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# Studying Global Human Rights Education. Theoretical and Empirical Approaches

**ABSTRACT** Within the field of comparative and international studies of education, a theoretical debate concerning the nature and extent of globalization thrives between those known as “world culture” theorists, positioned within neo-institutionalism, and their critics. Human rights education (HRE) is an emergent field of educational theory and practice that falls within the context of this debate. This article identifying both theoretical and empirical gaps in the research to date explores the thematic approaches that have been taken by scholars in their studies of HRE.

**KEYWORDS** HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION, COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION, WORLD CULTURE THEORY

## **Introduction**

At its most basic level, globalization can be defined as the process by which countries and their citizens are increasingly drawn together (Archard 1996). However, the nature and extent of this process is debated. It has been suggested that key global factors such as the end of the Cold War and the onset of the internet and other information and communication technologies across the globe has led to a re-organization of the world order and that globalization has emerged from the

international financial agreements and institutions of the Bretton Woods agreement (Kasuya 2001). Politically this has led to the setting up of a framework of international organizations to establish what Rosenau (1992) calls “governance without government,” for example the IMF, UN, OECD and World Bank. The effect of these international agencies acquiring power is that some states have bound themselves to uphold and implement the decisions of these agencies (Green 1997: 165). It has also been argued that running through these international organizations is a common ideology summarized by the features of the Washington consensus with a focus on making states more competitive (Dale 1999: 3). One characteristic of the process of globalization, it has been suggested, is the erosion of traditional modes of life and the advancement of standardization and homogenization into all areas, including education policy, as evidenced by policy borrowing, increasingly standardized decision-making processes, administration, and teaching within classrooms (Kasuya 2001: 237; Wiseman 2010: 5).

Within the field of comparative and international studies of education, there are a number of scholars who use neo-institutionalism as a theoretical approach to understand and explain the processes of globalization. Known as “world culture” theorists, they have developed from their work the argument that a world culture is being disseminated globally through education systems. The global human rights discourse is considered to be one aspect of this world culture that has been identified in the analysis of standardized curricula, and textbooks (Hafner-Burton, Tsutsui 2005; Kamens et. al. 1996; McEneaney, Meyer 2000; Meyer et. al. 2010; Meyer et al. 1992; Meyer, Ramirez 2000; Ramirez et al. 2006; Suárez 2007).

World culture theory (WCT) makes the claim that actors, such as states, organizations, or legitimized individuals are embedded in institutional environments and “scripted” by world cultural assumptions and that their “structures become isomorphic with the myths of the institutional environment” (Meyer, Rowan 1977: 340). Whilst these organizations are characterized by coherence and control, structures are “decoupled” from each other and from ongoing activities, which can be seen in rule violations, unimplemented decisions, poor technical efficiency, and “subverted” or “vague” control systems (Meyer, Rowan 1977). However, critics of WCT see in the concept of “decoupling” the accommodation of criticism into the theory (Carney, Rappleye, Silova 2012). Ramirez et al. (2006), applying WCT to the field of HRE, suggest that despite some variation between nations, concrete examples of HRE initiatives are found in every region of the world and that this is evidence of the spread of the human rights discourse. Support for this claim for a world culture of human rights is found in the exploration of the historical expansion of the human rights movement including the citation of evidence for the expansion of NGOs, international organizations and funding (Boli, Thomas 1999). WCT seeks to explain why HRE has become a transnational curricular matter, and research that adopts this approach comprises explorations of both individual nation states and international comparative studies.

It can be argued, however, that the arguments made by WCT are over-emphasizing the impact of globalization. Whilst it may be possible to observe an “international veneer of cultural homogenization” in supra-national organizations and in policy making at a national level, at the same time it is possible to identify an “infinity of cultural hybrids” (Green 1997: 163). Education systems as core institutions in society, it can be argued against WCT, are expressions of national culture that differ between and within countries having evolved from different historical, religious and cultural traditions. Critics of WCT have therefore “focused on the local enactment of world-level phenomena by highlighting the centrality of agency and the politics behind the implementation of global reforms in different national contexts”

(Anderson-Levitt 2003; Carney et al. 2012: 367; Schriewer 2012; Steiner-Khamsi 2004). However, this contestation of WCT as a theoretical approach has not yet extended to a specific critique of WCT studies of HRE.

As an emergent field of educational theory and practice, HRE falls within the context of the theoretical debate surrounding globalization. It has in the past few decades gained an increasing level of attention as scholars seek to understand how the human rights discourse promoted by the United Nations has impacted education systems around the world (Tibbitts, Kirschlaeager 2010). The plethora of studies about HRE do not neatly fall into theoretical categories. Therefore, using the following broad thematic approaches to the study of HRE, this article will explore the literature to date. Firstly, this article will explore studies that are occupied with the theoretical debate surrounding the universality and nature of HRE. Secondly, this article will explore studies dealing with the way in which HRE has become incorporated into the policies and curricula of nation states. Following this, studies that explore the way in which HRE is interpreted by those who produce resources such as textbooks will be considered as well as studies that explore the implementation of HRE by teachers. Finally, this article will take a closer look at studies that explore the way in which HRE is understood by students in terms of their competencies.

### **The theoretical debate surrounding HRE**

Within the theoretical debate surrounding the global discourse of human rights, the problem of defining HRE is addressed. Based on a consideration of the definitions given by the United Nations, governmental bodies, NGOs and educationalists, an array of different pedagogical and theoretical approaches to HRE are discussed (Bajaj 2011a; Cao, Fei 2014; Dembour 2010; Flowers 2003; Fritzsche 2004; Lenhart, Savolainen 2002; Lohrenscheit 2002; Magendzo 2005; Meintjes 1997; Misgeld, Magendzo 1997; Osler, Vincent 2002; Osler, Zhu 2011; Sen 2004; Shuji 2012; Sliwinski 2005; Starkey 2012).<sup>1</sup> These scholars, despite adopting different theoretical approaches, all agree with the principle of a universal approach to HRE, and the continuing development of new definitions, theories and pedagogical approaches to HRE can be seen as evidence of commitment to the idea of human rights. However, at the same time the level of diversity found in the academic world, in terms of pedagogical and theoretical approaches, rather questions the notion of a “world” culture of human rights.

At the theoretical level there are also those who question the appropriateness of a universal approach to human rights asking why nations should uphold human rights within their systems of education. The skepticism, within academic and political contexts, exists surrounding human rights because of their lack of a “natural” basis, doubt about their application to welfare and liberty, the patriarchal nature of rights schemes and their western roots (Kelly 2013: 1). This is particularly evident in the “Asian values” debate among scholars and political activists who argue that the global culture of human rights, as it currently stands, is in no way universal (Bauer, Bell 1999). The academic challenge to human rights comes from scholars who make the following claims; firstly, that human rights are not “universal” but biased in favor of western cultural views. These scholars argue that the western theory of human rights places too much emphasis on personal autonomy, prioritizing civil and political rights over social and economic rights. They also debate the

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller descriptions of these theoretical views see Tibbitts Kirschlaeager 2010.

logic of the deontological approach to human rights, arguing that the egalitarian principle seen as incontrovertible is a Judeo-Christian notion and therefore not valid cross-culturally.<sup>2</sup>

The second claim these scholars put forward is their practical concern to create a human rights theory that has cultural affinity to non-western nations.<sup>3</sup> Yasuaki (1999) argues that the negative reaction to human rights from Asian countries emanates from often humiliating colonial pasts and assumptions about the superiority of western governments. While claiming to have moral superiority, these western governments at the same time ignore human rights violations at home (Yasuaki 1999). Much as this debate continues to thrive, there is also a growing pessimism as to the success of a western global discourse of human rights in the face of declining western liberal power (Gearon 2002; Hopgood 2013). For many of the above scholars, the concept of a universal human rights and the viability of this discourse as it currently stands is questionable. At the same time, there are those scholars working within the debate concerning the universality/relativity of human rights who defend the applicability of global human rights assuming that the concept is flexible enough to accommodate cultural differences (Bauer, Bell 1999; Donnelly 2007, 2008; Goodhart 2008; McCowan 2012; Tatsuo 1999). The development of a theoretical foundation for HRE that will accommodate cultural differences continues to be a challenge for those working within this field.

### **The incorporation of HRE into the policies and curricula of nation states**

Historical analysis of the changes in national education systems at policy level reveal that many nations are over time incorporating the global discourse of human rights into the curriculum (Al-Nakib 2014; Chandrasiri 2001; Froese-Germain, Riel, Theoret 2013; Kang 2002, 2007; Kelly 2013; Leung 2008; Shuji 2012; Smith 2003; Suárez 2007; Zembylas, Charalambous, Lesta, Charalambous 2014). Some studies, in particular, focus on how national policy-making has happened in response to UN initiatives and highlight the development of a national plan of action for HRE as part of this response (Lapayese 2005; Suwansathit 1999; Xia 2013). Self-assessed national action plans can also be found at the office of the high commissioner for human rights website.<sup>4</sup> However, at the same time evidence can be found revealing that the level of national commitment decreases as policy ideas are incorporated into national curricula (Banks 2001; Bron, Thijs 2011; Huang 2006; Shekarey et. al. 2010; Velloso 1998; Xia 2013). In the case of Flouris (1998), in a comparative study of HRE in the curricula, the finding was that the HRE curriculum was organized according to a national or regional perspective rather than a global one. Despite ratification of international documents that explicitly support the promotion of HRE, the nation states in this study did not follow through this support into their policy documents but rather applied national or regional meanings (Flouris, 1998).

The findings of the above empirical studies do not suggest that a uniform approach to HRE is being adopted globally, but rather that both the agency of individuals and the political situation play an important role in the development of national policies and curricula. At the same time these studies do suggest that there has been a growth in the number of nations that now incorporate, to varying degrees, HRE in their policy and curricular documents at a national level. WCT views these policy texts as “shared recipes or blueprints,” and studies using this theoretical approach have therefore tended to focus on how studies of national

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller account of these views see An-Na'im 1995; Chan 1995; Yasuaki 1999.

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller account of these views see Bell 1996; Chan 1998.

<sup>4</sup> For an elaboration of the national action plans consult [www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Education/Training/WPHRE/FirstPhase/Pages/NationalActionsPlans.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Education/Training/WPHRE/FirstPhase/Pages/NationalActionsPlans.aspx). Accessed: December 1, 2014.

policy provide evidence of the convergence of education systems (Ramirez 2003). However, their critics suggest that national policy studies do not explore the “motivations for policy change, local meanings assigned to policy texts, and the degree of shared understanding across national populations” (Carney et al. 2012: 375). These criticisms leveled at both WCT and studies that focus on national policy are not unreasonable. A greater focus on the motivations behind policy and curricula change would greatly benefit studies such as these. This can be seen in the work by Moon and Koo (2011).

### **The interpretation of HRE by those who produce resources such as textbooks**

Studies in specific national contexts that concentrate on the interpretation of HRE into textbooks find evidence of an increasing focus, over time, of HRE content (Aslan, Karaman-Kepenekçi 2008; Bromley 2011; Miswanto 2012; Moon, Koo 2011).<sup>5</sup> This is especially evident in the large scale WCT comparative study of Meyer et al. (2010) who examined the rise of human rights themes in secondary school social science textbooks from 69 countries. The survey used coded data from 465 textbooks. Its results suggest a shift from national to world culture in the conceptions of legitimated social membership that partially undercuts the legitimated sovereignty of the nation state (Meyer et al. 2010: 112). The analysis in question included consideration of the way human rights emphasis has expanded over time, which kinds of textbooks give the most attention to rights, and what characteristics of nation states lead to greater human rights emphasis. Meyer et al. (2010) claim that the textbooks that incorporate human rights are more likely to be found in countries with a more internationalized curriculum, in western and more developed countries, and in countries with student-centric pedagogical approaches. Bromley, adopting a WCT approach, found an increase in HRE content over time, however, she acknowledges that nation states may incorporate and implement HRE in different ways by a “blending and integration of conceptions of national identity, multiculturalism and human rights” in the textbooks (2011: 164).

Textbook studies, however, also reveal evidence of nations who, whilst supporting HRE at a national level, contradict this discourse in their textbooks with examples of gender discrimination, and violence against children portrayed as acceptable (Barse 2000; Firer 1998). These case studies reveal national cultural values that are in direct competition with the global discourse of human rights.

The above textbook studies provide an insight into the way some nations implement their curricula. However, at the same time the majority of these studies do not provide crucial insight into the manner in which these textbooks were written, a comparison of the subtle differences in cultural understandings of human rights reflected in the books, or the effectiveness of these textbooks through an examination of how they are used by teachers.

### **The implementation of HRE by teachers**

Studies that focus on the implementation of policy by teachers suggest many obstacles to the successful implementation of HRE. The importance of the role of teachers and their attitudes towards the curriculum policy is often cited as a reason for limited success in the implementation of HRE (Bajaj 2011b; Bron, Thijs 2011; Froese-Germain et al. 2013; Gerber 2008; Kang 2007; Lapayese 2005; Leung, Lo 2012; Messina, Jacott 2013; Rinchin

<sup>5</sup> Textbooks are legitimized knowledge that act as mirrors of the political culture of societies and a contribution to the sociology of knowledge. See Apple 1992; Brown 1973; Firer 1998.

2000; Zembylas et al. 2014).<sup>6</sup> Evidence is found of teachers facing pressure to spend time developing student competencies in examination subjects, particularly Math, Reading and Science, at the expense of time that could be spent on HRE. These studies also indicate that despite commitment at the policy level, there is a lack of government direction and support for HRE (Bron, Thijs 2011; Froese-Germain et al. 2013; Huang 2006; Nabeshima et al. 2002). Some of these studies indicate that there is often a lack of teacher training in HRE leading to lack of knowledge and commitment on the part of teachers (BurrIDGE et al. 2013; Cassidy et al. 2014; Nabeshima et al. 2002; Prasad 2000).

In some cases human rights violations were still evident in the school institutions, contributing to the weakening of the effectiveness of HRE implementation (Bron, Thijs 2011; Rinchin 2000). In the case of Nabeshima et al. (2002) it was discovered that commitment to HRE was higher in areas where the Buraka liberation movement was influential, suggesting that HRE was valued more in parts of Japan where problems with discrimination prevailed. This suggests that variation in the way HRE is implemented exists at the local level irrespective of national policy. This local variation is also evident in a study that compared schools that are more or less successful at the implementation of HRE (Covell et al. 2011). The study took place over a three year period, identifying positive factors in success to be strong commitment by the head teachers and the development of HRE as a philosophy that over-arched the school curriculum (Covell et al. 2011).

The above studies suggest that local variations can be found and that the motivations of local government, head teachers and teachers play a role in the success of HRE irrespective of either the incorporation into national policy, or implementation of policy into textbooks. The primary focus of the above studies is on the motivations, training and competencies that teachers have in how they deliver HRE. They reveal tension as head teachers and teachers must prioritize from a selection of competing national objectives, often at the expense of human rights. The majority of these studies do not, however, extend to an exploration of the level of competencies that students gain in their understanding of human rights.

### **The understanding of HRE by students in schools in terms of their competencies**

There are many large scale assessments within educational research, often offering representative comparison between many countries with a focus on the effectiveness of education and competencies of students (IEA's TIMSS, PIRLS, ICCS, and SITES; U.S.-NAEP; OECD's PISA, PIAAC, TALIS, IALS and ALL).<sup>7</sup> However, for the most part, the focus of these studies is not on the effectiveness of HRE, but rather on the competency in Math, Science and Reading. The exception to this is the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), Civic Education Study (CIVED), which includes elements of human rights knowledge. Using the data obtained from 88,000 14-year-olds surveyed in the 1999 CIVED, Torney-Purta, Wilkenfield and Barber (2008) revealed a relationship between the following variables: a democratic classroom environment, the implementation of guarantees of human rights for adults in the country, how long a country has been a democracy, and higher levels of student knowledge and support for human rights. The analysis provides an interesting overview of the 28 countries analyzed suggesting some causal factors for a higher level of student human rights knowledge and support.

<sup>6</sup> Teachers have an important role in the interpretation of policy and its translation into practice in schools, according to educational policy studies. See Ball 1998; Hill 2001; Walshaw, Anthony 2007.

<sup>7</sup> For further information see [www.iea.nl/](http://www.iea.nl/) for IEA's TIMSS, PIRLS, ICCS, and SITES; <http://ies.ed.gov/> for U.S.-NAEP; [www.oecd.org/](http://www.oecd.org/) for OECD's PISA, PIAAC, TALIS, IALS and ALL. Accessed: November 12, 2014.

Overall, the study illustrates that the universality of students' understanding of human rights is not uniform, with variation found between countries and genders.

Other scholars have chosen to explore student understandings of human rights using small-scale studies undertaken in individual schools. Most of these studies reveal the positive impact of both the incorporation of HRE into the curriculum and its successful implementation, as evidenced by student competencies (Bajaj 2012; Covell 2010; Hayashi 2011; Leung et al. 2011; Magbitang-Chauhan et al. 2000; Nordin et al. 2011). However, some findings have revealed that students, despite having experienced HRE courses, feel powerless in facilitating their own or other people's human rights (Çayır, Bağlı 2011). From the limited number of studies that do focus on student competencies, the majority are studies in local settings with the aim to assess the success or failure of national/local HRE initiatives/policies. By building on studies such as these, using a comparative framework, a better understanding of similarities/differences between students in different nations will contribute to our knowledge and theoretical understanding of the impact of the global discourse of human rights.

## **Conclusion**

Within the context of the theoretical debate between advocates of WCT and their protagonists, this article set out to explore the thematic approaches that have been adopted by scholars in the emerging field of HRE.

Firstly, studies that explore the theoretical debate surrounding the universality and nature of HRE reveal a diverse range of views from scholars, some of whom see the global discourse of human rights as a positive thing to be developed and supported, so as to allow it to be relevant to all nations. Other scholars are more skeptical, seeing the discourse as a western imposition that is in decline. The development of a flexible concept of HRE that will accommodate cultural differences continues to be a challenge for those working within this field. Secondly, studies that explore the way in which HRE has become incorporated into the policies and curricula of nation states reveal a wide diversity between nations in the degree to which HRE has been incorporated. Whilst effectively describing the current national stance of HRE, most of these studies do little to inform us as to the way in which these policies came about or the effectiveness with which they are implemented. Thirdly, studies that explore the way in which HRE is interpreted by those who produce resources such as textbooks reveal an increasing, although in some instances hybridic, inclusion of human rights related content. These textbook studies provide a description of how national policies/curricula have been interpreted. However, they largely do not offer explanations for the interpretations given, and neither do they provide insight into how these textbooks are used by teachers or understood by students. Fourthly, studies that explore the implementation of HRE by teachers reveal gaps between national policy and practice and offer explanations for why these gaps exist. These studies provide essential pieces of the puzzle as we endeavour to understand how national policy is translated into student competencies. Finally, studies that explore the way in which HRE is understood by students, in terms of their competencies, are few and far between. These studies, for the most part, focus upon a local setting with the aim of assessing the success or failure of national/local HRE initiatives/policies. Using a comparative framework, a better understanding of similarity/difference between students in different nations will contribute to our knowledge and theoretical understanding of the impact of the global discourse of human rights.

What appears to be lacking from many of the empirical studies on HRE that have been explored as part of this literature review, is an explicitly stated theoretical foundation either



from HRE as a discipline or from broader fields such as comparative and international studies of education or sociology for example. When studies on HRE do have a theoretical foundation, it predominantly comes from WCT. This approach to studying HRE is on the whole “top down” exploring national policies and textbook production, which makes it difficult for “world culture” theorists to support the claim of a world culture of human rights, as they do not focus on the interpretations, actions, understandings and competencies of individuals. Whilst critics of WCT as a general theoretical approach abound, these criticisms have not extended to a detailed and empirically founded critique of HRE research. Therefore, within the field of HRE further comparative studies are needed that can not only provide empirical insight, particularly into the competencies that are developed by students in different local contexts, but also how such research can contribute to the theoretical debate on globalization and advance new ways of theorizing the global and the local.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For example, by exploring the ideas of “Global norm making” (Oppenheim, Stambach 2014), or “Policyscapes” (Carney 2009) and “ideoscapes” (Appadurai 1996).



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#### **TEORETYCZNO-EMPIRYCZNA PERSPEKTYWA STUDIÓW NAD EDUKACJĄ DOTYCZĄCĄ GLOBALNYCH PRAW CZŁOWIEKA**

**STRESZCZENIE** Na polu komparatywnych i międzynarodowych studiów nad edukacją trwa debata pomiędzy „neo-instytucjonalnymi” teoretykami „kultury światowej” a ich krytykami; debata, która dotyczy natury i stopnia globalizacji. W kontekście rzeczony debaty umieszcza się obecnie również zagadnienie edukacji nt. praw człowieka (HRE) – nową gałąź teorii i praktyki edukacyjnej. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest poszerzenie zakresu tego ostatniego tematu poprzez identyfikację teoretycznych i empirycznych „luk” badawczych w nim istniejących.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE** EDUKACJA  
DOTYCZĄCA PRAW  
CZŁOWIEKA, EDUKACJA  
KOMPARATYWNA  
I MIĘDZYNARODOWA,  
TEORIA KULTURY  
ŚWIATOWEJ

