

“Research & Practice” features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Keith C. Barton to share his recent research on students’ understanding of human rights. His work suggests the need for teachers to understand the significance of students’ social context when teaching about human rights. His findings also indicate that students focus almost exclusively on personal as opposed to institutional actions for protecting human rights.

—Patricia G. Avery, “Research & Practice” Editor, University of Minnesota

What Should We Teach about Human Rights? Implications of International Research

Keith C. Barton

Educators around the world have advocated for human rights to become a core element of students’ social and civic learning.¹ Although constitutional rights are typically the foundation for social studies and related subjects, human rights represent a universal and cosmopolitan vision, one that applies to citizens and non-citizens alike and is not restricted by national boundaries. Studying human rights can highlight our responsibilities to all fellow humans, not only those with whom we share national citizenship.

Human rights also point to a more stable foundation for safe, secure, and fulfilling lives. Constitutional protections can change with shifting political winds, and rights that once seemed secure can disappear when overturned in court, when leaders choose to interpret them in new ways, or when governments are overthrown. Although human rights have evolved over time (and continue to do so), and although their enforcement usually has less authority than national law, they nonetheless provide a societal vision that is more stable than the changing arena of national politics.

Research on Human Rights Education

The popularity of “Human Rights Education” as a rallying cry can obscure the differing meanings it may hold. Some educators emphasize the need to respect students’ rights during their educational experiences, by providing equitable access to schooling, treating students in a nondiscriminatory way, and including them in decision making. Others emphasize influencing students’ attitudes so that they see the importance of supporting human rights and working toward that realization. “Transformative” approaches go even further, by helping students identify human rights abuses in

their schools and communities so they can work toward solutions.

Attempts to transform students, schools, and society in line with human rights principles are unlikely to succeed, however, unless students develop related content knowledge. In order to support and take action on human rights, students need to know what these rights are, what policies and institutions either ensure or violate them, and what role they can play in upholding or protecting human rights. This kind of knowledge is important not only so that students can work toward realizing their own rights but also so that they have a clear understanding of how their actions can influence the rights of others, whether in their local communities, their nation, or around the world.

In order to make such content meaningful, educators need insight into how students think, just as they do with any topic. How do students process the information they encounter, both in and



Joshua L. Jones/Athens Banner-Herald via AP

Clarke Central High School students marched to the courthouse with University of Georgia students in protest of the Athens-Clarke County Sheriff's cooperation with ICE immigration policies in Athens, Ga., March 8, 2018.

out of school? What do they find most salient? How do they apply their ideas in concrete circumstances? By knowing more about how students think, educators can better design curricula and teaching practices that meet their goals, particularly by making sure that they address gaps in students' ideas and help them avoid misunderstandings.

Recent research has begun to provide evidence of the nature of students' thinking about human rights. For the most part, these studies have not evaluated the impact of specific curricula or instructional approaches, nor have they simply measured retention of information. Instead, researchers have looked for broader patterns in students' think-

ing. This kind of research can provide guidance for educators as they evaluate and develop materials and strategies regardless of the program or curriculum they may be using or the setting in which they work.

In one such study, my colleagues and I interviewed students (aged 14–17) in the United States, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Colombia about their understanding of the causes of human rights violations, about what can be done to ensure or protect human rights, and about the students' own potential role in working for human rights.² Other recent studies from India, Guatemala, Korea, and the United States have provided further evidence of stu-

dents' thinking.³ Two sets of findings in particular stand out from this work: the influence of social context in students' thinking about the location of human rights issues, and the imbalance between personal and institutional forces in students' ideas about how to protect human rights.

The Importance of Social Context

Students' ideas do not simply reflect school instruction but are strongly influenced by wider social contexts, such as the views they encounter in national media, politics, and popular culture. South Korean students, for example, drew upon national discourses of unity and self-reliance to

prioritize the country's traditions and its political and economic circumstances in ways that delegitimized the need to address national human rights issues—even though they recognized the impact of forces such as structural inequality on people's rights in other parts of the world.⁴

In my research, middle-class U.S. students who had studied both domestic and international human rights issues nonetheless talked about violations primarily as something that affected other parts of the world, such as those they considered politically oppressive, less economically developed, or that they referred to as part of the “Third World”—particularly the Middle East and predominantly Muslim countries.

These students could give examples of domestic issues when asked, but they continued to return, almost as if by default, to thinking about human rights in terms of their violation in other parts of the world. This pattern is consistent with prevalent stereotypes of particular cultures and regions, as well as the lack of popular attention to human rights within the United States. The only domestic issue students consistently mentioned was same-sex marriage, which was a major focus in the national media at the time.

Students in Ireland gave similar responses—including the importance of same-sex domestic partnerships in their country—although the most common location of violations they mentioned was not the Middle East but Africa. Students in Northern Ireland, on the other hand, were more likely to position human rights as a problem in their own region (in addition to less economically developed countries), even though they had not necessarily directly experienced such abuses themselves. In Northern Ireland, community division around religious and political differences is such a widespread part of the culture that it had become a prominent feature of students' thinking about human rights.

In some settings, however, students are influenced less by national contexts than

by experiences in their own communities. Students in Colombia who lived in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty and violence, including the presence of guerillas, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers, consistently pointed to problems of security and living standards that were part of their own lives. One student, for example, said, “In my house I'm always afraid. With my little brother, I always bring him inside the house after 5 p.m. because it is dangerous. That is definitely limiting our rights, because we can't be free when we're afraid.”

Another Colombian student explained, “I see a lot of people on the street begging. People should be able to have a home. Lots of people where we live don't have a real house.” A similar focus on local issues was evident among low-income and minority students in a separate study in the United States: After studying the topic at school, students used global human rights language to reframe their own experiences with discrimination and police brutality. However, their understanding of issues in other parts of the world remained limited.⁵ For these students in Colombia and the United States, the local context held more salience than national or international issues.

Implications

This finding illustrates the need for educators to emphasize multiple contexts in applying human rights principles. One of the chief advantages of human rights is that they are meant to apply universally; they can be used to analyze situations in one's community, nation, or world. If students consistently think of human rights as problems that apply to other countries but not their own, then studying human rights may not only reinforce negative stereotypes of other regions but also blind students to the need to address such issues locally and nationally.

Moreover, addressing national and international human rights issues *equally* may not be enough, given students' tendency to revert to what they encounter in media or popular culture. In some

settings, teachers will have to actively and consistently work against the stereotypes and blind spots in students' thinking; they may need to pay much more attention to domestic issues in order to overcome the pull of students' preconceptions.

Educators working with students who do the reverse—who think of human rights violations primarily in terms of their own nation or community, as some students in Northern Ireland, Colombia, and the United States do—face a different dilemma: helping students contextualize these issues in a more global way. Understanding local and national human rights issues is critically important, but if students think of these as related only to their own specific circumstances, rather than seeing connections and analogies with other settings, they will be inadequately prepared to address them.

Studying global issues in addition to local circumstances can not only provide inspiration from individuals who have worked to address human rights in other settings but can also acquaint students with underlying structural issues that may help them better contend with local problems. This points toward the second major finding of recent research—students' understanding of how to protect human rights.

Personal and Institutional Forces

A key purpose of the research my colleagues and I conducted was to try to understand what students thought caused human rights violations and how human rights could be protected—and particularly what their own role in that process might be. Many educators see their initial task as being to develop students' commitment to human rights, but students in our study already were committed to that goal, due to the way we selected participants. That allowed us to investigate what they thought their commitment implied in practical terms.

Across countries, students in our study recognized that a variety of factors influ-

ence human rights. Sometimes they pointed to governmental actions, whether negative (such as committing violence against the population) or positive (such as passing laws against discrimination). Other times, students noted the importance of economic development, particularly as an influence on living standards and on access to health care and education. Students also pointed to the impact of prejudicial mindsets—both individual and cultural—as sources of discrimination. Their recognition of these influences—governmental, economic, cultural, and personal—was extensive and varied; these students certainly did not have a simplistic understanding of the kinds of forces affecting human rights.

Their ideas about *how* these forces affected human rights and what could be done to influence them, however, were much more limited. When asked how to protect or ensure human rights, and about what role they could play themselves, students most often focused on personal actions with which they were directly familiar. Many students, for example, talked about the importance of not discriminating against others and of putting oneself in others' shoes in order to better understand their experiences. They had little to say about how to influence wider cultural attitudes, and most considered such change difficult if not impossible—although some thought schools could play a role in educating young people to accept ethnic and religious differences.⁶

Similarly, in discussing topics such as health, education, and living standards, students most often suggested donating to charities or engaging in volunteer efforts (such as teaching in a less economically developed country). Although they realized that these actions would not be enough to overcome national and global economic forces, they suggested few specific policy mechanisms that would affect such issues (such as redistribution of land or income). Like culture, the

economy was for many of these students a nearly intractable force, and certainly one they could do little to influence.

Students' understanding of their influence on government further illustrates this focus on the personal. Across countries, students pointed to a range of direct actions that they and others could take, such as lobbying, writing letters, signing petitions, and taking part in public protests. However, they rarely pointed to any specific policies that these actions were meant to address, apart from laws against discrimination. Sometimes they even suggested that the purpose of action was to "raise awareness," as though awareness itself would bring about change. They also knew that non-governmental institutions might play a role in human rights, but again they rarely pointed to specific mechanisms of such involvement.

By and large, students lacked knowledge of institutional practices—the wide array of measures that governments or nongovernmental institutions can take in order to protect or ensure human rights, including those that guide economic development or resource distribution, or those that aim to bring about long-term changes in culture. Students understood the means for influencing government, but they had limited knowledge of the concrete actions that such influence might bring about.

Implications

In order for human rights education to reach its goal of enabling students to play a role in building more just societies—in their lives now and in the future—educators will need to devote systematic attention to human rights as a set of institutional practices. Developing students' commitment to human rights will have limited practical impact if the only thing they know to do is volunteer, donate to charity, or treat others fairly. Teaching students to empathize with others and act accord-

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ingly is important, but it remains an inadequate approach to human rights education unless students also learn about the specific public policies that help ensure economic benefits, provide security, and protect people from oppression.

Students need to learn about the variety of ways that institutions such as governmental and non-governmental organizations (whether local, national, or transnational) address human rights by implementing specific policies and by supporting social, cultural, and political practices. Such measures are the real substance of ensuring and protecting human rights, and students need to understand how this work takes place. If students hope to bring about change at local or national levels, for example, they must know who is responsible for addressing their concerns and what to ask for. At a global scale, students will not be able to directly influence an institution such as the International Court of Justice, but they need to understand why it is important to support the policies and funding that maintain such organizations and practices.

Students will develop such understanding only if they receive systematic instruction; they are not going to pick up this kind of knowledge in their daily lives. Notably, however, some popular approaches to teaching about human rights may contribute little to developing such understanding. A curriculum focused on human rights abuses, for example, does not carry any direct implications for how to address such issues; the use of child soldiers is a terrible violation of human rights, but learning about its horrors is pointless without understanding how institutions attempt to deal with it.

Similarly, stories of human rights leaders can be inspirational, but unless students learn about the specific policies those leaders have fought for, they will be unable to draw conclusions about what should be done in similar circumstances. And although raising awareness has been a popular approach

to influencing human rights, changes in the nature of terrorist organizations and other non-state violators have rendered this less effective than in the past. Such groups now actively seek attention to their abuses in order to gain international prominence and develop networks of supporters.⁷

Conclusions

Although encouraging students' commitment to human rights and engaging them in civic action are crucial, these will be of little avail if educators do not also help students develop the content knowledge necessary to take effective action, both now and as adults.⁸ Encouraging students to support human rights without providing the knowledge necessary for the task does them a grave disservice; it can lead to young people who are too naïve to understand how to work for societal change, or who are frustrated by their inability to bring about the world they hope for.

The research described here identifies two areas requiring special emphasis. The first involves applying human rights principles at multiple levels—local, national, and global—so that students are not bound either by the uniqueness of their own experiences or by the potentially stereotypical and inaccurate images found in wider social and political discourses. The second involves helping students develop an understanding of a range of local, national, and transnational organizations (governmental and nongovernmental), as well as the specific policies and practices they use to address human rights. Educators must use their knowledge of students and of effective instructional practices to make such content engaging and meaningful, but this research points toward the content that needs particular attention in those efforts. 🌍

Notes

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KEITH C. BARTON is Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Indiana University. His scholarship focuses on curriculum for democratic civic participation, in the United States and internationally, and he has conducted numerous studies of students' historical understanding. He is currently working on a book, with Li-Ching Ho of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, on curriculum principles for deliberating on issues of justice and harmony. He can be reached at kcbarton@indiana.edu.