJam's stated goals are to "create the next generation of Nobel Peace Laureates," by fostering youth-led solutions for today's global issues and by creating opportunities for youth-led action (PeaceJam, 2019). The curricular approach introduces young people to issues of peace, social justice, and nonviolence, and focuses on three main tenets: Inspiration, Education, and Action (PeaceJam, 2019). The *Ambassadors Curriculum*, which is designed with and for geographically diverse youth ages 14-25, develops core competencies including personal power and purpose; diversity and inclusion; change agency; global citizenship and interconnection; peacebuilding; and compassionate leadership (PeaceJam, 2021).

The curriculum consists of seven learning modules that guide youth through the process of completing an action project based on topics they identify in their communities as important. They then connect those projects to the broader Billion Acts of Peace Campaign, an international movement that mobilizes youth to address pressing global issues (Billion Acts, 2021). Upon completion of their projects, youth present them to Nobel Peace Laureates at youth leadership conferences, where they also connect with a wider network of young changemakers (PeaceJam, 2021).

PeaceJam's curricular objectives align with THRE goals of developing youths' sense of empowerment and agency at individual, school, and community levels (Russell & Suarez, 2017). As one PeaceJam alumna notes:

PeaceJam ignited a flame within me for advocacy and ambassadorship, teaching me to be a global citizen by addressing world issues at a local level. It not only transformed the way I perceive the world, but more importantly, it shifted something within my spirit. PeaceJam revealed to me that I possessed the passion and power to change my world all along. It shattered the notion that I needed to wait until I grew older to make a difference. I realized that I, too, could be an agent of change. (PeaceJam, 2021)

This quote speaks to the transformative nature of the curriculum in the ways that it helps students to think critically about their environment and inspires their belief that every individual can contribute toward social change, regardless of age.

Social change in this approach manifests both through individual action to address human rights violations in one's sphere, as well as through collective action to work toward wider community development (Russell & Suarez, 2017). This article will analyze the strengths and limitations of how the curriculum's content, structure, and context align with a THRE approach. In doing so, it will present takeaways for the wider field about developing quality human rights programming centered on

community-engaged praxis, youth participation, transformative agency, and empowerment.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of molding attitudes to build a culture of human rights evokes notions of Paulo Freire's Conscientization, which describes the process of individuals recognizing and analyzing inequality, oppression, and subordination, and then acting collectively to overcome these harmful structures in society (Bajaj, 2017). When viewed through this lens, education becomes about "problem-solving and critical analysis rather than on the mere acquisition of knowledge" (Holland & Martin, 2017, p. 270). When pairing Conscientization with Cosmopolitanism, which focuses on global citizenship and belonging, formal and nonformal education results in action, solidarity, and connection (Bajaj, 2017). This kind of HRE has come to be known as "transformative human rights education" (THRE) (Bajaj, 2017, p. 8).

Tibbitts (2017) distinguishes Transformative models of Human Rights Education from two other models of HRE: Values and Awareness HRE, and Accountability HRE. The Transformative model stands out from the other two in its inclusion of critical pedagogy and deep reflection on the societal structures and conditions that lead to injustice (Tibbitts, 2017). THRE is also unique in its foremost goal of creating social change (Russell & Suarez, 2017). Social change in the THRE approach manifests both through individual action to address human rights violations in one's sphere, as well as through collective action, or activism, to work toward wider community development. It targets both beliefs and behavior. This empowerment occurs through leadership development, learning about topics relevant to the learner, cultivating agency in the learner, fostering personal transformation, and developing skill sets to organize advocacy and awareness events (Russell & Suarez, 2017; Tibbitts, 2017). Another essential element of THRE is its connection to "everyday experiences, aspirations, concerns and needs," relevant to the learner's context, rather than intangible concepts (Coysh, 2014, p. 94).

THRE practitioners employ various methodological approaches (Tibbitts, 2017). While wider approaches in HRE include a spectrum of didactic, participatory, empowerment, and transformational approaches, the two that are most intricately connected with THRE are the empowerment and transformational approaches (Tibbitts, 2017). Transformative and emancipatory learning emphasizes personal transformation in individual learners. It is that individual change and cultivation of agency that results in individuals taking personal and collective action to change the structures that lead to human rights violations (Coysh, 2014). The Transformative model is thus oriented towards approaches that generate both personal and social change. The elements of social change manifested in THRE connect to wider peacebuilding concepts related to Galtung's (1964) concept of "positive peace" (Galtung, 1964, p. 2). Galtung defines "negative peace" as the absence of violence and "positive peace" as the integration of human society (Galtung, 1964, p.

2). The latter addresses indirect and structural violence through its attempts to create the conditions for the absence of violence and the presence of peace. This allows for more sustainable, structural societal change.

Program Description

The PeaceJam Foundation is a youth development nonprofit organization led by 14 Nobel Peace Prize Laureates. Its mission is to create a generation of young leaders committed to positive change in themselves, their communities, and the world through the inspiration of the spirit, skills, and wisdom that Nobel Peace Laureates embody (PeaceJam, 2021). Developed in 1996, PeaceJam has over 27 years of experience in developing Peace and Human Rights Education curricula (PeaceJam, 2023). More than 1.3 million youth in over 45 countries have taken part in PeaceJam programming and conferences (PeaceJam, 2023). The wider set of curricula consists of five main curricula for different ages, including *PeaceJam Juniors* (ages 5-11); *PeaceJam Leaders* (ages 11-14); *Compassion in Action* (ages 12-14); *PeaceJam Ambassadors* (ages 14-25); and *Juvenile Justice* (youth with enhanced vulnerabilities). The PeaceJam curricular structure focuses on three main tenets: Inspiration, Education, and Action (PeaceJam, 2021).

The *Ambassadors Curriculum* specifically is a learner-centered curriculum for youth ages 14-25, that introduces young people to issues of peace, social justice, and nonviolence, as well as global citizenship and civic engagement (PeaceJam, 2021). The curriculum consists of seven learning modules that align with PeaceJam's main pillars of inspiration, education, and action (PeaceJam, 2021). These activities guide youth through the process of completing a service-learning project based on a topic they identify in their communities as important to them. They then connect this project to the broader Billion Acts of Peace Campaign (Billion Acts, 2021).

The Billion Acts of Peace Campaign is an international movement that mobilizes youth to address pressing global issues across ten peace and human rights issue areas: Advancing Women and Children; Alleviating Extreme Poverty; Clean Water for Everyone; Conflict Resolution; Education and Community Development; Ending Racism and Hate; Global Health and Wellness; Human Rights for All; Non-proliferation and Disarmament; and Protecting the Environment (Billion Acts, 2021). Upon completion of their service-learning projects, youth present their projects to Nobel Peace Laureates and community organizations at youth leadership conferences, where they also connect to a wider network of young changemakers (PeaceJam, 2021). To date, the global PeaceJam community has recorded 119,028,664 acts of peace across 171 countries (Billion Acts, 2023). A few examples to demonstrate the variety of peace acts are included here:

Table 1
Example Billion Acts of Peace Projects

Project Title	Project Location	Project Description
Bridging Gaps through Cycling	Aalen, South Germany	In this project, youth began an initiative at a bike workshop refurbishing, repairing, and selling bicycles at affordable prices. The project particularly targets individuals with a migration background. The project's focus on affordability creates opportunities for low-income individuals to access education, employment, social service centers, and other activities, fostering their integration into the community. This project aims to eliminate economic barriers, making sustainable transportation accessible to a diverse range of people.
Art Changes Lives	Florida, United States	In this project, a PeaceJammer who survived a school shooting co-founded a nonprofit organization to provide teens and young adults with skills to cope and overcome emotional challenges through music, art, and theater. Shine MSD has impacted the lives of many young people through the free workshops they host online and in-person on artistic expression. Youth who attend their workshops and classes learn a range of skills such as songwriting, singing, music production, video editing, photography, acting, dancing, improv, drawing, and many more.
Technology for Good	Gujarat, India	In this project, a 14-year-old produced the idea of a drone-based technology that accurately identifies buried plastic landmines and remotely destroys them. After seeing footage of soldiers being killed in their attempt to disarm landmines, he assembled a team of classmates and university students who successfully designed and built the technology, called EAGLE A7. This invention led to a Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Gujarat, and collaboration with the Indian Army and Indian Para Forces.

Program Objectives

PeaceJam's stated goals are to "create the next generation of Nobel Peace Laureates," by fostering youth-led solutions for today's global issues and by creating opportunities for youth-led action (PeaceJam, 2019). The *Ambassadors Curriculum* objectives build toward this wider goal by focusing on the development of core competencies in youth related to empathy and compassion, leadership development, and self-awareness. The six specific PeaceJam *Ambassadors* core competencies include personal power and purpose; diversity and inclusion; change agency; global citizenship and interconnection; peacebuilding; and compassionate leadership (PeaceJam, 2021). Youth are introduced to these

competencies through seven learning modules, each consisting of interactive lessons and activities. The curricular model is flexible and can be incorporated both into formal learning environments, as well as in non-formal education settings.

These curricular objectives align with the Transformative HRE model's goals of developing students' sense of empowerment and agency at individual, community, and school levels; helping students to think critically and reflect on oppression in their environment; and creating social change (Russell & Suarez, 2017). Tibbitts (2017) describes social change as a long-term process involving changes in beliefs and behaviors in both the private and the public domain. This empowerment occurs through leadership development, learning about topics relevant to the learner, cultivating agency in the learner, fostering personal transformation, and developing skill sets to organize advocacy and awareness events (Russell & Suarez, 2017; Tibbitts, 2017). The PeaceJam competencies address and build toward individual and collective social change in similar ways, as outlined in detail below. To bring life to what the competencies look like beyond the page, one PeaceJam alumna shares her experience:

PeaceJam has been the catalyst for my personal growth and transformation. It has taught me that the power to effect change lies within each of us, waiting to be discovered and unleashed. My involvement with PeaceJam has fueled my passion for advocacy, empowered me to be a global citizen, and equipped me with the tools to create tangible social change (Billion Acts, 2023).

This quote highlights just one example of the ways in which the curriculum works toward goals of empowerment and agency in its learners.

Underlying Strategies in Engaging Learners

Paulo Freire (1970) writes that authentic education is “not carried out by ‘A’ for ‘B’ or by ‘A’ about ‘B’ but rather by ‘A’ with ‘B’” (p. 160). This signifies the importance of working with young people to craft their educational journeys while helping them to develop the skill sets needed to authentically participate in that journey. PeaceJam's approach aligns with this vision through its primary strategy of building authentic youth participation in its programming. To authentically participate in society, youth need the space, confidence, and training to do so (Davies, 2009; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). PeaceJam accomplishes this not only by providing venues for youth to make changes at youth conferences and in their Billion Acts of Peace projects but also by helping them build the skill sets to make that change. The curriculum focuses on individual and group interactions, understanding the self and the self concerning others, and critically reflecting on society more broadly. A few example module themes include “communicating for change,” “exploring identity and culture,” “exploring power and privilege,” “exploring peace and violence,” and “inspiring change in your community” (PeaceJam, 2021). The structure of the activities within each chapter also builds authentic engagement in the curriculum itself. The modules include activities such as debates,

brainstorming, and critical reflection to focus conversations on the perspectives of youth (PeaceJam, 2021). The activities also use a variety of methods for participation, including written, physical, spoken, artistic, and other modes of engagement to be inclusive of all types of learners (PeaceJam, 2021.)

Each chapter includes stories from Nobel Laureates with lessons that they have learned in their journey toward participating in community change. In this sense, youth have access to avenues for making change but are also given the skills to make that change. This aligns with the THRE approach of allowing young people to recognize their role in creating change and to practice the process of doing so early and in a safe environment. Actively building this space “demonstrates a genuine attempt to honor the right of youth to participate in making decisions that affect their lives” (Apple & Beane, 2007, as cited in Hantzopoulos, 2011, p. 228). Youth learn that their voices are important in speaking to the policies and practices that impact them daily and develop belief in their ability and responsibility to make change.

Socio-Political Context

The PeaceJam headquarters are located in Arvada, Colorado, where the organization was founded; however, it currently has eight regional chapters across the United States, as well as chapters in thirteen other countries. These country chapters include Ghana, South Africa, Liberia, Belgium, India, Greece, Monaco, the United Kingdom, Colombia, Guatemala, Timor-Leste, the Czech Republic, and Uganda (PeaceJam, 2021). In addition to these locations, the organization partners with many foundations that the Nobel Laureate board members are connected with across the world. It has PeaceJam Clubs in 41 countries (PeaceJam, 2021). As such, PeaceJam operates in a wide variety of socio-political contexts. The organization also adapted to a virtual environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, extending its reach further (PeaceJam, 2019). Youth join the organization through classes, clubs, and informal initiatives. In some cases, the curriculum is formally integrated into coursework, in line with education standards. In other cases, youth complete portions of the curriculum while implementing the Billion Acts of Peace projects through extracurricular clubs or youth groups.

PeaceJam works with local staff members in each country chapter, which allows for local contextualization of the curriculum. However, the breadth of geographic implementation of the *Ambassadors Curriculum* potentially creates challenges of the set curriculum being less relevant or applicable in some local contexts, a challenge that many organizations face in adapting curriculum globally (Holland & Martin, 2017). The *Ambassadors Curriculum's* student-centered model does remove some element of concern, as youth develop projects related to their self-identified local topics; however, the potential that the curriculum is Western-centric and less relevant in some contexts is still important to consider.

Analysis of Operations and Efficacy

Several elements of the PeaceJam *Ambassadors Curriculum* approach align with key tenets of THRE. This section will explore the content, structure, and context of the curriculum to further highlight how it mirrors a THRE model, and where there is space to grow. Given the lack of empirical data on this program, the analysis relies heavily on secondary data sources and advisory conversations with program staff and alumni. Despite this limitation, consulting the curriculum, program data, program reports, and other secondary data sources provided sufficient information to conduct a focused analysis of the program's content, structure, and context.

Content

One strategy for educating *about, through, and for* human rights is to equip learners with the skills they need to actively participate in society. This includes developing the capacity to “describe, articulate, and convey one's needs; to seek and acquire services; and to manage conflicts and resolve disputes” (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009, p. 64). Another way of framing this is that THRE addresses the *knowledge, skills, and attitudes* that youth need to effectively engage in the world around them (Bajaj, 2017). In line with this thought, many educators emphasize that HRE must include goals related to individual and group identity exploration, cognition, emotional awareness, and action orientation (Tibbitts, 2002 as cited in Zembylas, 2011). Bar-Tal and Rosen (2009) further specifically identify conflict resolution and tolerance as skills that young people need to contribute toward human rights and peacebuilding. Per their descriptions, conflict resolution education seeks to promote an understanding of conflict and to assist students in developing abilities to negotiate, mediate, and collaboratively solve problems in conflict contexts (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009). Tolerance refers to the recognition and acceptance of the right of all individuals and groups to have opinions and to be open-minded in hearing perspectives that are not one's own (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009).

Training in the skills above is infused throughout the *Ambassadors Curriculum* through content that focuses on identity development, intentional listening, intentional speaking, recognition of privilege, and identification of several types of violence, among others. As one concrete example, the curriculum introduces the concept of civil discourse in the first module to help youth navigate how to engage with each other as a PeaceJam group. Civil discourse sets conversation rules that honor each person and their contributions to the conversation (American University, 2021). Activities across the seven modules help young people to further practice four types of discourse (brainstorming, discussion, controversy, and consensus) so that they can learn to share ideas, explore topics, voice disagreement, discuss differing perspectives, and make decisions respectfully and productively.

Bar-Tal and Rosen (2009) also highlight reflective thinking as a crucial element of THRE. Reflective thinking facilitates learning and enables a deeper understanding of the relationships and connections between ideas and/or experiences. The *Ambassadors*

Curriculum integrates critical discussion questions, journal reflection questions, and other critical reflection opportunities throughout each module. 75 percent of PeaceJam alumni survey respondents indicated that the program positively influenced the organizations and businesses they chose to work for. Many of those indicated that they were more inclined to seek out organizations and/or businesses focused on social justice and social change, as well as to consider ethical principles and social responsibility in their workplace choices (PeaceJam, 2023). This demonstrates an understanding of the connectedness between individuals, (in) action, and challenges/solutions.

A significant consideration when a curriculum contains content that may be sensitive, such as content related to identity and violence, is that it is important to effectively prepare facilitators to implement the curriculum in a way that allows youth to engage in these sensitive topics safely (Jones, 2006). Facilitators need to be able to help learners discover what they already know and to guide them through dialogue and critical thinking in acquiring innovative ideas (Holland & Martin, 2017). They need to make human rights relevant to the lives of the learners and help them engage deeply in topics that may be contentious. The challenge of preparing educators to teach about sensitive topics, particularly in conflict-affected contexts, has been emphasized by several HRE researchers (Jones, 2006; Zembylas, 2011). This is an area in which the *Ambassadors Curriculum* could grow. The curriculum does include a facilitator's guide that provides strategies for facilitators like rapid reflection techniques and tips for creating inclusive groups. Facilitators also need to complete training to gain access to and deliver the *Ambassadors Curriculum*. However, more training for the facilitators on engaging youth in challenging conversations is a space that PeaceJam could expand content-wise. Particularly since the organization operates in conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts, more training around conflict sensitivity and dialogue would be beneficial.

Structure

Concerning HRE, "it is not enough to present people with information and then leave them to act on their own. Education has to lead students through the steps to act upon their new knowledge" (Holland & Martin, 2017, p. 269). PeaceJam's interactive, action-oriented model fits into this approach of education leading to social change. The *Ambassador Curriculum* shapes each lesson around the implementation of a social action project based on issue areas that young people identify as relevant in their communities. The participants first learn about ten key global human rights issues that Nobel Peace Laureates address, outlined in Section II. Students then brainstorm and identify issues that are most prevalent in their local communities, with a community defined as family, school, neighborhood, city, or more broadly. Throughout the curriculum, while working with their group to create an action project to address that issue area, youth deeply examine the local issue that they chose. They also explore the root causes of that topic, and its interrelation to wider structural violence like power, privilege, and oppression. In identifying these root causes, youth learn to deeply examine challenges in society, explore the issues from multiple perspectives, and identify what a better outcome could

look like. They are also introduced to various change-making tactics by reading stories about the approaches that the Nobel Laureates took to make change in their communities. This includes strategies ranging from storytelling to active allyship and coalition building, to campaigning, among others.

The examples above align concretely with literature that emphasizes the importance of learning that helps young people understand how human rights are conceptualized and practiced on the ground (Coysh, 2014; Osler, 2016; Tibbitts, 2017). Empowerment methodologies focus on cultivating agencies in learners and increasing their capacities to influence their environment through topics of personal relevance to the learner (Tibbitts, 2017). These methods also expose participants to new topics or issues that may originally have been unknown but become important to the learner. Kepenecki's (2005) study of human rights education in Turkey, as an example, demonstrated the challenges of integrating human rights into the curriculum in that sometimes the language can be too legalistic, lofty, or advanced for learners to understand. The study emphasizes the importance of tailoring HRE to the learner and of making it applicable to the learner's environment. Hence, fostering opportunities for learners to concretely study and apply human rights principles to a social change-oriented curriculum is one way of making HRE relevant and understandable.

Through this approach, youth come to believe in themselves and their ability to make a difference. The PeaceJam 2023 annual report highlighted that 93 percent of youth who participated in PeaceJam believe that one person can make a difference, 97 percent said they will be peacemakers for the rest of their lives, and 94 percent said PeaceJam positively influenced their participation in the democratic process (PeaceJam, 2023).

Context

The *Ambassadors Curriculum* is currently facilitated across multiple different contexts, with PeaceJam chapters operating in 14 countries, and PeaceJam clubs in an additional 41 countries. This presents benefits and downfalls. On the one hand, the lessons and activities of the curriculum are flexible and can be adapted to formal, non-formal, or informal learning spaces. This allows schools and youth organizations to adapt the curriculum to their needs, policies, schedules, and social climate. The geographic reach also creates a global community of young changemakers, connecting them with ideas, perspectives, and innovations from around the world. However, although flexibility allows for adaptability across contexts, it is important to consider the wider potential implications of adapting a Western-developed curriculum to other settings, particularly in sensitive contexts like post-conflict areas.

Bar-Tal and Rosen (2009) emphasize that HRE cannot be detached from its surroundings. Political and societal conditions have an immense effect on education, determining what format would be effective. Bajaj (2017) further highlights how HRE takes different shapes and approaches in different contexts. For instance, some curricula may focus on global citizenship as an outcome; however, in other contexts, such as in conflict settings,

curricula may focus on coexistence and respect for difference. This differentiation is extremely important in ensuring that the curriculum meets the needs and acknowledges the challenges of different learning environments and cultural contexts. To connect this concept with PeaceJam, currently, the *Ambassadors Curriculum* is facilitated in Timor-Leste, Guatemala, South Africa, and Liberia, along with other post-conflict contexts. While THRE may be important in these settings for fostering positive peace, it is also pertinent to consider the dynamics of implementing them in such spaces. As an example, Russell and Suarez (2017) highlight the potential danger and challenges of implementing education focused on human rights and social change in schools in post-conflict settings. They share examples of educators in South Africa who were afraid to teach curricula that focused on social issues, as they feared that focusing on contentious topics would potentially lead to a backlash by authoritarian governments. When education becomes politicized, it can lead to negative consequences for educators and students and potentially put them at risk (Russell & Suarez, 2017).

One element of the *Ambassadors Curriculum* that may allow it to function more easily in post-conflict contexts is its heavier focus on indirect rather than direct peace education. Bar-Tal and Rosen (2009) distinguish between direct and indirect peace education, with indirect peace education focusing on general themes relevant to peacemaking, rather than directly referencing, or addressing specific elements of a particular conflict. In indirect education, the content emphasizes themes like empathy, human rights, and conflict resolution skills, and focuses on helping young people develop new skills, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and values that build peace (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009). In this way, the *Ambassadors Curriculum* may be beneficial even in conflict contexts.

Each PeaceJam chapter and club works with local staff to deliver the curriculum, which may also help contextualize it to the local environment. This aligns with Freire's (1970) emphasis on the relevance of engaging in authentic dialogue with communities in designing education and development approaches. However, it is important to consider whether the main *Ambassador's* curricular model is relevant in all contexts with just minor adaptation, or if a major structural shift in the delivery approach would be needed in some cases. For example, Mendenhall and Chopra (2016) underscore the challenge that some HRE programs face in adopting strategies that may be viewed as individualistic. These scholars note that whereas many peace education programs might begin with individualized concepts like personal identity or self-esteem, this notion may be considered invalid as it "belongs to those societies that are individualistic" (Sommers 2001, p. 181, as cited in Mendenhall & Chopra, 2016). The *Ambassador Curriculum's* focus on self-reflection, personal communication, and individual leadership styles, along with other individual development pieces may run the risk of not aligning with some cultural contexts.

Conclusion

The content and structure of the PeaceJam *Ambassadors Curriculum* fall within the model of Transformative Human Rights Education through its focus on individual empowerment, agency, and social change. The curriculum is designed to place youth at the center, authentically engaging them in both self-reflection and shaping the world around them. The content and structure are set up in a way that builds toward personal transformation in skills, attitudes, and behaviors, while also developing skill sets and avenues for making individual and collective change.

Due to the curriculum's format of having young people identify the local and global issues that matter most to them as the foundation of their social change projects, the model adds relevance for the learner. This also makes the curriculum more adaptable across different global contexts. Implementation of the curriculum across contexts by local chapters, educators, and adult facilitators, allows it to be contextualized appropriately. However, the adaptation of the curriculum across contexts is a space that PeaceJam can continue to develop. It would be beneficial for the organization to further consider what the curriculum might look like in contexts that define human rights differently, in sensitive or conflict-affected environments, and in cultural contexts that place more emphasis on collective versus individual development. PeaceJam can also build out additional training for facilitators operating in these environments, along with generally more training for facilitators across all contexts on how to engage youth in sensitive conversations.

The *Ambassadors Curriculum* engages young people in shaping the societies around them. It invites youth into conversations about important local and global issues. It then helps young people build values and tools to address these issues and provides avenues for them to make that change. The tenets articulated in this curricular analysis shed light on other HRE practitioners looking to ground their programming in a transformative approach.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

Note that while the author is familiar with the PeaceJam Foundation, she is not currently affiliated with the organization.

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