

HUMAN RIGHTS IN SCHOOLS

Teacher **Kim Hurd** says human rights education teaches tolerance and respect and combats discrimination

I am a teacher with 15 years' experience, working in schools in Reading, Leicester, and London. Almost a decade ago, I joined Amnesty International's Teacher Advisory Group to support their Human Rights Education (HRE) team to develop new resources and courses. I have also made several lesson resources for the organisation on women's rights and gender equality.

The teachers' standards set out the minimum level of practice for teachers and trainee teachers to achieve to get qualified teacher status.¹ Within this document teachers must treat pupils with dignity and promote mutual respect. We must safeguard pupils' well-being, show tolerance of and respect for the rights of others and not undermine fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law and individual liberty. HRE would, in my view, be the most effective way to meet these obligations.

HRE focuses on promoting equality in human dignity, empowering people to know, claim and defend their rights. It promotes participation in decision-making and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. In 1993 the World Conference on Human Rights² declared HRE as 'essential for the promotion and achievement of stable and harmonious relations among communities and for fostering mutual understanding, tolerance and peace'. HRE encourages empathy, inclusion, and non-discrimination; principles which are crucial for building and advancing societies. It is also a human right to learn about human rights with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training stating that 'everyone has the right to know, seek and receive information about all human rights and fundamental freedoms and should have access to human rights education and training'.

Yet often I find that students have a very limited understanding of human rights as it is largely missing from the curriculum and so is not taught consistently in schools. This is a global issue. Nancy Flowers of the Human Rights Educators Network USA recognises that although human rights are frequently mentioned, 'human rights literacy' is not widespread, with most people receiving no human rights education at all. As a result, knowledge of human rights is usually through personal experience, social media, or independent research which doesn't always lead to positive outcomes. A long-term strategy is required to tackle this.

Within my school I have experienced HRE being effective in promoting tolerance. Recently, lessons were being disrupted by teenage boys supporting Andrew Tate and his misogynistic views regarding women. Through targeted PSE lessons and classroom conversations the boys began to question their beliefs – realising they were advocating for depriving people of rights that all humans should have. This shows the power of

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards>

2 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/introducing-human-rights-education>

HRE to empower students to reframe arguments and form new opinions based on human rights values and principles. By encouraging education from early years and engaging young people on topics such as human rights, we lower the risk of them falling into simplistic often problematic views as explanations for societal issues. These views can sometimes express themselves as authoritarian, racist or misogynistic. The lawyer Muhammed Saqlain Arshad argues young people need to understand equality and know their rights, to understand both how they should be treated, and how they should treat others. Teaching these topics creates a safe place for students to explore, discuss, challenge, and form their own opinions and values which are skills that they need to be informed global citizens.

HRE must be taught from an early age, as this is when attitudes, values, and beliefs are shaped. In many ways HRE always has been taught since then; telling children not to be mean and that 'sharing is caring'. We devise schemes learning to celebrate diversity, learning about different cultures in the humanities, and reading books about a wide variety of people. Despite this, teachers are often unaware what HRE is. We need to formalise HRE delivery and reclaim the term 'Human Rights' to mean what it should – treating others in a fair and just way.

Within my school, children and young people are passionate about human rights, and will frequently want to discuss conscription, Gaza, abortion, or Black Lives Matter in lessons. They want to make the world better and will often use their voice to challenge perceived injustice. They want to digest and unpick the nuance around human rights, yet currently the curriculum has limited opportunity for this. Human rights education provides a framework within which students can analyse complex debates and make sense of the wider world. HRE simultaneously engages students, promotes higher order thinking skills, and delivers wider skills for life.

In my school each year we run a 'What matters to you' survey and students consistently express concerns about food bank usage, homelessness, and war. I have seen young people litter pick plastic from their local environment, collect medicines to send to Ukraine and provide essentials to the local homeless populations. Students will also challenge sanctions they feel are unfair, with new rules which are perceived as unjust resulting in threats of strikes, protests, and petitions. As you can see, the passion to put things right is clear but students need guidance on how to do this constructively. As teachers we can support them by giving them the skills to take action for human rights and understand how to affect change. This will reap benefits in later life promoting positive engagement with society, reducing apathy and disillusionment, and creating citizens who can be change-makers.

While HRE can benefit students, unfortunately policy regarding HRE is often vague, resulting in uncertainty in how to deliver it amongst teachers. When even the term 'human rights' can feel politically charged, teachers often respond by just shutting down conversations. Guidance is required. Recently, I called a student out for making a homophobic comment, he was adamant it was his religious right to say this. I felt lucky to teach in a supportive school, where several staff took time to explain to the student why this was inappropriate. But even in a supportive school I was concerned – where does my right to tackle homophobia end and his right to religious freedom start? Subjects like this are delicate and teachers need training, through both Initial Teacher Training and In-service training, to gain the confidence needed to discuss human rights in their classrooms when issues arise.

I have seen first-hand that many schools foster human rights cultures, with staff modelling rights respecting behaviours, behaviour policies prioritising praise and students being listened to through student voice. But often human rights are not explicitly named, and students don't know their rights and how to claim them. Schools which are not rights respecting, which seem unfair, fall apart quickly. Even the strictest of headteachers agree that respect, consistency and fairness are key to any behaviour policy and yet often we do not explicitly talk about human rights principles or teach HRE. This is a missed opportunity to support students to gain the skills to live in a diverse society. Being a school with HRE at its core also improves teacher recruitment and retention – as respected teachers feel empowered and happier in their roles and are more likely to stay.

Ofsted recently reported our school was an inclusive school, where pupils knew they were deeply cared for within a vibrant community, where pupils listen to one another respectfully. What is that if not teaching 'for' human rights? Designing policies which put the individual at the heart of the school has resulted in students flourishing. The final part of human rights education – teaching 'for' human rights is possibly the most challenging. If students have knowledge about human rights, combined with understanding, respect and tolerance for difference, they are able 'to understand other people: what motivates them, how they work, how to work cooperatively with them'³. HRE forms the basis on which students can tackle prejudice and improve relationships in their own lives. Students want to be tolerant and respectful, and informed students make better choices. I once launched a whole school programme educating students about a range of offensive terms – upon hearing the meanings of these words they didn't want to use them anymore. Stonewall recommends educating students about discriminatory language before issuing sanctions, and this successfully changed their behaviour.

After teaching HRE for several years I have seen many success stories, the debate club student who became Wales's youngest mayor, and the first non-binary one; the girl who served on advocacy panels giving a speech in the House of Lords. And beneath this there are hundreds of students who listened before judging, felt included in spaces they previously didn't or showed respect to others. Through human rights education we can produce individuals with the ability to compile an argument and the confidence and motivation to affect change, defend justice and equal opportunities, and create a tolerant society. The Equality and Human Rights commission reports that once HRE is introduced, schools experience improved attainment and attendance; behaviour and well-being of students improve; and there is a reduction in discriminatory attitudes.

As former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said HRE goes beyond a single lesson, 'It is a process to equip people with the tools they need to live lives of security and dignity' – and this is why it is needed explicitly in the curriculum. After all, isn't that the whole point of education?

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This essay is part of a collection of thought pieces curated by Amnesty International UK and Labour Campaign for Human Rights. June 2024

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³ Watson and Greer 1983