

## *The Hopes and Challenges of Introducing Human Rights Education (HRE) in Latin America Schooling*

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Efforts to introduce HRE in Latin American schools in the last two decades have resulted in significant progress, though there still are considerable shortcomings and gaps to overcome.

### **The Progress**

1. Overall, there has been a gradual -and today extended- inclusion of HRE as an explicit goal in national education laws (*Constitutions, Federal Education Laws, and national plans and guidelines by Ministries of Education*)

This is a solid stand for HRE work at schools because it expresses the States' political will and commitment to undertake it. States can now be demanded to do so, and held accountable if they don't.

2. There is an increasing (though not extended yet) inclusion of HRE as an explicit goal in laws concerning some professions who are trained at specialized schools or academies (e.g. military, police and judiciary personnel)

These legal provisions, in some countries were ordered by rulings of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in cases of human rights violations; in others, come from local initiatives. Such norms open a promising avenue to respond to social grievances, and prevent new violations since they target the main perpetrators of past ones.

3. In elementary and high school study programs there is an increasing incorporation of topics concerning human rights and democracy, their principles and values.

Curricula have been frequently reviewed during the past decades, and each update increased the contents associated to human rights and democracy.

4. Particularly prevalent and strong are now study contents on human diversity (ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural), its value for society, and rejection of all forms of discrimination.

Since most Latin American education systems are centralized, study programs are applied nationwide and the curricular advances mentioned reach all students across the country.

### **Shortcomings and gaps**

5. However, the widespread references to human rights and democracy might be more nominal or symbolic than substantial, since study programs show several shortcomings:

- Lack **comprehensive conceptualizations of the notions of HR, democracy and the state of law** (e.g. definitions, underlying principles, features, interpretations, polemic issues, etc.),
- Lack **historical background information and analysis** (e.g. how the notions of human rights and democracy were constructed by mankind and evolved over time, historical landmarks, crucial events in the struggle to advance human rights, etc.)<sup>1</sup>,
- Do not mention (or do it scarcely) **relevant individuals who stood up for human rights and democracy, in history and today** (e.g. fighters, thinkers, advocates)
- Neglect to address (or do it minimally) **cases of massive human rights violations in the recent history** of the world, Latin America and the country.

These worrying signals indicate there is still much to be done. Human rights should not be addressed at schools “anyhow”. HRE has to be properly introduced and well taught (with sense, sensibility and disciplinary depth) in order to create significant learning experiences for youngsters.

HRE has to address the learners’ cognition, emotions and behaviours. It has to move minds, hearts and hands. How HRE is taught and learned is key.

6. Study programs still support the traditional notion of “citizenship” associated with nationality and membership in a closed, territorially bound community with a homogeneous culture. There is little presence of a broader, more plural understanding of citizenship that, while respecting its national or civic dimension, extends farther: the notion of “global citizenship”.<sup>2</sup>

A “global citizenship” approach can be a good way to overcome sequels of past politic-ideological conflicts. Unfortunately, our school systems are slow in walking this road...

7. Teachers’ training is the weakest link of the educational chain in this respect. Initial training programs (**in charge of universities**) do not yet pay much attention to the pedagogy of HR/democracy education; in-service programs (**in charge of Ministries of Education**) include only occasional, brief and limited activities on the topic.

This is the most serious gap, since neither legal or curricular provisions nor textbooks, important as they are, can substitute the formative influence of knowledgeable and sensitive teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> The only exception tends to be the history and culture of indigenous and Afro-descendant populations in each country.

<sup>2</sup> Global citizenship crosses national and cultural barriers to foster a systemic view of the planet and its development. It values all forms of human and natural diversity, defending the environmental balance and seeking the inclusion of all individuals in society on a footing of equal rights. It promotes dialogue and negotiation for resolving conflicts as an alternative to the use of force, whether between nations, social groups or individuals.

## Some lessons learned

What did we learn from experience that might help advance HRE public policies and methodologies?

1. HRE is context-sensitive. Any HRE program has to take into account the past and present experiences of the local community with conflict and human rights violations. That reality should define the priorities and pedagogical approach for such a program.
2. But although situated, HRE cannot remain a response to purely local historical and social concerns. It has to look beyond the actual context, and ahead of the actual time in order to incorporate HR issues that are global and lasting, as well as concerns about subjects that do not yet exist (future generations). It has to achieve a comprehensive and balanced vision: both local *and* global; individual *and* social; group or culture specific *and* universal.
3. HRE does not work at classroom level only. Works (or not) at school level, which demands paying attention to the institutional environment, personal interactions, decision-making processes, all actors' participation, enforcement of discipline, etc.
4. The three components model embraced by the international literature (work on *knowledge, values and attitudes*, and *skills or capacities*) is wide-ranging and powerful. Only the balanced conjunction of the three does stand a chance of changing selfish and violent social practices.
5. Regarding curricular incorporation (the debate of discipline-specific versus transversal incorporation), a mixed model is more effective because it avoids the limitations of each singular model. HRE would benefit from having specific space in the curricula (whether as a course or part of a existing course, such as Civic Education) **plus** incorporation as a crosscutting and whole-school perspective.
6. HRE is successful only when subjects learn to monitor their behaviours with human rights parameters, and to change any behaviour colliding with, or insensitive to human rights standards. The bottom line is that human rights are principles to regulate daily human interactions.
7. Teaching human rights values must include preparing to face conflicts among values, and to negotiate them. Only when opposing values and positions are recognized as legitimate, can people be inclined to discuss them, and to reject fundamentalisms.
8. Much needed is to develop communicative and intercultural communication competences among all members of the educational community.

Do you think that our “lessons learned” might be applicable to other world regions to help build a culture of human rights and peace? Let’s talk about it...