

Educating About and For International Human Rights

To counteract the continuing rape of human rights around the globe, educators must engender in students concern for those rights and the courage to act in their defense.

Human rights. What this term means to you, your colleagues, and your students is crucial. Does it mean freedom of expression and opinion, or something more? Is "human rights" an area of concern or largely an abstraction?

Before students can appreciate all that this term stands for, they must be aware of what human rights are and are not, why human rights is an issue, and what has been done on a worldwide scale to devalue those rights as well as protect them.

Human Rights Defended

During the past 38 years the United Nations has established what has become known as the International Bill of Rights. It is composed of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (unanimously adopted by the General



Photograph © by Mike Yohour

Edwin Lopez was arrested by military intelligence agents at the offices of the Community Integrated Development Services on 26 February 1982 in Quezon City, Philippines. He was tortured repeatedly with electric shock over a five-day period, according to Amnesty International.

It is one thing to have heard and
read something,
that is, merely to take notice;
it is another thing to understand
what we have
heard and read, that is, to ponder.
—Martin Heidegger

Assembly in 1948); the Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; and the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (both of which were adopted by the General Assembly in 1966 and fully implemented in 1976). The Covenants turn the principles of the Univer-

sal Declaration of Human Rights "into treaty obligations and . . . establish international machinery to supervise and enforce their application" (Torney 1980). The upshot is that the International Bill of Rights delineates the obligations of member states of the UN in protecting international human rights. These and other documents, such as the United Nations Convention Against Genocide, were a direct result of the world's reaction to the atrocities committed by the Nazis during World War II.

The Universal Declaration delineates, in 30 articles, the rights to which all persons should be entitled by virtue of their humanity. They include the rights to life, liberty, justice, education, asylum, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, and freedom of peaceful assembly. Slavery, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, exile, and the deprivation of one's nationality and property are outlawed. Other articles address economic and social rights such as adequate medical care, food, clothing, and housing.

Human rights are those rights which belong to every man, woman, and child simply because each of them is a person, a human being. They are rights which exist prior to and independent of governments. Human rights, therefore, are rights which are inalienable.

Another way to explain what human rights *are* is to explain what they are *not*. Human rights are not a very recent discovery, a passing concern, an ephemeral issue. Human rights are not something about which only people in the Western World care. . . . Human rights are claims asserted and recognized 'as of right,' not claims upon love, or grace, or brotherhood or charity; one does not have to earn or deserve them. They are not merely aspirations or moral assertions, but increasingly, legal claims under some applicable law.

. . . Human rights, in sum, are more than abstractions, more than theoretical legal or philosophical concepts. Human rights are the birthright of every person, because each man, woman, and child has inherent dignity and each is a member of the human family (Branson, 1982, pp. 7-8).

If it were as easy to protect human rights as it is to assert what they are, then all might be right with the world. Unfortunately, that is not the case in a world rife with conflict among political, racial, and religious groups. As Isebill Gruhn trenchantly observed, "When it comes to human rights. . . the West and the third world seem to be peering through the same telescope, but from different ends" (1980, p. 40).

"The Universal Declaration delineates the rights to which all human beings should be entitled. . . life, liberty, justice, education, asylum, and freedom of movement, expression, and peaceful assembly."

The fact is, while the Western world stresses civil and political rights, communist nations stress social and economic rights, and Third World nations—where abject living conditions are endemic—generally stress the right to basic needs.

Most Western nations that adhere to the tradition set forth by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke place major emphasis on the *natural rights of individuals*. In contrast, most communist and Third World nations that adhere to the tradition set forth by Jean Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx, place major emphasis on *social transformation*. Of course, in the real world such ideas are not so neatly demarcated, and injustices of almost all types take place frequently in almost all parts of the world.

Over the past two and a half decades many independent groups have been organized to conduct research, publicize human rights violations, educate the public and government officials about human rights issues, work in the behalf of those deprived of their rights, and lobby individual governments and international bodies to strengthen human rights legislation or measures. These groups have been instrumental in prodding governments (and their citizens) into becoming more concerned either about their own human rights records or those of their allies and antagonists. Just the names of some of these organizations give one an idea of their diverse interests and concerns: Amnesty International, Bread for the World, Campaign Against Investment in South Africa, Cultural Survival, Helsinki Watch, Indian Law Resource Center, the Institute of the International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide, Minority Rights Group, Survival International, Washington Office on Africa, and Washington Office on Latin America.

Brutality Continues

The fact remains that from the time the UN adopted the Declaration of Human Rights up to the present, the deprivation of human rights has been rampant and brutal. Since the liberation of the surviving Jews from the Nazi death camps, there have been numerous cases of genocide: the Ache Indians in

Amnesty International

Kiril Spasov turned 21 in a Bulgarian prison. Police had arrested him soon after he graduated from high school, and a military court sentenced him in September 1983 to three years' imprisonment for planning to leave the country without permission from authorities. Spasov lived with his family in the capital city of Sofia at the time of his arrest. Charges against him included possession of foreign radio broadcast tapes and leaflets containing "anti-state propaganda." Kiril Spasov is considered a *prisoner of conscience* by Amnesty International.

Now in its 25th year, Amnesty International was organized to bring such forgotten prisoners out of the dungeons of the world. And there are many. In 1985 the organization reported human rights violations in 123 countries and incidents of torture and ill treatment in over 90 countries.

Amnesty International plays a specific role in protecting human rights. Members in its worldwide network agree that no one should be imprisoned, tortured, or executed for their beliefs. They belong to local, community-based and campus groups of 20 to 25 individuals and participate in networks of health and legal professionals, among others. Their activities include raising money and collecting clothing for prisoners and their families, writing letters in behalf of prisoners, appealing in person for protection of human rights, and lobbying for human rights legislation. Amnesty International also sponsors special projects such as the Campaign to Abolish Torture and the Torture Victim's Protection Act and has worked for the ratification of the United Nations' Genocide Convention.

With an estimated 25,000 prisoners of conscience being held around the world, Amnesty International groups may "adopt" prisoners for whom they specifically write letters of appeal. Last year 150 prisoners who had been adopted by U.S. groups were released.

The organization places top priority on urgent cases. For example, when Amnesty International receives information about alleged human rights violations in a particular country, researchers in London contact sources within the country to confirm their information. They then send to their worldwide networks requests for action, specifying names of victims, brief case histories, and names and addresses of people who can exert influence to end the abuse. Strategies for urgent actions range from a few telephone calls placed through diplomatic channels to thousands of letters sent from network members.

Since torture usually occurs during the initial phase of detention when authorities in many countries hold prisoners incommunicado, urgent actions can be especially effective in stopping or preventing prison personnel from torturing the people in their charge. Each individual in the Urgent Action Network helps to dismantle institutionalized torture by refusing to remain silent as governments in a third of the world's countries condone or permit torture. The Urgent Action Network strengthens all aspects of Amnesty International's work by letting governments know that a widespread constituency stands ready to act against human rights abuses. In all cases, the organization works through established, legal channels.

In the United States, hundreds of teachers and students are participating in the Urgent Action Network and other campaigns or actions in behalf of individual prisoners. Amnesty International encourages students to practice compassion and respect for freedom of expression. It defines human rights education as any formal education that attempts to develop in students an attitude toward and knowledge of human rights as summed up in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Covenants.

Human rights education may be particularly effective in countries where children do not have direct experience with human rights violations. Students need to reflect on what constitutes freedom and fairness, why international covenants and codes of ethics are necessary, and how universal rights differ from social or cultural conventions. Such consideration can help students value their own freedoms and enable them to empathize with their peers in other countries where there is no guarantee of human rights protection.

6 May 1983: Amnesty International has received reports that a 16-year-old schoolgirl named Norma Quispe was arrested without warrant at her parents' home in Ayacucho. She was detained by a group of about 30 plainclothes armed members of the Ayacucho police who forced their way into the house at about 1:00 a.m. Norma's family witnessed her arrest. According to reports, Norma was stripped naked, immersed in a tub of cold water, and severely beaten. . . . She has been formally charged with terrorism. Among the evidence produced against her by the police is possession of a record containing "subversive songs"; according to her family, this is a record of traditional Ayacucho folk songs. □

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Paraguay, the Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge, the Guatemalan Indians, and the Cuiva Indians of Columbia. Apartheid continues to virtually imprison black people in South Africa from the day they are born to the day

they die. Slow but inexorable starvation still plagues peoples across the globe. The Soviet Union continues to incarcerate dissidents in psychiatric hospitals where they are plied with body- and mind-wrenching drugs. Am-

Photograph by Gamma Liaison Agency



The victims of torture include people from all social classes, age groups, trades, and professions. Amnesty International received reports that these women prisoners in Evin Prison, Iran, were tortured in the presence of their young children.

nesty International, which was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1977, has reported that torture "is not an isolated but a worldwide phenomenon. It is an epidemic in the world" (1984, p. 2). It is estimated that 98 countries practice some type of torture. The list could go on and on.

Jack L. Nelson succinctly evaluates humanity's evolution toward civilization vis-à-vis its concern for human rights:

Certainly, one cannot argue that the development of human rights throughout the world has followed a consistently expansive pattern. For each example of rights, one can produce an example of human wrongs. . . . The major difference is that in earlier time periods such actions were perceived as natural and universal (1980, p. 398).

In a similar vein, Israel Charny, executive director of the Institute of the International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide, sees hope in evolutionary development:

Can anything be done to prevent genocide? . . . unfortunately, the real answer in our day and age is still not very much can be done. Nonetheless, for those who have [an] optimistic evolutionary view of the long haul of human history, there is hope based on the fact that a definite process of change is taking place in the history of

ideas, especially since the Holocaust. For the first time, increasing numbers of scholars are looking at possible active steps to punish genocide-doers, people and governments, and to prevent genocides as they gather momentum. Even the weak United Nations Convention on Genocide sounds a clarion call to civilized people against the mass murders that were once taken entirely for granted. . . . (1985, p. 451).

"The fact remains that from the time the UN adopted the Declaration of Human Rights up to the present, the deprivation of human rights has been rampant and brutal."

Thus, in the midst of despair over the continuing brutalization of people across the globe, glimmers of hope are shining through, but it is still too early for humanity to be self-congratulatory.

The Role of Educators

Now that the machinery of human rights is in place, we need an educated and caring citizenry to insist on and assist in the promulgation of mandates, charters, and conventions. And this is exactly where educators can play a key role. Either we can take our own rights for granted and ignore the plight of those who are being deprived of theirs, or we can educate our students to act as concerned citizens. As to the profound significance of this endeavor, philosopher Karl Jaspers stated:

There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty (Beres 1982, p. 44).

To help students understand human rights issues, teachers in all curricular areas can use at least three primary elements: knowledge, values, and so-

cial participation (Hahn 1985). On a basic level, students should gain *knowledge* about (1) both their own and other national constitutions that spell out citizens' rights and about international human rights documents; (2) key concepts such as rights, justice, dignity, and interdependence; (3) the goals, accomplishments, and work of quasigovernmental and nongovernmental organizations that address the issue of human rights; and (4) the role that their nation plays in protecting or abusing the basic human rights of citizens and citizens of other nations. As Carole Hahn has pointed out:

Social sciences and the humanities can also contribute to students' knowledge of human rights. Anthropology and sociology can teach how individuals learn the meaning of justice in their cultural contexts and how different societies deal with injustice. Both economics and geography can contribute to an understanding of economic development in the Third World and the achievement of economic and social rights. Political science and law can teach about issues of national sovereignty and international law. History and philosophy can present the historic and philosophic roots of human rights. . . . Literature, too, can contribute to human rights knowledge with its expression of concern from people in all countries and times who dream of realizing human rights (1985, p. 482).

To help students understand human rights issues, teachers can encourage them to examine their own *values*, their nation's, and those of others. Two ways to incorporate this element into study are to invite guest speakers who have suffered from the deprivation of human rights or are engaged in human rights work to talk to and with students and to have students conduct oral histories of those individuals. These activities provide students with opportunities to interact with courageous and often dynamic individuals and to discuss their stories. These educative experiences often become unforgettable events, helping students empathize with survivors and activists. Such people are readily available for speaking engagements and can be contacted through local human and civil rights agencies. The use of thought-provoking discussions and debates on human rights issues also helps students confront their ideas,

feelings, beliefs, and ultimately, their values.

Social participation engages students in coming to grips with what the human rights issue is all about. As the National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Guidelines (1979) state:

Knowledge without action is impotent. . . . A commitment to democratic participation suggests that the school abandon futile efforts to insulate pupils from social reality, and instead, find ways to involve them as active citizens.

Social participation activities are limited only by the amount of energy, time, and imagination that students and teachers wish to invest, and, of course, should be voluntary. One of the most worthwhile activities is for high school and college students to join in the efforts of a human rights organization. Amnesty International has campus chapters in which students work, with their instructors, in behalf of prisoners of conscience.¹ It is important that the students become knowledgeable about the various issues inherent in the area in which they are working. Otherwise the activity becomes perfunctory in nature.

Human rights education can. . . be doctrinaire, nationalistic and static, or it can be critical, global and dynamic. . . . The goal and purpose should be to further the development of human rights world-wide, not to further nationalistic or imperialistic education (Nelson 1980, p. 400).

Overall, the most worthwhile study about human rights, it seems, will strive to engender what psychologist Rollo May calls "perceptual courage":

It is highly significant, indeed almost a rule, that moral courage has its source of identification through one's own sensitivity with the suffering of one's fellow human beings. I am tempted to call this "perceptual courage" because it depends on one's capacity to perceive, to let one's self see the suffering of other people. If we let ourselves experience the evil, we will be forced to do something about it. It is a truth, recognizable in all of us, that when we don't want to confront even the *issue* of whether or not we'll come to the aid of someone who is being unjustly treated, we block off our perception, we blind ourselves to the other's suffering, we cut off our empathy with the person needing help. Hence, the most prevalent form of cowardice in our day hides behind the statement, "I did not want to become involved" (1975, p. 16-17).

A well-developed, objective, and in-depth study of international human rights is a step in the direction of worthwhile education. Yet many teachers hesitate to take a step that may jeopardize their position with the administration, the school board, or the community. Only those whose leadership is strengthened by their own "perceptual courage" can support teachers and students in an education that extends both their knowledge *and* their humanity. □

1. See William S. Mayher, "Beyond Themselves: Students Work for Human Rights," *Social Education* (September 1985).

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