



## Empowerment in Human Rights Education Theories: Towards a Dialectical Model

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### **Abstract**

The concept of empowerment is central to Human Rights Education (HRE) theories. HRE is a newly established field of educational theory that has received significant attention globally since the early 1990s. It primarily concentrates on disseminating knowledge about human rights and aims at empowering the global populace. However, prescriptive HRE often disregards the life experiences of the oppressed. Therefore, there is an urge to develop critical human rights education to implant empowerment in the oppressed truly. This article argues for the dialectical model of empowerment in HRE based on the episteme of the oppressed and the mutual dialogue that regenerates the entire field of HRE. The article primarily draws on Paulo Freire's valuable notion of the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' to analyze the nuances of empowerment in HRE theories and actualize the necessity of a dialectical model of HRE to empower people.

**Keywords:** *Empowerment; Human Rights; Oppressed; Agency; Transformation*

### **Introduction**

Human Rights Education (HRE) is concerned with promoting a universal human rights culture. It is commonly conceived as imparting knowledge of human rights. HRE aims to cultivate knowledge, skills, and values in people in order to recognize, claim and defend their rights. HRE has been defined variously by different institutions; however, it principally germinated through the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 1948. Thus, HRE is formed on human rights principles. Although there was earlier evidence of HRE in organizations such as Charter Schools and Workers Education Programmes, the UN was the first international organization that forged a formal relationship between human rights and education (Coysh, 2017, p. 47). Thus, it is essential to discuss what human rights are in brief in order to comprehend Human Rights Education in its entirety.

Against the historical backdrop of World wars and the immense loss of lives and treasury, the United Nations came into existence in 1945 with the aim of establishing peace, cohesion, justice, and

solidarity among nations and ensuring the rights and responsibilities of their citizens (Peters, 2015, p. 1-2). The international community stood together and acceded to the codification of universal human rights and consequently adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. It established basic standards without which people cannot live dignified lives. Such basic human rights entail life, liberty, equality, dignity, and justice. It is the same for every individual in every country, hence is universal. Human rights are equal, inalienable, and universal rights (Donnelly, 2013, p. 10). They are natural rights deemed indivisible, and interdependent. To realize the human rights codified in the UN documents requires knowledge about it on the part of individuals and government officials. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has acknowledged the importance of education as a mode of dissemination of knowledge, information, and skills stating that “everyone has the rights to education . . . and shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (UN, UDHR 1948, Article 26). Therefore, the goal of Human Rights Education is to establish a universal culture of human rights and the maintenance of peace in a society where everyone can enjoy a dignified life. It has drawn the attention of the assembly to how would this goal be achieved and insinuated that the UDHR should be “disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories”<sup>1</sup>. It seeks to disseminate knowledge about the rights and responsibilities of individuals which helps them to recognize human rights violations and develop skills and agency to claim their rights and mitigate human rights violations. It tends to create a just society.

Human Rights Education is relatively a newly established field of educational theory and praxis that has received significant attention across the globe since the early 1990s. It intersects with other fields of education such as peace education, citizenship education, anti-racism, and genocide education in academia. Nevertheless, it is not limited to formal education in its purview rather it is deeply connected to the non-formal education sector and professional training of educators, journalists, and government officials (Tibbitts, 2017). The chief concern of HRE is to empower people to realize their human rights.

### **Theoretical Framework: Empowerment and Liberation in Freirean Pedagogy**

Paulo Freire contends with the Kantian idea of emancipation which is “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” (Kant, 1784, p.1). Immanuel Kant places an undue ethical imperative on ‘man’ for his empowerment, discounting oppressive social structures. Therefore, Freire draws insights from Marxism to develop his theory of ‘pedagogy of the oppressed.’ Freirean pedagogy is constructed on his belief in social justice for the empowerment and liberation of the subordinated people. This pedagogy offers a critical understanding of the power structures that “unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation” (Freire, 1996, p. 54). Freire distinguishes between the ‘pedagogy of the oppressor’ and the ‘pedagogy of the oppressed,’ which coincides with ‘banking education’ and ‘problem-posing’ education, respectively.

‘Banking’ education infuses the oppressed with the ruling ideology of the oppressors and controls their understanding of the world. It serves the rhetoric of persisting status quo deviating the oppressed from reality. Thus, ‘banking’ education upholds knowledge that serves the ruling interest and functions as an instrument of domination. The oppressors do not consider the oppressed as ‘human beings’. For them, “‘human beings’ refers only to themselves; other people are ‘things’” (Freire, 1996, p. 57). By reducing the oppressed to the status of ‘object’, the oppressors make the oppressed believe they are incapable of constructing knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Comment of the General Assembly, 10 December 1948, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/resources/educators/human-rights-education-training/universal-declaration-human-rights-1948>.

Contrastingly, the ‘problem-posing’ approach concerns the empowerment and liberation of the oppressed or students. It encourages students to engage in the co-creation of knowledge with the teachers. Freire argues that the ‘problem-posing’ approach is the critical pedagogy that creates a dialogue between teachers and students where “the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students” (Freire, 1996, p. 80). The hierarchy between teacher and student dissolves, and students get empowered to be vocal and creative. It transforms the students into a ‘conscious being’, a subject, and the creator of knowledge. Such a critical pedagogy “ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation” (Freire, 1996, p. 54). Those committed to the empowerment of people refute ‘banking’ education and consider it “a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1996, p. 79). Therefore, Freire’s notion of critical pedagogy is revolutionary, transformative, and empowering. This approach of Freire has been employed in several works of literature on HRE seeking to unlearn the dominant epistemology of the oppressor and empower the oppressed from their repression.

### **Empowerment in Normative Human Rights Education and Critical Human Rights Education**

“The very core of the concept of . . . human rights education, implicates empowerment” (Ely-Yamin, 1993, p. 645). HRE is customarily focused on empowerment as an objective since its germination through the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. UDHR, in its preamble, states that “every individual and every organ of society . . . shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms” (UN, UDHR 1948). As the rubric suggests, HRE is staunchly established on the fundamentals of universal human rights. It aims at empowering people through education but contains Western norms as inalterable ‘truth’. Alicia Ely-Yamin argues that “empowerment itself is a normative concept” (Ely-Yamin, 1993, p. 645) which is predominantly framed and expressed through the language of international human rights instruments such as UDHR, UNESCO, EC, CRC, CEDAW, and the like. Further, Joanne Coysh argues that “a dominant discourse of human rights education has been controlled through global human rights framework” (Coysh, 2014, p. 89). Coysh critiques the exertion of the global human rights framework in education that ignores the knowledge of local communities. Therefore, the normative formulation of human rights, a “moral guardian of global capitalism and liberal internationalism” (Mutua, 2002, p. 157), fails to capture the diversity and complexity of local knowledge.

Normative HRE assumes that knowledge and values formulated in the West readily liberate the disempowered across the globe. This understanding of HRE does not necessarily empower the oppressed; instead, it devoid them of critical engagement. Normative HRE, analogous to banking education, restrains from the dialogic form of knowledge that also draws on the learners’ insights. Thus, normative HRE projects “an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression” (Freire, 1996, p. 72). It treats learners merely as receptacles to be filled with others’ ideas and knowledge, restricting a process of inquiry and scrutiny. Human rights defined, directed, and regulated by the UN can be “considered to be an ideology” (Zajda & Vissing, 2022, p. 4), and “educational institutions play a significant role in promulgating society’s dominant ideology” (Zajda & Vissing, 2022, p. 3). Andre Keet argues that HRE has been constructed “as a declarionist, conservative, and uncritical framework that disallows the integration of human rights critiques into the overall HRE endeavor” (Keet, 2012, p.7). Therefore, a critical form of HRE is required to overhaul the dominant mode of ideology and epistemic injustice inherent in normative HRE.

Contrary to the reductive idea of empowerment in normative HRE, this article argues that empowerment encompasses enormous possibilities for the dignified lives of the oppressed and the transformation of society as discussed below. Garth Meintjes argues that empowerment “requires enabling each target group to begin the process of acquiring the knowledge and critical awareness it needs to understand and question oppressive patterns of social, political, and economic organization” (Meintjes,

1997, p. 66). Empowered are the ones who can detach themselves from the normative knowledge and involve critically in the reconceptualization of their own life experiences and reconstitution of knowledge. HRE, in the true sense of empowerment, is emancipatory that transforms immaturity into maturity and ignorance into knowledge enabling an individual to use his own reason and be independent in claiming his rights. Seth Kreisberg defines empowerment as “a process through which people and/or communities increase their control or mastery of their own lives and the decisions that affect their lives” (Kreisberg, 1992, p.19). Kreisberg accedes with Meintjes and claims that empowerment focuses on regaining agency, dissociating itself from the external influence of normative values. Felicia L. Tibbitts further argues that empowerment cultivates agency in the learners to bring behavioral and societal change. She asserts that transformative and emancipatory learning “invite a critical reflection on power and oppression in one’s local environment” (Tibbitts, 2017, p. 12). Tibbitts’s transformative model of HRE is directed to liberate individuals and subordinated groups from internalized oppression.

Meintjes categorizes and distinguishes different concepts of empowerment, namely static and dynamic empowerment, and absolute and relative empowerment. The idea of static empowerment is an ahistorical approach that focuses only on the presently marginalized, oppressed, and silenced individuals or groups. It does not take history into account but offers disempowered people knowledge and material or professional assistance to make existing hierarchical and authoritarian institutions more accessible. It cannot succeed in genuinely empowering marginalized individuals; instead, it is merely paternalistic aid. Freire dismisses such charity-based empowerment approach as assistencialism and argues that it involves the danger of “anti-dialogue, which by imposing silence and passivity denies men conditions likely to develop or to ‘open’ their consciousness” (Freire, 1994, p. 41).

Meintjes finds static empowerment problematic as it refutes the dialogue with the disempowered. Instead, he advocates for the concept of dynamic and relative empowerment. Dynamic empowerment considers the overall socio-political contexts of the oppressed. He believes that recognizing the historical and socio-political context of a target group facilitates true empowerment. Similarly, absolutism in empowerment divides people as either empowered or disempowered, which is likely to disadvantage the partially empowered ones. The fixed line between them excludes many partially empowered people from the prospect of full empowerment. Therefore, it is wise to view the categories of empowered and disempowered relatively in the spectrum.

### **From Critical to Dialectical Human Rights Education: Empowerment from Top to Down and Bottom to Up**

Normative HRE is overtly hegemonic and overlooks the negotiation with the real victims. In contrast, Meintjes’ model of HRE is just focused on the oppressed, discarding the importance of human rights structures. Therefore, the dialectical model of HRE developed by Alicia Ely-Yamin is more significant for empowering people. Her model encourages dialogue between human rights ideals and the voices of the oppressed.

The proponents of HRE affirm it as emancipatory, whereas skeptics rebuff it as a ‘new world order’ ideology. Skeptics like Senarclens argues that HRE is detrimental which imbues students with values that would “be highly ideological and would go against the freedom of thought and autonomy that is inscribed in the principles of human rights” (Senarclens qtd. in Ely-Yamin, 1993, p. 662). “The heaviness of *declarations*” (Zembylas & Keet, 2019, p. 24) has already forged counter-hegemonic distrust among the people. However, Ely-Yamin does not consider HRE only reductive as the carrier of ideology; rather, she also believes in the potentiality of empowerment in education. She advocates for a dialectical pedagogy that validates personal experiences of rights deprivation and is critical to the underlying values of human rights. This paradigm “begins with the premise that human rights is aimed at empowering individuals to make choices for themselves in the fulfillment of their human dignity” (Ely-Yamin, 1993,

p. 644). Empowerment is thus an articulation of self-determination inspired by the understanding of human dignity.

Ely-Yamin discusses the three dimensions of advocacy and explores the possibilities of empowerment in HRE: pursuing an individual case, changing human rights discourse, and forming consciousness. She believes advocating human rights and pursuing individual cases do not bring change in society because the individual cases “do not attack the structure of abuses in any given social context” (Ely-Yamin, 1993, p. 648). For her, education is “potentially the most groundbreaking form of human rights advocacy” (Ely-Yamin, 1993, p. 652). However, she is also aware of declarative and legalistic education. Most literature on HRE is implicitly juridical; hence, declarative. Juridical education is valuable for advocating victims’ rights but it does not discuss the theoretical underpinning of human rights and the multiplicity of interpretations of the rights that the students can express. Against the declarationist HRE, Rancière presents the idea of an ignorant schoolmaster. The ignorant schoolmaster does not present himself as a scholar and explicates but interrogates students frequently in a Socratic manner. He argues that “to explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself” (Rancière, 1991, p. 6). Therefore, there should be a mutual will to learn but not to instruct or impose.

The dialectical model of HRE yields room to reflect upon what is and what is becoming. It empowers individuals through the formation of critical consciousness. Ely-Yamin believes that the dialectical approach provides “individual agency in the process of achieving human rights, but also recognizes the need for structural change” (Ely-Yamin, 1993, p. 680). It emphasizes critical consciousness in unmasking the concealed interest of power structures and “make the invisible structures of rights ideology visible” (Ely-Yamin, 1993, p. 679). Therefore, dialectical imagination of human rights engages both the historical reality of the oppressed and critiques the society’s power structures that deprive the full realization of human dignity. This approach transcends the dichotomy between school and community, students and curriculum, moral commitment and critical thought. It sees power as dynamic and fluid in which individuals must continue to be involved for its transmission and sustenance. The dialectical pedagogy perceives both schools and students as mutually constitutive.

### **Opportunities and Challenges of Empowerment in Human Rights Education**

The critical and dialectical model of HRE possesses the immense potential to transform society into a just one. It can make the world inclusive and non-discriminatory. The demystification of the oppressive structures of society ruptures the false consciousness infused in the mind of the disempowered. It helps them to form their own worldview based on local experience. It provides individuals dignity liberating them from abuses and oppression. Gert Biesta argues that “emancipation can be brought about if people gain an adequate insight into the power relations that constitute their situation” (Biesta, 2013, p. 81). Dismissing HRE merely as normative Western ideology does not provide structure to combat injustices and human rights violations. Therefore, the dialectical HRE model, which sees underlying Western values critically and local communities as co-constitutive of knowledge, empowers every individual and oppressed society. Besides, another possibility for regenerating HRE is to address students as a member of the global community instead of treating them only as national citizens. This form of HRE seeks to cultivate “vibrant global citizenship” emphasizing interdependence, global knowledge, and a commitment to social justice worldwide (Bajaj, 2001). It broadens the horizon of empowerment in HRE.

Despite having profound transformative possibilities, the concept of empowerment in HRE entails many challenges. The conventional education system is the first and foremost challenge the idea of empowerment in HRE faces. Although there is growing acceptance of empowerment in education, the integration of normative HRE with other fields of formal studies, such as peace studies, minority studies,

and decolonial studies, imbibe the students with the universal values associated with human rights standards. Similarly, the curricula in elementary and secondary schools are often designed based on the national educational guide, which gives little room for educators to develop reading materials based on local knowledge. Therefore, the national curriculum guidance often avoids the participation of the students in developing such curricula.

Teaching-learning activities should be taken in a fearless ambiance. However, HRE appears to be competing with governmental authority in the various political landscapes, and an undemocratic regime poses a threat to educators. It may reduce the teacher's instructions to more implicit and uncritical of the authority and existing power structures. It negatively influences the objective of empowerment in HRE. Furthermore, the full realization of empowerment in a particular society may be threatening to the elites and the rulers. They seek to preserve its "status quo, that are most likely to resist or repress the effort of HRE programs" (Meintjes, 1997, p. 71). Thus, educators must recognize the ruling ideology and political nature of knowledge, not conform, and submit to it. It is wise for educators to calculate the forthcoming challenges from the ruling authority and develop an approach to deal with them.

Moreover, a challenge to emancipative HRE may sometimes emerge from the double-edged nature of education itself. It is double-edged because education either functions to serve the ruling ideologies and manufacture consent or to liberate the oppressed. Louise Althusser posits that an educational institution is an Ideological State Apparatus that "functions massively and predominantly by *ideology*" (Althusser, 1971, p.112) to create hegemony among the subjects. Through education, the oppressors often transmit and cultivate the 'false consciousness' in the oppressed. The possibility here includes that the oppressor may control the values and the understanding of the oppressed. This form of education closely resembles banking education, where the ruling elites deposit their ideology in the students as a fact. The human rights educator should strive to awaken the critical consciousness of his disciples and prevent them from epistemic violence. Here comes the significance of Freire's notion of 'problem-posing' education which poses problems to the dominant mode of knowledge by questioning the repression and deprivation. However, radicalism in the empowerment or human rights movement involves the risk of transforming the oppressed into the oppressor. While reclaiming human dignity, Freire states that "the oppressed must not . . . become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both" (Freire, 1994, p. 44). Empowered does not signify dominion over others but the equal in dignity.

## Conclusion

Empowerment is essential to human rights education to make society just and egalitarian. The normative value of human rights education functions ideologically, expecting behavioral changes in marginalized individuals and communities by its Western standards. It does not interact with the real-life problems of the oppressed; thus, it is blind to the epistemology of the local communities. Critical pedagogy directly engages with oppressed people and empowers them to be conscientization, "the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and their capacity to transform that reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 27). However, it is more likely to create a binary between global and local, and oppressor and oppressed. Therefore, a dialectical mode of empowerment is of paramount significance in human rights education. It is more dynamic, flows from bottom to up and vice versa, and helps people reclaim lost human dignity and self-reliance. It also does not reject the human rights values entirely but reconstitutes them continually through the knowledge of the oppressed. This model should enable people to reclaim their right to redefine the meaning of the past and the present and to use local resources to meet their needs.

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### **Appendix/Abbreviations**

CEDAW: Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

CRC: Committee on the Rights of the Child.

EC: European Commission.

HRE: Human Rights Education.

UDHR: Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

UN: United Nations.

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

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