And This Matters Because…?

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Studying history is difficult. It takes a different approach than most subjects, dealing mostly with critical thinking and a deep search for truth rather than a formation of opinion. If taught incorrectly, students could leave the classroom more confused than when they entered. The ideals held in global human rights are very important to instill in students in history courses beginning around the upper middle to high school levels, but can often be lost if they are not taught correctly or explained clearly (Guadelli and Fernekes, 2004).

 The question behind this study was, “How do students respond to a Human Rights Education curriculum that emphasizes the dimensions of global citizenship?” (Guadelli and Fernekes, 2004). The problem: students who were educated in the human rights of the United States and not on a global level were left with misunderstandings. These misunderstandings left students lacking knowledge in what it means to have human rights and how they affected global citizenship. Global citizenship is the underlying factor in this study, because without a good education in global citizenship, the future of our world could be lost if the students of today do not know what it means to be a global citizen. This study focused on how educators could better relay to students the meaning behind global citizenship in light of the curriculum guidelines based on Human Rights Education (HRE). The desired outcome, in this case, was to find methods in teaching that could get students indirectly and directly involved in their own education of human rights in order to develop better citizens and a clearer understanding of global citizenship.

In this study, Hunterdon Central Regional High School, a suburban high school located equidistant from New York and Philadelphia, was a prime variable to use because it had recently revamped its Social Studies department to focus in the genre of Human Rights Education. The study took place within two semesters spanning between 2000-2003. In the two semesters, data sources came from two classes totaling 48 students. All the students were in the eleventh grade (Guadelli and Fernekes, 2004). The class was titled “Comparative World Studies” which was taught over an eighteen-week period for eighty-four minutes a day, five days a week (Guadelli and Fernekes, 2004). RHS’s study was done with one teacher’s approach to the HRE curriculum.

 At the beginning of the unit, the experimental group of students formed rights documents for themselves as adolescents. This forced the students out of lower-level thinking and into higher-order thinking and immediate real-life application. From this, the teacher could already see a change in the students who were now taking ownership and a proactive approach to the study of human rights. This generally caused students to ask questions about their rights in the context of the school. Little did they know that the doctrine they had developed and the questions that had surfaced from it could be found throughout their daily lives and that they were related to global citizenship. Rights such as privacy, security, and property were manifestations in the arguments that students had begun to develop, aspects of human rights that are often at the forefront of debate (Guadelli and Fernekes, 2004).

 The data obtained from the study came in the form of mixed method research. In 2000, the students were given surveys at the end of the semester in order for quantitative research to be conducted. In 2003, the data expanded to include pre and post-test surveys, teacher pre- and post-interviews, teacher reflections, and student interviews that included 43 students from two focus classes providing a form of qualitative research and data. The findings of the study provided key indicators in whether or not the students were pleased with the HRE. In both the 2000 and 2003 samples, students indicated they had an increased awareness for global human rights. In the surveys and interview responses, students were asked to rate their interest in the unit with a 60% agree and 15% disagree split indicated. Students also showed interest in continuing to learn about global human rights in a 57%/19% agree/disagree split (Guadelli and Fernekes, 2004). Students noted several times in their surveys that they had no idea prior to this education that human rights were often abused and ignored globally. They also seemed to take a personal approach to the issues saying, ‘ “I realized there’s a lot more that I can do,”’ or ‘ “I want to do more to help people out”’ (Guadelli and Fernekes, 2004). By having a desire to help more than just themselves as students, this research has already begun to prove what studying human rights can give to developing a better understanding of global citizenship.

 In this study, there are a few ways in which educators could approach teaching with the HRE style differently. First, future teachers may want to consider the ethnography of the students they are teaching. This study, obviously not getting a 100% result finding either way, could have been more specific if consideration would have been made toward the different ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the students. In the study, they verified that all students participating had at least been educated up to the point of Nazi Germany. However, it would have been helpful to know the background of each student in order to better understand how their education had occurred before, and possibly even their socioeconomic background to figure in the school district from which they had come so teachers could know the kind of education each student had previously.

 This study goes far beyond the classroom. The desired outcome was for students to want to take an initiative in global citizenship. As the results have shown, the general population of the study has moved from self-focused thinking to taking a proactive approach in human rights and global citizenship. Taking the curriculum from HRE, teachers in Social Studies now educate the whole person by providing each student with authentic, real-world learning that can be applied to the students’ daily lives. By personalizing the curriculum, students can now be better prepared for the workplace. Students can take what they have learned and use it for the betterment of society.

In summation, Human Rights Education has proved beneficial in the 2000 and 2003 eleventh grade classes at Hunterdon Central Regional High School. Overall, student interest improved, and from observation in the naturalistic setting of the classroom, it appeared that understanding and a personal relationship was formed for the issue of human rights. By adding background research on the students, Human Rights Education could very well prove to be a successful tool for many high schools.

References

Gaudelli, W., & Fernekes, W. R. (2004). Teaching about Global Human Rights for Global Citizenship: Action Research in the Social Studies Curriculum. *Social Studies, 95(1),*16- 23.