

8. A human rights–based approach to schooling²³

Human rights education, which has primarily focused on teaching and learning, can also be seen as part of an overall HRBA to schooling. An HRBA draws our attention to overall school culture, policies and practices through the lens of human rights values.

There are two articles in the CRC that mention education directly. Article 28 defines education as a right and Article 29 comments that education should assist the child in developing her or his “personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential”. Another purpose of schools, according to the CRC, is to develop respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. We know one thing: to truly understand and promote human rights, one has to live them out in relation to others.

The core values of “dignity, respect and responsibility” should be the driving force behind the school. This means not only exposing students to human rights values and content in the classroom. The human rights framework is intended to create a child-centred school where these values inform how students learn, how they are treated by their teachers, how they treat one another, and how they will take their rightful place in the world, with a special sense of mission for promoting social justice – a tall order, no doubt, but one that has placed human rights front and centre in the school.

Teachers can bring human rights alive in their classrooms through examples they use, questions they raise, through active discussion, critical thinking and reflection, project-based work and enriching field trips. Teachers are challenged not only in learning about human rights content itself but in figuring out how to present human rights in a way that is meaningful and empowering for their students. One of the key challenges is not only helping to make human rights less abstract but also having students fall in love with the idea of human rights.

The human rights-based approach to schooling that the school aspires to includes the following characteristics, which you might identify as being core to school-based approaches to human rights in general. These are taken from a framework developed by UNICEF.²⁴ It:

- **Recognises the rights of every child.**
- **Sees the whole child in a broad context.** The staff are concerned about what happens to children before they enter the school system (in terms of health, for example) and once they are back home.
- **Is child-centred,** meaning that there is an emphasis on the psycho-social well-being of the child.
- **Is gender-sensitive and girl-friendly.** Staff are focused on reducing constraints to gender equity, eliminating gender stereotypes and promoting achievement of both girls and boys.
- **Promotes quality learning outcomes.** Students are encouraged to think critically, ask questions, express their opinions, and master basic skills.
- **Provides education based on the reality of children’s lives.** The students have unique identities and prior experiences in the school system, their community and families, which can be taken into account by teachers in order to promote student learning and development.
- **Acts to ensure inclusion,** respect and equality of opportunity for all children. Stereotyping, exclusion and discrimination are not tolerated.
- **Promotes student rights and responsibilities** within the school environment as well as activism within their community at large.
- **Enhances teacher capacity, morale, commitment and status** by ensuring that the teachers have sufficient training, recognition and compensation.

23. Author: Felisa Tibbitts (2009). Original source: Tibbitts F. (2005), “What it means to have a ‘school-based approach to human rights education’ and a ‘human rights-based approach to schooling’” in Amnesty International USA, *Article 26 Newsletter*, August.

24. *Child Friendly Schools Manual*, Programme Division/Education, UNICEF, www.unicef.org/publications/files/Child_Friendly_Schools_Manual_EN_040809.pdf. Accessed on 23 September 2010.

- Is **family focused**. The staff attempt to work with and strengthen families, helping children, parents and teachers to establish collaborative partnerships.

These are abstractions, but they are an organising framework that the educator can apply to her or his own school. These principles can also be questions that we can use in evaluating a particular practice in the school. Is our discipline policy child-centred? Does it enhance student rights and responsibilities? Are there sufficient opportunities for student participation in the school? Is this participation meaningful and student-led? These principles can also lead to a whole school engagement of the infusion of human rights values in various dimensions of school life: learning, school development and management, and school and community policies.

Maybe we can agree that human rights in schools is not merely about education in the classroom, but a way of life in the school. This is not something created out of the goodwill of a few teachers. It is a commitment from leadership and a critical mass of teachers in the schools and, thus, is rather rare so far. Some initial results are promising, however.

The “Rights, Respect, Responsibility” (RRR) initiative of Hampshire County Council in the United Kingdom is a whole-school approach based upon the CRC.²⁵ Its universal principles emphasise the need to protect the rights of all children, to help children understand their responsibilities and to offer a framework for teaching and learning. These principles are used to promote the practice of democratic citizenship and respect for human rights among all members of the school community. Hundreds of primary schools, as well as 50 secondary and special education schools, are actively participating in the RRR programme. Its key features are as follows:

- The CRC is taught as a body of knowledge and promoted as a framework for school ethos, teaching and learning.
- Children and young people are treated as citizens.
- Children’s identities and self-esteem are promoted so that they see themselves as bearers of rights, just as adults do.
- A human rights perspective is built into a range of subjects, including literacy, maths, science and history, and rights-based language is developed through the regular work of teachers.
- More democratic approaches to teaching and learning (emphasising participation and rights) are created.
- Class charters on rights and responsibilities are signed by both students and teachers.

Schools report that RRR acts as a framework for much of their citizenship work (for example, healthy schools, relationship education, drug education, emotional literacy, school councils), which can be related to articles in the CRC. School community members appreciate that they can point to a higher authority (international human rights standards) in relation to their school values and codes of conduct.

A three-year external evaluation was completed in 2008 and demonstrated a significant impact on the school environment where RRR has been fully implemented. These impacts include positive results on students’ awareness of their rights, respect for the rights of others, and levels of participation and engagement in school. Teachers reported feeling less stressed and an enhanced enjoyment of their classes. Thus, the human rights-based approach enhanced both the human dignity of community members and the ability of schools to meet their academic mission to successfully engage learners in their education.

25. Hampshire County Council (2009), “Rights, Respect, Responsibility: A Whole School Approach” in *Human Rights Education in the School Systems of Europe, Central Asia and North America: A Compendium of Good Practice*, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Warsaw, pp. 72–74.