

## **Bringing Human Rights Home: What are Human Rights Concepts and Instruments? What is HRE? – Nancy Flowers**

Nancy was a teacher for 25 years and a human rights education advocate for Amnesty International. She has worked in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, all over the world. She is very happy to now be doing work in her own country.

Nancy began her presentation with “What is HRE”:

- “How many of you studied the US constitution in high school?” Everyone raised their hand. Then she asked, “How many of you learned anything about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?” This exercise was used to show how little is taught about human rights in schools in the US. Many Americans have the perception that human rights are “problems over there.”
- Nancy defined HRE:
  1. ABOUT human rights (content) – this is the area that many of us are weakest in
  2. IN human rights (methodology) –this is about respecting students and parents
  3. FOR human rights (goals) –giving students a sense of their rights and ability to advocate “ABOUT human rights”:
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), created on December 10, 1948, was the first time there was a document that was “universal.” It is called “universal” instead of international or global because many people don’t have a country to call their own, yet these rights still belong to them, too. A “declaration” is the weakest form of international law; it’s not legally binding, but it is a statement of belief. The date this was created, December 10<sup>th</sup> is now International Human Rights Day. It is very strategic that this document came into form in 1948. The UN had just been founded one year earlier. The UN wanted to create some form of agreed principles of operation. Eleanor Roosevelt was the chair of the committee that drafted that document. It was a bit cynical to give her that role. They didn’t have much expectation of her, but she had the skill of getting people to work together. 1948 is also significant because WWII had just ended and there was a lot of emphasis on peace. Also, this period was when many former colonies were struggling for independence. There was a surge of these ex-colonies putting their support behind the UDHR. If this conversation had arisen a few years later it would have been very difficult to achieve a unanimous decision due to the Cold War. This was a golden moment for everyone to come together in agreement.
- What was wanted was a convention, which is a legally-binding document. So, the UN created two documents: The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The reason for two documents instead of one is the Cold War. The West supported the civil and political rights that were already upheld in their constitutions, while the Eastern bloc supported the economic, social and cultural rights. (Note: The US has still never ratified the ICESCR.)
- Much of this “schizophrenia” was later healed with the Vienna Declaration of Human Rights (1993). It was agreed that all human rights were universal, indivisible, and interdependent, i.e., that one could not pick and choose among them.
- The “human rights framework” was built off of the ICESCR and the ICCPR. Nancy emphasized the UDHR booklets available in the Institute binders. It is the most important human innovation of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.
- Nancy led the group in brainstorming ideas of “inhumane acts” and “vulnerable populations”:
  - Inhumane acts: genocide, torture, human trafficking, slavery, apartheid, racism

- Vulnerable populations: children, refugees, women, detainees, migrant workers, indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, prisoners, the poor, black men, religious minorities
- The principal human rights conventions include: (\*= US has ratified)
  - ICESCR
  - ICCPR\*
  - Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination\*
  - Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
  - Convention against Torture\*
  - Convention on the Rights of the Child: US **only** country in the world not ratified.
  - Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
  - The major reasons US have not ratified many human rights treaties has to do with the make-up of our government structure and states' rights.
  - These are enforced mainly by “naming and blaming.” It’s not very strong. Generally speaking, the US will ratify things related to civil and political rights (which restrain the state), and are less likely to ratify things related to economic, social and cultural rights (what the state has to provide).
- What are human rights?
  - Universal, indivisible, interdependent, interrelated.
- Quote from the UDHR preamble: “Therefore the General Assembly proclaims this UDHR as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society...shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms...” This is our mandate. Teaching is the only profession mentioned in the UDHR.
- At the time of its creation, the US did not openly promote the UDHR. It was a document that said everyone was equal, while Jim Crow laws were still in place in our country. The UDHR was more of a secret in its early years.
- Human rights are not written in stone. All of these conventions were developed over 50 years, as issues came up. What’s important about that evolving nature is that we have a role to play.
- Civil and political rights v. social, economic, and cultural rights:
  - Civil/political: freedom of speech, assembly, press, religion, right to vote
  - Social, economic, cultural rights: health care, education, marriage, wages, housing, right to unionize, right to have your language, culture, and heritage respected

“IN human rights,” or the methodology of human rights.

- “How” you teach is also related to “what” you teach. I have the obligation to protect your rights. MLK once said, “If anyone’s rights are violated, everyone’s rights are violated.” Rather than an “abuse” model, a better model is a “culture of human rights,” the activation of your own human rights. This should involve not only the student and teacher, but extend to the parents and larger community.

“FOR human rights.”

- *Why* do we do teach human rights? It is both aspirational and practical. There are lots of types of education that involve standards and values. What we have that is different with HRE is a legal framework for these values. “This is some of the best human thinking that there is.” Human rights are not tied to a religion or a culture, although they don’t deny either

of those things. This education equips students to be members of the global community. Human rights give some “rules” (i.e. laws) that you can be confident in. You are exposing kids to dilemmas, creating critical thinking skills – there will be conflicts between individual rights and collective rights, religious beliefs and human rights. This shows kids that not everything is black and white, which prepares students to think critically about the world. “I think you are already human rights educators, you just may not have seen it from that perspective yet.”

- Nancy mentioned a story about two fish. The point was that when you’re IN something, you don’t necessarily look at it and examine it critically.

#### Q&A with Nancy:

- Chris asked, “Ideologically, I don’t really see a difference between HRE and what education should be in general. What Amy was talking about empowering students and making things relevant – that’s what education is.”
  - Nancy: That’s why you are the cutting edge; you are already doing this kind of work in your classroom. This is giving a legal framework from which to approach this.
  - Chris: Maybe more actively naming this framework is how we make it become human rights education.
  - Paulo Freire once said, “What is a human rights educator? Everyone can be a human rights educator. Anyone who raises awareness and precipitates change.” Everyone here is already a human rights educator.
- Sandra: One thing we need to focus on is how you could do HRE in a math class, or in an English class. That is the key, to really be able to integrate it in your personal subject.
  - Nancy: It is both the classroom curriculum and the whole school community that teaches human rights.
  - Myrna: I agree, there are two strands of HRE: the academics and the culture.