We Hold These Truths
To Be Self-Evident . . .
Human Rights as an Educational Problem

The education of American citizens requires substantive consideration of human rights issues—however politically sensitive they may be.

Given their role in American society, public schools cannot be isolated from the U.S. political tradition of belief in the existence of human rights, nor can they avoid confronting both the substantive and methodological questions that the U.S. commitment to human rights raises.

Historically, the provision of schooling in the United States has been supported by the argument that the preservation of republican democracy required an informed and educated electorate committed to the political principles upon which the country was founded. From the earliest days of post-Revolutionary America, schools were held by many to be the social mechanism responsible for balancing the sometimes conflicting demands of order and freedom in society. At times common school advocates stressed the order side of the argument, as de Lave (1979) quotes Horace Mann:

Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery . . . It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich, it prevents being poor (p. 42).

Kaestle (1983) explains that Thomas Jefferson:

in the preamble of his 1779 bill for free schools in Virginia . . . laid out the basic logic of state sponsored schools for republican citizenship. Citizens must choose leaders wisely, defeat ambition and corruption in politics, and protect liberty by keeping a vigilant eye on government. All citizens should have a chance not only to vote but to be elected. The government needs wise and honest laws, Jefferson argued, and thus it needs educated and virtuous lawmakers (p. 6).

In their enthusiasm, post-Revolutionary republican theorists sometimes made both arguments at the same time, as Benjamin Rush did when he claimed that it was the responsibility of the schools to produce students who would be "republican machines."

Although the specifics may be hotly disputed, there still seems to be a social consensus that republican political philosophy and consideration of the issues that define the meaning of that philosophy in a given historical period are central to the purpose of American public education.

Human rights concerns are part and parcel of the political tradition of the United States. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed the right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to be inalienable and self-evident—rights bestowed as an aspect of one's humanity, which could be neither sold, bought, nor taken away by the state. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries nonproperty owners, people of all races, and women in the United States have fought for and won the right to be considered politically human and therefore as possessing the same human rights as white male property owners.

In the last decade human rights has reemerged as a highly visible issue in the U.S. political debate, especially with regard to the conduct of foreign affairs. The current controversy surrounding the nature and meaning of the United States' commitment to human rights abroad as well as at home has compelled consideration of what this fundamental principle means to the United States today. The question facing educators is how schools are to fulfill their role in this process.
Four Approaches to Teaching Human Rights

Experiential approach. This orientation is based on the tried and true educational maxim that children learn what they do. Given this orientation, educators would make every effort to build human rights into the school program and help children consider human rights in their everyday comings and goings at school. The assumption underlying this approach is that children who have experienced human rights in their upbringing and in their daily activities at school will be more likely to appreciate and defend human rights in a variety of different settings.

Special topic approach. A special topic orientation would rely on the development of human rights units and lessons that focus on activities appropriate to the age of the child. For example, at the elementary level behavior on the playground or in the hallways of the school might be used to illustrate human rights issues. At the high school level, a human rights unit might fit in a modern problems social studies class or in a class on international affairs.

Subject matter approach. This approach assumes that subject matter that has been carefully selected for its significance contains within it those essential themes of human social existence (including human rights) that are important to the child. The emphasis here is on teaching the subjects in the curriculum in such a way that students will have a basis for understanding human rights concerns and will be capable of making informed judgments about human rights issues.

Modified subject matter approach. This approach shares the assumption of the previous approach that the subject matter of the school has been thoughtfully selected to present those ideas and knowledge that are the best our culture has to offer. In this approach, teachers would receive preservice or inservice training in topics such as human rights so that as human rights issues appear in the standard curriculum (in literature or in social studies, for example), the teachers will be sensitive to those issues and underscore them for their students.

Rights and Loyalties

Although human rights are a fundamental part of our political heritage, the topic of human rights in the context of schools has the potential to be extremely controversial. For example, how many school curriculums devote serious attention to the legal rights of students? How many schools help students learn to analyze and determine for themselves the meaning of apparent contradictions in American foreign policy. For instance, the current administration proposes a policy of "constructive engagement" with the government of South Africa. It argues that this policy helps maintain U.S. influence in South Africa for the benefit of the majority of people in South Africa, that is, South Africans who are oppressed by the white minority. At the same time, the United States government arms and supports counterrevolutionary guerrillas fighting against the government of Nicaragua. In both instances, the United States contends that it is supporting human rights. Issues such as these suggest that a serious examination of human rights issues requires that students (at least those of high school age) be able to understand the difference between loyalty to the policies of a particular American administration and loyalty to the United States' form of government.

It is, at least in part, because of the complexity and contentiousness of human rights issues that schools tend to shy away from any substantive consideration of them, preferring instead to describe the formal aspects of legally granted human rights in the United States in a factual and abstract manner. Whether this stance will be sustainable in light of the renewed interest in citizenship education is not yet clear.

References


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