

Representation in the Human Right to Education

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There is a severe under-representation and lack of information about minority cultures and other marginalized populations within the context of education. Seemingly objective information provided in formal educational settings oftentimes tokenizes and exoticizes minority cultures rather than empowers individuals. Those who are marginalized or part of minority groups must often seek informal education to fully understand the parts of themselves that are not in the mainstream, and those who are not in these groups sometimes have little-to-no understanding of minority groups. Formal education must expand to provide adequate information to, and about, these under-represented communities. Adopting and incorporating human rights education (HRE) into formal educational settings would help to expand the scope of formal education and make the content more fulfilling to both minority and majority populations.

Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) uses rather vague terminology when describing the right to education. There exists no universal definition – nor justification – for education, and human rights as a whole have sparked many debates over time about whether they are culturally relative. Joel Spring (2000) inquires about whether or not the right to education can actually be justified for all cultures across the board, citing the shortcomings of Article 26. Debates about the definition of education reveal divisions in the understanding of education’s purpose because some view education as a tool to achieve economic outcomes for individual states while others

think of education as providing moral and spiritual guidance for individuals (Spring, 2000, p. 9). Other definitions point to education as a tool of empowerment, with the purpose of educating individuals with the goal of liberation and understanding democracy.

If education is meant to be a tool of empowerment, however, then education should provide individuals with the knowledge to determine how the world system relates to their own culture. This is a clear shortfall in formal education, since many Indigenous peoples are seldom provided the necessary tools to critically analyze the impact of colonialism and imperialism on their own educational systems (Spring, 2000, p. 18). In fact, most formal, state-sanctioned education does not do much to empower individuals with the skills necessary to think critically about their own states in relation to their own cultural background. The right to education has not been specified as education that is not unequal, segregated, nationalistic or controlling, among others (Spring, 2000, p. 17). In whole, the UDHR's Article 26 and subsequent legislation does not promote a universal definition of education and therefore leaves much room for inadequate educational settings and content, particularly in reference to non-majority cultures.

Educational systems in former imperialist or colonialist nation-states are likely to hold some type of bias that glorifies the harmful actions of the state and undermines minority groups, particularly those that fell victim to imperialism or colonialism previously. In the case of Britain in the early twentieth century, for instance, school texts and government policies served to racialize and perpetuate negative stereotypes of minority children – particularly those of colonial and post-colonial immigrants (Cole & Blair, 2006, p. 70). Stemming from the irrational fears of White parents, the state put policies in place to ensure that no more than 30 percent of any school's population would be made up of ethnic minorities (Cole & Blair, 2006, p. 75). Textbooks demonstrated a clear imperialist bias, with passages that glorified the monarchy and painted the nations under British colonial rule as being prosperous and grateful for Britain's protection (Cole & Blair, 2006, p. 73). Africans, Asians, and Australian Aboriginal

peoples were shown in an extremely negative light in these same textbooks, where they were referred to as miserable, poor, barbaric, wretched, and self-indulgent, among other things (Cole & Blair, 2006, p. 74). These negative labels and stereotypes transferred from the colonies to the British schools, putting children of color at a disadvantage when it came to discipline or other classroom expectations. Their parents often had to supplement their education to make up for the areas that were lacking. Some parents organized “mother-tongue” teaching for their children or created supplementary schools to correct misinformation about British history and their own respective cultures (Cole & Blair, 2006, p. 79).

In 1981, the British government commissioned the Rampton Report, which demonstrated that racism against Black children in particular played a major part in their educational experience. Four years later, the Swann Report investigated the experiences of other ethnic minority groups and discovered similar findings, stating a need for multicultural education so that children could all understand each other better (Cole & Blair, 2006, p. 79). However, what resulted was a sharing of minority cultures with White students that resulted in tokenization and exoticization of minority cultures that did very little to address the issues with racism or discrimination in the schools (Cole & Blair, 2006, p. 80).

In the case of the United Kingdom, minority students subjected to schooling with a clear imperialist bias were forced to supplement this sub-par education with more non-formal education provided by their families and communities. The government’s attempt to push multicultural education did not result in a deeper understanding of cultural differences, but rather placed a clear distinction of “other” on ethnic minority groups and created romanticized ideas of cultural music, dress, and food completely separate from the experiences of the children themselves. Rather than teaching about cultures in a historic sense, a sense completely separate from the members of the cultural group, it would be far more beneficial to provide real world examples and case studies of different cultures in a contemporary setting.

Part of the problem in providing quality education is the assumption that teachers are the knowledge bearers and the students' only role is to actively listen and eventually regurgitate the same content that has been provided (Ty, 2011, p. 207). In an ideal educational environment, students and educators would share ideas and knowledge with one another and learn together, rather than one person monopolizing the conversation simply due to credentials. In the context of Indigenous or minority populations, educators with no life experience as a member of these communities cannot adequately teach on subjects pertaining to these communities. Regardless of the time spent researching or studying the topic, a member of the majority population would not have an accurate grasp on the extent to which colonialism and imperialism still plagues communities of color.

Human rights education (HRE) has the ability to fill some of these types of gaps in standard formal education. HRE can take place in formal, informal, or non-formal settings, but in a formal setting it is typically focused on civil and political rights. Formal HRE is usually the study of human rights legislation or the idea of "inalienable rights" and less of a study of abstract concepts (Ty, 2011, p. 212). Formal HRE is essentially lessons on citizenship and societal order. Ideas of cultural pluralism and differences between social or ethnic groups have traditionally been understood as part of non-formal education, likely because it seems less objective than civic responsibilities (Ty, 2011, p. 213). This type of education typically takes place in peer-led discussions or roundtables, rather than as an educator standing in front of a class speaking about information from a textbook or other literature. Allowing members of minority groups to speak of their experiences is not typically perceived as a legitimate transfer of information within education because it is based off the experiences of individuals rather than research or "objective" observations. Nevertheless, there is bias in any transfer of information and this is an incredibly important and valuable way that individuals may understand others, particularly those that have been under-represented in formal education.

Members of minority groups sharing their personal individual experiences within formal educational settings provides opportunities to cultivate empathy and understand more sensitive issues that would not hold the same weight if spoken of only in an objective sense (Ty, 2011, p. 213). Incorporating personal experiences into formal education exposes members of the majority to more multicultural educational content without the same type of tokenization or exoticization that typically occurs when members of the majority attempt to teach about minority cultures in an objective sense. Using this type of HRE in formal education can help to combat the effects of historical underrepresentation that has happened up until this point.

Incorporating formal, informal, and non-formal HRE into formal educational settings would prove beneficial to all people, but those of minority cultural groups in particular. Previous attempts at multicultural education have fallen short and tokenized or exoticized minority cultures rather than providing the general public with accurate information and educational material on said cultures. By utilizing HRE to incorporate human rights doctrines and language into formal lectures, roundtable discussions, and peer-to-peer discussions, education about minority groups and cultures can be understood and empathized with in a more personal sense. Human rights education is necessary to accurately and sensitively teach and learn about all aspects of a society.

References

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