

The State of Human Rights Education in Northeast Asian School Systems: Obstacles, Challenges, Opportunities

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Foreword

As in any subregion of Asia, Northeast Asia presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities for human rights promotion. Peoples in this subregion share similar socio-cultural perspectives that impact on education. The subregion has diverse political systems set in the midst of growing integration of their economies. While there is little likelihood of having a Northeast Asian intergovernmental mechanism, as in the Southeast and South Asian subregions, there are nevertheless parallel experiences that provide ground for subregional interaction.

Educators in the subregion have been intermittently interacting with each other during the past decade through workshops and conferences sponsored largely by institutions other than the Ministries of Education. HURIGHTS OSAKA has its share of these workshops and conferences since the late 1990s. And so far the only Northeast Asian intergovernmental workshop on human rights education was the one organized jointly by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNESCO, the Korean National Commission for UNESCO and the South Korean government in 1999 in Seoul. No other intergovernmental activities have taken place since then.

In this context, this publication is another step towards finding concrete and practical measures of promoting human rights within the Northeast Asian school systems. It does not cover mainland China and Japan, but it complements existing documentation on the long human rights education journey in Northeast Asia.

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HURIGHTS OSAKA

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Introduction

This publication is the fruit of a meeting of Northeast Asian educators organized by HURIGHTS OSAKA in March 2008. The meeting identified a set of challenges affecting, and the opportunities supporting, human rights education in Northeast Asian school systems.

The March 2008 meeting identified some significant obstacles to human rights education in the Northeast Asian school systems ranging from macro issues to problems that affect communities. To overcome them, several of the obstacles were matched with feasible measures.

To the problem posed by simultaneous impact of globalization and localization, loss of identity, existence of multiple identities, the meeting agreed on the need to

- Promote the idea that globalization and localization enrich each other, respect/appreciate different identities
- Use globalization in a positive sense – using modern technology – to understand the situation and people in other countries in the subregion
- Promote globalization as a positive influence in people, as a “win-win situation”
- Help take away fear of human rights as Western imperial idea.

The problem of indifference of students, parents, and teachers to human rights education can be addressed by promoting human rights in relation to their daily lives.

In the context of Northeast Asia, the culture and human rights issue takes the form of

conflict between Confucian beliefs and human rights. This persistent problem should be tackled by dialoguing with postmodernists to review their stance against international principles, and by promoting interdisciplinary perspective on human rights. There is room for reinterpretation of traditional ideas/values (e.g., the concept of “respect the teachers, respect the ideas” can support the teaching of human rights), give old values new meaning, and also use the conflict of ideas as opportunity to reexamine the ideas themselves.

The government policy in most Northeast Asian countries that support competitive education has been impeding human rights education. One idea of addressing this problem is through a redefinition of the idea of competition in education using human rights principles.

The meeting also identified opportunities that should be exploited such as the government support for education programs on specific issues (children, gender) that can be used to promote human rights education in the school system.

In order to maximize the meeting results, a follow-up activity was initiated to address in a practical sense the situation in Northeast Asian school systems. The follow up project, entitled “Overcoming Obstacles to Human Rights Education in the School Systems in Northeast Asia,” was developed in late 2008 and started to be implemented in 2009. The project is part of the long-term goal of helping institutionalize human rights education within the school systems in Northeast Asia. For the short-term, the

project is meant to present in concrete terms the current challenges and opportunities relating to human rights education within the school systems in Northeast Asia by 1) providing detailed discussion on the challenges and opportunities common as well as unique among the countries in the subregion, 2) presenting concrete experiences that address the challenges and make use of the opportunities, and 3) creating a network among Northeast Asian educators that continues the exchange of information on the development of human rights education in the different school systems.

The expected main beneficiaries of the project in the long run are Northeast Asian educators - mainly those who promote human rights education in the school systems such as the teachers themselves, school heads, teacher trainers, professors in teacher colleges, researchers of education institutes, education officials, and educators from non-governmental organizations.

The project eventually produced four reports from Hong Kong, Mongolia, South Korea and Taiwan. The reports provide different perspectives and discuss different contexts. However, common elements appear in terms of challenges and suggested measures to ensure widespread institutionalization of human rights education in the school systems.

Common Challenges

The challenges generally appear in three areas: culture, social environment and political situation.

Several papers discuss the over-arching influence of the Confucian beliefs in the development and implementation of human rights education in Northeast Asian school systems. The Confucian influence tends to restrict human rights education as it provides a notion of a child or young person different from that provided by the international human rights standards (particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child). Rather than see children as persons with rights and capacities, they are seen as weak members of society who should always be guided to the right path. There is also the notion of the role of teacher inside the classroom that translates into hierarchical and authoritarian classroom/school system. Related to this is the view about discipline, and the acceptability of using corporal punishment. The Confucian influence affects likewise the participation of students in school activities and in the school policymaking and rulemaking processes.

The social environment provides challenges in terms of the sense of the future. There is a strong belief about the need to succeed in schooling by getting at least a university education, in order to succeed in life. This reinforces the government educational policy that supports competitive education. The society considers children as having a singular mission of focusing on learning the "basic subjects" such as mathematics, science, and language subjects in order to have the chance to pass university entrance examinations. The children are therefore expected to spend most of their time fulfilling this mission, starting at a very young age. The future lives of the children/young people are considered secure with

tertiary education, or higher level of education.

The political situation is a challenge both in terms of the effect of the past political developments, and the current political contexts. The history of the development of political consciousness of the people and the change in the political systems affected the understanding of human rights by the people. While the understanding of human rights as equivalent to civil and political rights is not wrong, such understanding has not expanded to cover other rights or issues. Human rights have been relegated to protest against the government or making claims for one's own benefit only, to the prejudice of the society as a whole. Human rights as positive elements that support a vibrant and diverse society have largely been unrecognized. The current political context is likewise a problem as it minimizes the opportunities available in the educational policies and curriculums. With the lack of elaboration on the human rights content in the curriculum, support for training, teaching/learning materials, and incentives, human rights education becomes a burden to teachers and school officials.

Common Obstacles

While governments and schools express support for human rights education, the educational policies and programs of governments and the rules of the schools have the opposite effect.

The educational policies in Northeast Asia range from explicit human rights education policies to that of insufficient provisions. In both cases, the incorporation of human

rights education into the school curriculums has not been fully mainstreamed despite years of efforts of education officials, schoolteachers, and other educators (particularly those belonging to the non-governmental institutions).

Despite explicit support for human rights education, practical problems exist including inadequate pre- and in-service teacher training on human rights education, inadequate development of proper human rights contents in textbooks, lack of human rights lesson plans and other teaching materials, inadequate use of participatory teaching/learning methodologies that can lead to human rights understanding, and inadequate participatory translation of human rights into school policies, rules and activities.

These obstacles exist in the context of perceived weak understanding of human rights by the teachers, the students and their parents.

Overcoming Challenges and Obstacles

The challenges and obstacles notwithstanding, there are efforts that contribute to the development and mainstreaming of human rights education within the Northeast Asian school systems.

The Mongolian situation provides a very positive political and educational policy environment for human rights education. The efforts currently undertaken should be bases for continued expansion of human rights education in the Mongolian school system.

The same is true for Taiwan where efforts on human rights education provide the necessary experience, materials and methodologies for greater mainstreaming of human rights education in the Taiwanese school system.

The Korean situation requires more collaborative work among the National Human Rights Commission of Korea, the human rights organizations, teachers and school officials, and education officials, to mobilize support for human rights education. Increasing understanding of human rights among the people requires more demonstration of the necessity of human rights education in relation to the current situation of society as well as the needs of the children/young people.

The opportunity for teaching/learning human rights within the curriculum of Hong Kong school system exists, though limited. But since it is an opportunity, the Liberal Study subject should be a major starting point for the further development of human rights education in the curriculum.

In sum, while challenges and obstacles remain, they have not stopped efforts to mainstream human rights education within the Northeast Asian school systems.

Opportunities within the School System

The four reports invariably emphasize several points that provide opportunities for the integration of human rights education into the school system. Following are some of the points emphasized:

- a. Human rights education as a right in itself – in line with the provisions of the United Nations human rights instruments, the reports emphasize the need to recognize the state obligation to promote human rights education as a right in itself;
- b. School system approach – there is likewise a strong emphasis on the need for a proper environment for human rights education by looking beyond the school curriculum and considering the important role of extra-curricular activities (within the school and in the community), school rules and regulations including those that govern teacher-student relations and disciplining of students, participation of the whole school community (students, parents, teachers, school officials) in reviewing/adopting school policies and rules, and also appropriate school facilities. Such a human rights-friendly school environment can ensure a better human rights education program affecting not only the students but also the parents, teachers, and school officials.
- c. Need for human rights awareness of stakeholders – the reports likewise emphasize the crucial importance of teachers, school officials and parents having appropriate level of human rights awareness (if not sufficient knowledge of human rights) to be able to teach human rights to students. Some reports explain the activities that involve these stakeholders (including teacher training and participation of parents in human rights activities).

This publication adds to a number of literature that present Northeast Asian experiences in human rights education within the school system. It points to the need for an evaluation of the current school system in order to strengthen existing programs on human rights education or redevelop such programs. This will address key issues that prevent human rights education from becoming a mainstream educational concern.

This publication likewise supports the need to continue the sharing of experiences, materials and expertise among the Northeast Asian educators and to create a subregional momentum to further promote human rights education in the school system.

HURIGHTS OSAKA is preparing a material that compiles various components of human rights education in the form of educational policies, school rules and regulations, teaching and learning materials, and classroom and field activities. This is another step in the task of promoting human rights education as a strong component in the Northeast Asian school system.