Are global learning metrics feasible?

Beyond Measure: Valuing Human Rights in Global Education

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How do we measure agency? How do we compare empathy? How do we evaluate respect for human rights? These are core components of a quality and comprehensive education to prepare young people for lifelong active citizenship, yet prove difficult to assess and measure in international learning metrics. Human rights education (HRE), in its ideal form, offers transformative learning that fosters agency, critical analysis, and social action. Many efforts towards including human rights information in textbooks or teacher education courses have been made across the globe; however, superficial forms of purely content-based reforms often miss the larger goal of HRE that include cognitive, affective and action-oriented dimensions of the holistic educational project (Bajaj, 2012; Bajaj et al., 2016; Flowers, 2003; Tibbitts, 2002).

Content. While the rise of human rights content in textbooks internationally signals the increasing popularity of rights discourses (Meyer et al., 2010), dynamic grassroots struggles for rights often get flattened and simplified when included in textbooks: Martin Luther King Jr.’s wide-ranging calls for economic and racial justice, anti-war stances, and radical non-violence get reduced into four words—“I have a dream”—and a photo in textbooks whether in the United States, India or Taiwan. Thus, while including human rights content can be a starting point for students’ continued exploration, on its own, the value of such content is limited if it fails to offer a connection between a historic struggle and students’ own lives.

Attitudes. The 2016 cycle of the International Civic and Citizenship Study of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (or the IEA) has many indicators that offer 14-year olds across the world a chance to self-report on their attitudes towards human rights; this builds on previous inclusion of rights-related questions on previous IEA studies. Such inclusion is laudable and indeed offers valuable cross-national information about attitudes towards political rights, women’s rights, and the rights of minority groups. And the mixed and varied performance on previous IEA studies on these indicators—related to, for example, attitudes towards immigrants and gender equality—suggests much more need for human rights education in school systems near and far.

Action. In my research in India and the United States, there are countless examples of human rights actions that would never be captured on an examination whether at one’s school, a state-wide exam, or through a cross-national comparison. Yet, such experiences, in the cases of Fatima and Zau narrated below, often mark their learning experiences, offering critical learning moments that can prove transformative in the course of their lives.

I met Fatima in 2009 in her village in southern India. As the eldest child in her family, she was to be killed in the illegal but still common practice of female infanticide. Her grandmother intervened to save her, and in doing, was given the child to raise on her own with a meager salary as a sweeper at a local school. Fatima’s attendance in school was sporadic with chores to do and her performance less than average when there. After a non-governmental organization (NGO), the Institute of Human Rights Education, introduced a three-year course in human rights education, Fatima had a chance to explore poetry and public speaking through competitions and events held in collaboration with her school and the NGO. Although a high-stakes exam after the 10th grade in India tells students what careers they can and can’t pursue based on their scores, even after the
exam, Fatima was passionate about human rights, had written over 100 poems about them, and her teachers were helping her publish them to raise money for her college costs (Bajaj, 2012).

I met Zau in 2014 when he was a student in a human rights club my research team ran for newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth in California. Zau was a refugee from Burma, a fifth year senior who was simultaneously taking classes at community college and still at high school because he hadn’t yet successfully passed the state-wide high school exit examination. Although Zau had just been in the U.S. a few years, the state only offered the exam in English and no accommodations were made for English Language Learners. When Zau was 10, his family’s small plot and house were confiscated by the Burmese military, and he was forced to go to work to support his family until they could flee to Malaysia and later the U.S. In the human rights club, when discussing child labor, Zau shared,

That’s like my story. I had to go find gold in the mines when I was 11 years old. We had to dig holes 20 feet down, and then go inside to see if there was gold. It was so quiet when I would go inside there. Because the government had taken our farms over and built things on our land, we had to leave and look for work. The mine owners hire children because we have more energy and we are small so we can go inside the holes and go way down into the mines. Plus, if something falls as we dig, we can move quickly to escape. It was really scary, but I didn’t really have a choice but to do it. (as cited in Bajaj et al., 2017)

Considered a “failure” by state-wide standards, Zau found resonance in learning about human rights and other children forced to work; he said it made him feel better that “it’s not just us” going through these hardships, and that there are people working towards ending such violations. This resonates with Varenne and McDermott’s (1998) notion of “successful failure” in which school evaluations prove partial and insufficient in recognizing or valuing the strengths and potential of students who fall outside the metrics of rigidly-defined success.

The experiences of Fatima and Zau suggest that key components and forms of education towards individual self-realization and the social good—critical consciousness, agency, promoting sustainability, respecting human rights, co-existing peacefully, among others—defy assessment and evaluation: they are indeed, beyond measure.

Human rights education praxis requires more comprehensive and long-term modes of valuation. We cannot presume a priori the outcomes for the destination of human rights education given that each student will internalize and make sense of it differently based on identity, social location, and historic and current forms of privilege or marginalization. Further, decontextualized human rights education that is not grounded in reflexivity and solidarity with struggles for rights elides the transformative possibilities for authentic learning in HRE.

Increasing international and comparative discussions of human rights as an integral component of civic education necessitates greater attention to more robust methods—through portfolios, project-based learning, service learning, and civic engagement as curriculum—to authentically assess transformative forms of rights-based education. There is no doubt that there is value to human rights education—certainly Fatima and Zau would attest to this. But narrow indicators of causation and value cannot be superimposed upon larger mandates for civic engagement, citizenship competencies and education for peace and human rights. To do so would be to limit the power and force of such holistic educational projects and to eclipse their vast cosmopolitan imaginaries.

References