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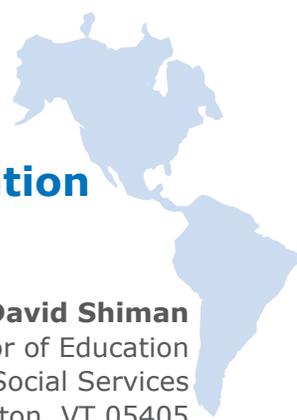
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Human Rights Education in Costa Rica: More Expectation than Implementation

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Abstract:

This research explores human rights curriculum and curriculum policy in Costa Rica and seeks to understand why a nation that views itself as a champion of human rights, and identifies human rights as a core value to be promoted in schools, has failed to develop a national plan for human rights education or provide the curricular and human resources needed for teaching human rights. The explanations are found in the Costa Rican view of their nation as a human rights culture as well as structural and resource conditions that impede efforts to advance human rights through education. However, one state university has made strides in incorporating human rights into its teacher preparation programs. Conducted in Costa Rica in 2007, this research combines interviews with government officials, educators, and researchers, and analyzes Ministry of Public Education policy statements and data gathered by the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights.

Introduction

Here is a piece of the Berlin Wall. It was given to Costa Rica because of our commitment to human rights...Did you know our president, Oscar Arias, received the Nobel Peace Prize, and that Costa Rica was the first country in the world to abolish its army?

So began my guided tour of the city of San José and my exposure to the dominant narrative of Costa Rican exceptionalism: the story of a country deeply committed to promoting democracy and human rights and providing social and health services to everyone within its borders, a country that sees itself as more progressive than other nations in Latin America.

This is a country that has signed almost every international human rights agreement and has played an important role promoting the goals of human rights education at the United Nations and in other settings (IIDH, 2002, part 1). I therefore expected as I entered this research to find a nation that would be demonstrating its commitment to human rights through its educational initiatives. However, what I uncovered was a lack of fit between official declarations asserting the importance of human rights, and curriculum policies and instructional guidelines that do little to promote human rights education in Costa Rican schools. In contrast, I discovered substantial growth in human rights education in the teacher preparation programs of the one higher education institution studied.



Research focus

In this article,¹ I strive to explain the relationship between Costa Rica's declared commitment to human rights and the place of human rights in curriculum policy, textbooks, and instructional guidelines. This involves exploring links among the present state of human rights curriculum in Costa Rica, human and material resource issues affecting curriculum policy implementation, and the people's sense of their own "exceptionalism," particularly their belief that Costa Rica already possesses a human rights culture. This includes examining the reasons Costa Rica, a strong advocate of the United Nations' World Program for Human Rights Education (2005), has not sought to develop a national plan for human rights education called for by the agreement.

This essay provides a variety of explanations for the state of human rights education in Costa Rica. It also points the way to fruitful areas for further research by identifying some larger questions about the efficacy of cross-curricular integration as a curriculum policy and the effect of human rights education on student learning and behaviors, teacher intra-classroom practices, and school policies. It suggests also that the relationship between a nation's commitment to human rights education and its history of political repression might be worthy of study. Finally, there is always the researchable question of the effect of curricular efforts in addressing societal problems, and in the Costa Rican case of addressing the perceived deterioration of human rights conditions.

Data sources and their limitations

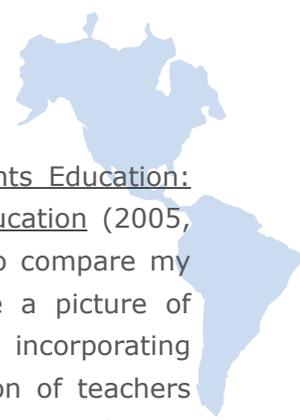
There were five different data sources employed in this study: reports on human rights education prepared by Inter-American

Institute of Human Rights (IIDH by its Spanish acronym), Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education publications, publications and syllabi from a state university, interviews with Costa Rican educators, researchers, and government officials involved in human rights education, and assorted other documents.

1) *Inter-American Institute of Human Rights (IIDH)*. I interpreted data from research on human rights education conducted by the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights (IIDH). Created in 1980 under an agreement between the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the Republic of Costa Rica, where it is located, IIDH has been gathering data on selected aspects of human rights education in 19 countries in Latin America since 2002.

By the end of 2007, IIDH had published five research reports on different aspects of human rights education in these countries. These reported on data that IIDH gathered for 1990 as well in order to compare them with data collected during the years 2002-2005/6. IIDH focused on policy statements and curricular content drawn from official government statements, ministry of education curricular guidelines and prescriptions, plans of study for selected subject areas (particularly social studies and civic education), textbook content for selected years (5th, 8th, and 11th), syllabi and plans of study at teacher preparation institutions, and reports on other forms of teacher education, such as in-service and ombudsman training. For the purpose of this study, I examined the information on Costa Rica extracted from these IIDH data.

One must be cautious, however, about reaching conclusions on the state of human rights education based on these data alone. There are no data in the following areas: student learning of human rights content, student behaviors affected by human rights instruction, and



teacher classroom behavior related to human rights principles. In addition, the data on teacher preparation programs provide nothing about the relationship between human rights learning and teacher-student interactions, selection of curriculum materials, classroom governance, or discipline policies.

Despite these obvious shortcomings, the IIDH reports offer strong suggestions of what sorts of human rights education might be occurring in the schools and whether such instruction has been increasing over the years.

2) *Costa Rica's Ministry of Public Education (MEP)*. I examined reports, policy and philosophical statements, and curriculum guidelines and prescriptions provided me by the Ministry. To my knowledge, the Ministry has gathered no data on student outcomes in human rights learning, or on teacher behaviors or intra-school policies and practices that might have been influenced by human rights principles.

3) *Interviews*. I conducted interviews with ten people: researchers, university faculty, classroom teachers, a Ministry of Public Education (MEP) official, and human rights education activists. Most people fell into more than one category. All were engaged in work related to human rights education and committed to its advancement, which influenced their assessment of present conditions in the country. The interviewees provided me with most other interviewee names.

4) *Universidad Nacional Autónoma (UNA)*. Besides the interviews mentioned earlier, I examined three course syllabi with human rights content that are part of the teacher education program, as well as university catalogs and other program information provided by this state university. I chose UNA because IIDH had reported on this institution in its Inter-

American Report on Human Rights Education: The Development of Teacher Education (2005, part 4). I was, therefore, able to compare my findings with theirs and provide a picture of the changes made over time in incorporating human rights into the preparation of teachers at this one university. Clearly, this is a glimpse into only one institution, but findings show what committed faculty can do. They also suggest that teacher training might be a fruitful area for future research.

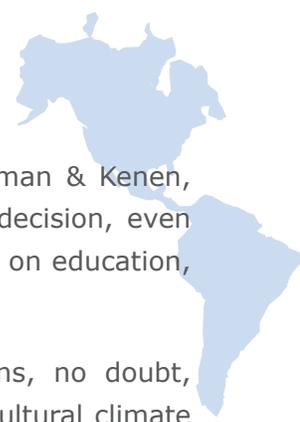
5) *Other written documents*. These include yearly reports on the state of the nation and the state of education prepared by prestigious national organizations, newspaper articles, and scholarly articles and books. Unfortunately, I found little scholarship on human rights education in Costa Rica that drew on sources other than IIDH's research.

I was limited to three months of research time in Costa Rica in 2007 and, therefore, was only able to examine and organize data previously gathered by IIDH, analyze documents, and conduct interviews. Others will need to explore inside classrooms to discover what is actually taught and learned in schools, and how that affects the manner in which students and teachers live their daily lives.

Costa Rican exceptionalism

There is a national mythology in Costa Rica. Its citizens often portray themselves and their nation as "exceptional" (Palmer and Molina, 2004). While scholars Palmer and Molina resist the temptation to apply this label to the country, they nevertheless state in *The Costa Rica Reader*, "We do insist on the distinctiveness of its past and present" (p. 3). They write:

During the colonial era, Costa Ricans suffered a relatively miserable lot, and



they have depended on two agricultural exports for most of the modern era. Yet they have built a democratic political system and achieved a healthy measure of social justice in a region where dictatorship and grotesque inequality have been the sad norm (p. 3).

Costa Rica's colonial society, they continue, also was not built on coerced indigenous or slave labor that would have left a destructive legacy of racial and ethnic division (Palmer & Molina, 2004). "Forces favoring social, ethnic, and cultural integration have tended to outweigh those favoring discrimination" (p. 5). Over the years there has emerged, as Palmer and Molina describe it, a Costa Rican propensity to "resolve conflict by channeling it in a legal and institutionalized fashion" (p. 5). Finally, in the last few decades, Costa Ricans have sought to add another dimension of exceptionalism to that of the stable, liberal, and peaceful democracy. Vivanco (2006) writes, "They have incorporated ecological appreciation as a positive national characteristic" (p. 10), situating themselves as the ecological leader of the Americas and thereby expanding on the Costa Rican narrative mentioned above.

Costa Rica's decision in 1949 to become the first nation in the world to constitutionally abolish its army was one of its most important development decisions. This move enabled the government to direct more resources towards human development goals. However, Palmer and Molina (2004) point out that many years prior to this decision, Costa Rica had already begun to increase the proportion of its budget devoted to public health, education, and public works and to reduce the percentage assigned to the military and police. The state had, in 1941, passed legislation establishing a social welfare program that provided protection for the ill,

elderly, disabled, and poor (Edelman & Kenen, 1989). However, with this 1949 decision, even greater emphasis could be placed on education, health, and the social services.

All of these official actions, no doubt, contributed to the creation of a cultural climate that valued civility, non-violent responses to conflict, and respect. In addition, while this might be difficult to document, educational, religious, and family institutions must have participated in building a society sensitive to what are now called human rights concerns long before the terminology entered the public lexicon.

Today, there are social, economic, and environmental indicators to which one can point as evidence of Costa Rica's exceptionalism. In 2004, an International Monetary Fund official described Costa Rica in the following fashion:

A central tenet that has been embraced by Costa Rica is that the ultimate goal of economic policy is to deliver human development. Over the past 20 years, poverty has been reduced from 40 percent of the population to below 20 percent. Extreme poverty has been halved from its level in 1990—thus, Costa Rica has already achieved the first Millennium Development Goal or MDG. In fact, Costa Rica's social indicators are the best in Latin America and, in some cases, approach levels prevailing in advanced economies. Education levels are high and practically the entire population is literate. Health indicators are strong, with high life expectancy. There is wide access to health services and safe water. Forest degradation has been reversed and, more generally, protection of the environment has been a top priority (Carstens, 2004).



Demographic data from the United Nations' *Human Development Report* (2006) seems to support this conclusion:

- * Life expectancy at birth: 78.3 years (24th in world); (1st in Latin America)
- * Infant mortality: 11 deaths out of 1000 births (48th in world); (4th in Latin America)
- * Adult literacy: nearly 95% of population (38th in world); (4th in Latin America)
- * Access to improved water sources: 97% of population (12th in world); (3rd in Latin America)
- * Children under weight at birth: 5% of population (24th in world); (4th in Latin America)

The United Nations' Human Development Index, (2006), which is a composite of several indicators,² places Costa Rica at 48th out of 177 countries in the world, while its Human Poverty Index³ (2006) places it 4th among 102 developing countries. For both indices, only Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina rank higher than Costa Rica in Central and South America.

Civil and political indicators are just as impressive. Freedom House (2006) assigns Costa Rica its highest overall rating for political and civil rights in its *2006 Report on Freedom in the World*. The U.S. State Department's (2006) Report on Human Rights, while identifying some areas of concern (e.g., domestic violence and exploitation of children), gives Costa Rica an overwhelmingly positive evaluation in its ten-page report. In particular, it praises Costa Rica's ombudsman's office for monitoring of government actions and advocating on behalf of citizens. Amnesty International's (2006) annual report, entitled *The State of the World's Human Rights*, which focuses on countries where serious human rights violations need to be addressed,

does not even include a section on Costa Rica. Finally, the Cinganelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Data Project places Costa Rica among the lowest four nations in Latin America in their incidence of human rights violations (Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights Data Project, 2008).

Perhaps, there is something to this Costa Rica exceptionalism: a little Switzerland in Central America, committed to democracy and social development, that is a cut above almost all other countries in Central and South America. Seligson's (2001) research comparing Costa Rican, Chilean, and Mexican views of democracy does suggest that Ticos, as Costa Ricans call themselves, are different. For one thing, they possess the longest uninterrupted democracy in Latin America. Seligson writes:

What can we say about Costa Rica exceptionalism? We know that Costa Ricans have a much stronger preference for democracy than do the citizens of Mexico and Chile. We also know that variables such as respect for the rule of law and willingness to hold government accountable for its actions are factors that make Costa Ricans different from their counterparts elsewhere in Latin America. (p. 106)

He continues, "...all countries develop national myths; Costa Rica is a small country, and they are proud of their democracy...Central to the Costa Rican myth is the country's identity as a democracy" (p. 106).

Almost everyone I interviewed, while not necessarily using the word "exceptional," described Costa Rica as superior to other nations in Central and South America in its commitment to human rights. Most of those interviewed, however, raised serious concerns about existing human rights conditions in Costa Rica. I



incorporate these concerns into my discussion later in this essay.

State of human rights education in schools

The research into human rights education in Costa Rica discussed here has focused on curriculum content and knowledge (e.g., history, international agreements, and constitutional protections), with little attention being paid to intra-classroom practices, school and classroom climate, and student learning about human rights. Nevertheless, the indicators point to increased attention paid to human rights in curriculum, textbooks, and educational policy statements during the past two decades.

This section first describes the human rights education policies of the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) that center around promoting the transversal, i.e. cross-curricular, integration of human rights themes across grade levels and school subject areas. It continues with a discussion of the research findings reported by the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights (IIDH) on the presence and/or absence of human rights content in Ministry of Public Education's plans of study (curriculum guidelines), and in selected textbooks for grades 5, 8, and 11. This part concludes with a description of the place of human rights in the curriculum (course syllabi) of students preparing to be teachers at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma (UNA), one of Costa Rica's four state universities. Afterwards, I will offer interpretations for the condition of human rights education in Costa Rica reported here.

Curriculum Policy Guidelines

The Ministry of Public Education (MEP) established the National Program for Values Education (El Programa Nacional de Formación en Valores) in 1987, but it was not until 2003 that the Consejo Superior de Educación (Higher

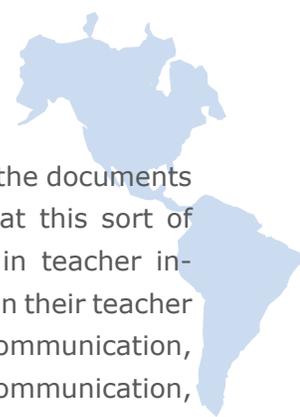
Education Council) established four "transversal" themes that were to "cross and impregnate horizontally and vertically, all the subjects of the curriculum" (MEP, 2003, p. 2). The MEP official interviewed described them in the following manner:

Temas transversales (Transversal Themes): 1) Cultura Ambiental para el Desarrollo Sostenible (Environmental Culture for Sustainable Development), 2) Educación Integral de la Sexualidad Humana (Integral Education of Human Sexuality), 3) Educación para la Salud (Health Education) and 4) Vivencia de los Derechos Humanos para la Democracia y la Paz (Experience of Human Rights for Democracy and Peace) (Personal Communication, March 7, 2007, translated by author).

The Ministry has declared human rights to be one of four transversal value themes intended to be addressed in all disciplines. By this strategy, the MEP hoped to include human rights content in the curriculum of specific courses.

Despite the fact that human rights is considered a transversal theme by the MEP, it is clear from Ministry documents, as well as communication with a MEP official, that the social sciences, particularly civic education and social studies, are expected to carry the brunt of the responsibility for human rights education (MEP, n.d., Ficha; Personal Communication, February 28, 2007).

This approach to cross-curricular integration is not unique to Costa Rica. Civic educators and many human rights educators have discussed its value (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Flowers, 1998; Cox, Jaramillo, and Reimers, 2005). Questions about cross-curricularity, horizontal integration, or *transversalidad*, as



the MEP calls it, abound in the exchanges about methodology in human rights education found on the Global Human Rights Education Listserv over the years. These include discussions of many of the obstacles to curricular integration identified by this research (See <http://www.hrea.org/lists/hr-education>)

In an attempt to monitor this transversal education, the MEP has generated a checklist for its education officials visiting schools to report on how well the transversal themes are being taught (MEP, n.d., Lista). However, the MEP reports that there is little follow-up intervention by the MEP if a school is in fact found deficient in its instruction of these transversal themes (Personal Communication, March 7, 2007).

The issuance of policy statements, publication of guidelines, distribution of materials on values, and in-service training are the MEP's principal vehicles for intervention. Regarding the last of these, my review of the titles of in-service workshops conducted by the MEP between 2003 and 2005 identified none that specifically mention human rights. (Note: The 1998-2002 workshop titles are not specified.) Most of the in-service sessions, however, have titles that suggest a more general focus on values education, including moral decision-making and self-concept. It would not be unreasonable to conclude that themes related to human rights have been addressed in some of these sessions.

In March 2006, the MEP published a thoughtful, clear set of guidelines for incorporating the four value themes into instructional plans. *Los Valores En El Planeamiento Didáctico Eje Transversal del Currículo Costarricense* provides a rationale and examples for incorporating each theme across the curriculum (MEP, 2006). This is, however, not easy teaching, as most teachers require special training to become effective cross-disciplinary instructors. Neither the

university faculty interviewed nor the documents I examined revealed evidence that this sort of training is provided by the MEP in teacher in-service sessions or by universities in their teacher preparation programs (Personal Communication, March 26, 2007; Personal Communication, February 23, 2007).

Finally, despite the many policy statements and guidelines from the MEP, there is no way of knowing, without a research effort quite different from this one, the degree to which human rights knowledge, values, and behaviors have penetrated the Costa Rican classroom and the learning outcomes of the students. MEP data on teaching practices and assessments of student learning about human rights would need to be gathered and analyzed. Nevertheless, one might conclude that the promotion of human rights as a transversal value in the MEP guidelines is a positive sign. I will, however, discuss criticisms of this sort of curriculum strategy in a later section of this essay.

National Plan for Human Rights Education

In the first stage (2005-2007) of the United Nations' World Program for Human Rights Education (2005), to which Costa Rica committed itself, countries were expected to take an inventory on the status of human rights education in the country, write a report, establish priorities, develop an implementation plan, and disseminate goals and strategies. However, Costa Rica has failed to take steps toward the development of a national plan for human rights education.

If one views, as IIDH (2005, part ?) does, that progress towards this goal is a key indicator of a government's recognition of the importance of promoting human rights education, then one would be forced to conclude that the Costa Rican official commitment is weak. However, the MEP



argues that they have taken another path. The official interviewed, at least, asserts that the transversal themes are part of the 2002-2006 National Education Plan, and that such a plan is all that is necessary (Personal Communication, February 28, 2007).

The efficacy of this “transversal” approach will be discussed in detail in the next section. Suffice it to say here that there appears to be no evidence that this interdisciplinary approach serves as an effective vehicle for promoting human rights learning in Costa Rican schools.

Curriculum and Textbook Content

While policy statements might be declarations of the intent to teach about a subject like human rights, curriculum and textbook content bring us closer to discovering actual classroom practice. The research conducted by the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights (IIDH) shows that human rights education has been on the upswing since 1990. However, IIDH (2006) does not find human rights themes have penetrated most subjects, as advocates of the MEP’s principle of *transversalidad* would have hoped. Neither the plans of study developed by the MEP nor the content of textbooks in selected subjects point to a substantial presence of human rights in classroom instruction.

Let us turn first to the official educational plans for social studies and civic education (grades 5, 8, and 11) developed by the MEP and distributed to teachers. These were the foci for IIDH’s second report (2002). IIDH reviewed these plans, looking for changes in the presence of four indicators of curricular inclusion of human rights between 1990 and 2002/3. These content indicators are: specific references to 1) human rights and constitutional guarantees, 2) justice, state institutions, and the rule of law, 3) democracy, the right to vote, elections, and

political and ideological pluralism, and 4) values (i.e., solidarity, human dignity, peace, tolerance, and cooperation among nations).

There are some curricular constants in the human rights content of the Ministry’s educational plans of 1990 and 2002/3. These include: an emphasis on citizenship, constitutional guarantees, and the role of institutions in protecting and promoting democracy. We can find more human rights-related references in curriculum in 2002/3 than in 1990. We also find specific mention of children’s rights as articulated in the United Nations’ Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), greater emphasis on non-discrimination and core values of tolerance, respect, and solidarity, and increased concern with gender issues. Finally, there are some major omissions in both the 1990 and 2002/3 curriculum content: no curricular references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reported by the IIDH researchers, little mention of the global nature of human rights challenges, and almost no opportunity provided for students to act on human rights values. And, where human rights problems are identified, IIDH (2002, part 2) notes that they appear to be examined only within a Costa Rican context, with few references to the rest of the world.

Similar findings appear in IIDH (2002, part 2) research reports into human rights content in textbooks. The early (1990) texts speak only of the obligations of citizens in Costa Rica, almost to the exclusion of any international references to human rights. The textbook data from 2002/3 reveals many more explicit references to human rights. Texts in the 5th grade refer to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and make reference to the three generations of human rights: civil/political rights, economic/social/cultural rights, and solidarity/environmental rights. There is a heavy emphasis



in the textbooks on civic values and moral education, particularly respect, tolerance, and participation. This emphasis on values as the basis for social coexistence, no doubt, reflects the MEP establishment of human rights as one of its transversal value themes in 2003.

On another front, the IIDH findings reveal a substantial jump in content on gender equity between 1990 and 2003: specifically, there is more inclusive language and more images of women in the texts. However, IIDH does report that gender concerns are not placed in a global context, nor do the texts make mention of content specifically linked to the Convention for the Elimination of All Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), signed at the United Nations in 1981.

Taking a slightly different approach in its fifth research report, IIDH (2006) focused on changes in human rights content in MEP curricular guidelines, textbooks, and curricular spaces between 2000 and 2005 for children aged 10-14 years. This IIDH research also included content analyses of subjects besides social studies and civic education. They report that religious education guidelines link human rights to one's responsibilities as a child of God, and other course guidelines mention the right to health. However, IIDH asserts that human rights themes have not penetrated most of the other subject areas, as advocates of the MEP's principle of *transversalidad* would have hoped.

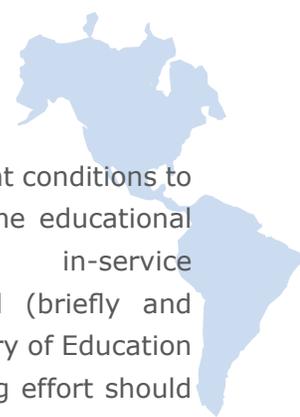
IIDH (2006) concludes that human rights are not sufficiently visible in the curriculum. Even when themes related to human rights are evident, often the link is not made in the materials to the fact that human rights issues are global in nature and that human rights principles are articulated in a range of international documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There is little curricular opportunity provided for children to raise questions about their attitudes

and behavior with respect to global human rights concerns. Instead, the curriculum makes links only to the students' personal values and attitudes in a Costa Rican context. IIDH researchers contend:

Curiously, the curricula where much lower frequency of human rights content are detected are in the countries that have included human rights as "transversal" axes or themes (Costa Rica, for example) or inside a transversal ethical axis (Chile, for example) (p. 62, translation by author). Human rights content, IIDH (2006) argues, is more evident and prevalent when there are specific subjects dedicated to it, rather than assuming that it will be folded into all the subject areas. The IIDH (2006) report and two human rights researchers interviewed (Personal Communication, March 15, 2007; Personal Communication, March 19, 2007) noted also that there is a tendency for a more substantial human rights curricular focus to be found in countries where human rights have been under assault in the not-too-distant past, such as Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, and Peru. Not surprisingly, in such countries there is now a strong felt need to develop and promote those democratic principles and practices that were previously repressed.

Teacher Preparation

A fourth and final area to consider in understanding the state of human rights education in Costa Rica is the preparation of teachers. IIDH's third report (2005) focused on teacher training in 19 countries; however, Universidad Nacional Autónoma (UNA) was the only Costa Rican institution included in that report. I chose to update, so to speak, findings based on that singular data source. I examined the data gathered by IIDH, conducted interviews with faculty members, and analyzed syllabi and other related UNA program material. From 1990 to 2007, there has been substantial progress in



the inclusion of human rights themes into the preparation of teachers at UNA. I deliberately use the language of inclusion, rather than infusion or integration, because the latter terms would suggest that human rights are woven into the teacher preparation programs. Based on my interviews and analysis of UNA course offerings, using a word such as “infusion” is premature.

The IIDH (2005, part 3) research into the incorporation of human rights themes into the preparation of teachers focused on fifteen indicators of content,⁴ as found in 1) international agreements, government documents, and MEP policy statements, 2) teacher training courses, 3) in-service sessions, and 4) ombudsman efforts. This wide-ranging list of themes includes: values, rights of the child, and institutional order, to name a few. The list reflects the IIDH research emphasis on indicators that are measurable and identifiable in documents, syllabi, and policy statements. While helpful, this narrow focus provides little insight into intra-classroom climate, teacher-student relations, instructional methodology, or school environment dimensions of human rights, and little reference to social actions taken by students or teachers in the name of human rights principles.

A brief survey report on teacher training in Costa Rica, prepared by an IIDH researcher for the Global Strategic Planning Meeting on Teacher Training in Human Rights Education held in New York in 2005, described human rights education in teacher preparation in the following manner:

...Teacher training is the “missing link” in an otherwise positive scenario for HRE... The main obstacle in my opinion is the general lack of awareness of the importance of training future teachers in HRE. School curricula and textbooks which include HRE contents are

necessary, but not sufficient conditions to fully incorporate HRE in the educational system. Furthermore, in-service teacher training provided (briefly and occasionally) by the Ministry of Education is not enough. The training effort should be seriously made during the regular formation process of new teachers, which in Costa Rica is conducted by university Schools of Education—both public and private (Rodino, 2005).

The changes that have taken place at Universidad Nacional Autónoma (UNA) suggest that this institution, at least, has substantially increased the human rights emphasis in its preparation of teachers. This Costa Rican university, according to IIDH (2005, part 3) research, had no elective or required courses on human rights in 1990 but did make references to international agreements, organizations, environmental issues, and types of human rights in some courses. There are data for 2002/3 about elective courses on human rights and other courses that include some human rights themes. In particular, there was an increased focus on social issues (health, work, education), the exercise of democracy and peace, and links to issues of due process and the rule of law. There was also an increase in references to gender equality and children’s rights in the teacher preparation curriculum.

By 2007, the situation in several of the teacher preparation programs at UNA had changed substantially. There are now two courses with a specific human rights focus which are required for different teacher preparation programs at UNA: *La Niñez y Sus Derechos en el Contexto Costarricense (Childhood and Children’s Rights in the Costa Rican Context)* and *Derechos Humanos de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (Childhood and Adolescent Human Rights)*.



There is another course, entitled *Educación para la Diversidad (Education for Diversity)*, that is required in a third program at UNA, and which addresses many human rights issues. In addition, for some time there have been human rights topics included in the course content for those specifically preparing to be social science and civics teachers.

This shift to required courses came in 2005 and 2006, as faculty reviewed their programs of study and made changes. The faculty in one program engaged in an emotional debate about the appropriateness of promoting the rights of children in school settings. A UNA faculty member reported that some professors felt that a human rights course was not necessary because the children did not need lessons in rights (Personal Communication, March 26, 2007). She stated that some faculty claimed that “the children have too many rights,” perhaps expressing concerns about liberal child-rearing practices. She reported that these professors also saw teaching and promoting human rights in schools as a challenge to the authority of the classroom teacher and as a threat to the teacher’s rights. Needless to say, the vote to include a human rights course as a requirement in this teacher preparation program was far from unanimous.

The course syllabi at UNA offer the traditional human rights content of theory, history, and international agreements, but they also strive to make links between human needs and human rights. In doing so, they reference The Convention of the Rights of the Child and Costa Rica’s Code of Children’s Rights, and they address areas of human rights concern in the country: child labor, sexual exploitation, and child abuse and abandonment. Several UNA faculty emphasized that the need for human rights education is particularly great in rural areas where there are higher levels of poverty, fewer employment

opportunities, less presence of the state (and its services), and conditions where children and adolescents are more vulnerable to various forms of abuse and exploitation. Future teachers play an expanded role in rural areas, assuming social service and advocacy responsibilities that their urban counterparts do not necessarily assume. The classroom teacher needs to be able to identify human rights violations and know where to turn for help (Personal Communication, March 26, 2007; Personal Communication, February 23, 2007). Critical of traditional teaching about human rights that concentrates on facts, documents, and theory, one UNA faculty member stated, “If you teach about the Declaration, Convention, etc., it is boring (*aburrido*)...because the lesson is not connected to their lives or the lives of their students in the rural setting” (Personal Communication, March 26, 2007). This faculty member and others interviewed lamented the concentration on information about human rights and a lack of emphasis on preparing to teach according to human rights principles. They claimed that the teacher preparation courses focusing on methodology, classroom climate, and curriculum content were particularly lacking in a human rights perspective. “They don’t know human rights,” one faculty member claimed, “and they use little of the language of human rights” in their discussions of practical classroom concerns—climate, discipline, teacher/student relations, curriculum orientation.” (Personal Communication, March 26, 2007). Other interviewees shared similar assessments.

Understanding the Condition of Human Rights Education

Clearly, Costa Rica has made advances in human rights education since 1990. However, the progress has been uneven, and the nation has not lived up to the standards it set for itself and for other countries. What explanations can



we offer to account for this? Some fall within the conventional realm of observed human and material resource limitations, structural obstacles, and differing national priorities. But other possible explanations are associated with the Costa Rican sense of their “exceptionalism” discussed earlier. Indeed, almost everyone I interviewed, while critical of conditions in Costa Rica, spoke of their nation as having a strong commitment to human rights values and being imbued with a human rights culture. They did not therefore declare a sense of urgency for increased efforts to advance human rights education in the schools. They did, however, often point to a great need to promote human rights through education in surrounding countries.

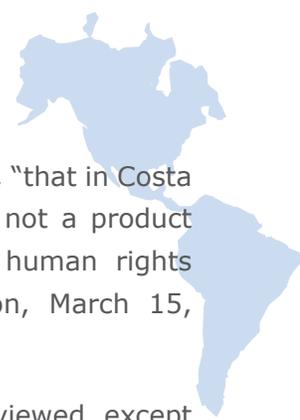
The state of the uneven advancement in human rights education in Costa Rica is captured by the fact that the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) assigns to *Human Rights for Democracy and Peace* its lowest priority among its four transversal themes. Reflecting on the initial establishment of the four transversal themes, the MEP official interviewed stated:

.... since the idea of values is so broad, the country decided to make four areas: Sexuality, health, education and environment, and human rights. These four themes are the most important areas of our educational system. Sexuality and health--we have to work on those. It's urgent to work on these themes. And we decided to work on them because they are the biggest weaknesses in our country. And the other two we decided to work on because they are strengths of our country, to give a base to other themes. What are the other important themes? Sustainable development--our country has always had the characteristic of having the convergence of many

climates, environment, nature, and we are internationally recognized for what we have to offer in nature. So we have to take advantage of this strength, and the other—human rights. Here we've always worked on the regime of human rights, and respecting human rights, we have to strengthen this, we have to take advantage of this strength as well. We believe we do it very well, so we have to continue doing it well, but there are also smaller issues to broach. (Personal Communication, February 28, 2007).

Given this perception of the challenges before Costa Rica, it should come as no surprise that the MEP does not seem drawn to developing a national plan for human rights education. The principle explanations offered by the MEP for not developing a national plan lay in their commitment to the potential efficacy of the *transversalidad* approach to human rights education, and their belief that Costa Rica lacks a compelling need for such a major initiative. Although Costa Rica signed on to the UN World Programme for Human Rights Education, with its call for each nation to develop its own plan for human rights, the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education does not seem inclined to move in that direction. A MEP official wrote to me stating:

I must be honest with you to inform that the only thing that has been done in relation to the education in human rights is related to “*transversalidad*”, that as I commented to you another day, it approaches a specific topic on Human Rights for the Democracy and the Peace and that one works in the whole system, but integrally, neither as subject nor as exclusive strategy (Personal Communication, March 7, 2007).



Not surprisingly, nothing more in the area of human rights education is deemed necessary at this time.

When asked to explain why Costa Rica had not moved forward in developing a national plan for human rights education, this same MEP official stated:

I think because Costa Rica has a common idea (sic), with authorities and people in general, that human rights is something natural in our country. This is probably the reason, but it's not a good reason... I think we're accustomed to thinking that when it comes to human rights, what occurs in other countries is very attention catching, when we really should be paying more attention (sic). Here there aren't wars, people aren't killed in the streets, and maybe because of this we don't take this consideration (sic)...It's a country of rights. Generally, we have a peaceful environment... and culture. The disadvantage is that we don't see the smaller things that need to be attended to. There are things we need to tend to (Personal Communication, February 28, 2007, translated by author).

The human rights researchers interviewed for this study held views quite similar to the MEP official. When explaining why other nations were ahead of Costa Rica in developing national plans for incorporating human rights into instruction and curriculum, one researcher stated, "Other countries need to develop something that does not exist" (Personal Communication, March 19, 2007), meaning that they are trying to use schools to create a human rights climate after decades of struggle against dictatorships and oppression. Another human rights researcher developed this theme in a separate interview.

"You need to understand," he said, "that in Costa Rica respect for human rights is not a product of education...Costa Rica has a human rights culture" (Personal Communication, March 15, 2007).

In fact, every person interviewed, except one, commented on the favorable human rights conditions in Costa Rica. While they all might not accept the MEP view that there is a lack of urgency for promoting human rights education, they did see Costa Rica as special, even exceptional, among the nations of Central and South America. This is not surprising, given Costa Rica's relatively peaceful history, longstanding government commitment to social development, and public support for democratic institutions. Nevertheless, this perception of their own country appears to impede the development of strong initiatives to advance the cause of human rights education in schools.

Besides this sense of Costa Rican exceptionalism, there are other factors that help explain the apparent lack of implementation of human rights education in Costa Rican schools. Most of these also relate to Costa Rica's strategy to advance human rights learning through the four curricular crosscutting, i.e. *transversal*, value themes. First, there are issues related to teacher preparation and curricular orientation. Several UNA faculty stated that many teachers are not prepared or sufficiently competent to teach in the manner proposed by the MEP (Personal Communication, February 23, 2007; Personal Communication, February 19, 2007). Teachers are expected to submit lesson plans to their department head or school director (principals), showing how they are incorporating human rights (and the other transversal themes) into their teaching plans. However, teachers have had few opportunities to acquire a knowledge base for teaching about human rights, and



relatively little has been offered through in-service training to address this shortcoming. The same holds true for developing the capacity to teach in a cross-disciplinary manner. This involves not only making connections to other subject areas but also collaborating with colleagues in other disciplines. Lamenting the lack of interdisciplinary teaching, the MEP official blamed the narrowness in the subject matter preparation of prospective teachers at universities to explain why teachers fail to make cross-disciplinary connections in the classroom (Personal Communication, February 28, 2007). In contrast, several university faculty pointed to the narrow discipline focus of the national examinations administered by the MEP, which provide no opportunity for evaluating cross-disciplinary learning, and thereby discourage teachers from spending time on cross-content learning that is not evaluated on these examinations (Personal Communication, March 26, 2007; Personal Communication, February 23, 2007). As has been reported by others promoting citizenship education elsewhere in the world, the stamp of importance that accompanies being an examinable subject ensures that serious attention is paid to the discipline by teachers (Kerr, 1999).

Although the MEP official interviewed speaks of the importance of weaving human rights into curriculum, there is no formal assessment of human rights learning in the national examinations, particularly at 11th grade level (the *bachillerato*). There might be a few questions on civic education or social studies examinations, but nothing that reflects the supposed curricular importance assigned to the “transversal theme” of *Human Rights for Democracy and Peace*. No attempt apparently has been made (or is anticipated) by the MEP to use the national examination requirements as a way of promoting/ requiring teaching about human rights in schools (Personal Communication, February 28, 2007).

There are two related administrative challenges to monitoring the teachers’ efforts to incorporate human rights into their instruction. Several interviewees asserted that school administrators, particularly in large institutions, often do not have the time to review and provide the feedback a teacher might need to teach in a cross-disciplinary fashion. In addition, both a human rights researcher and a schoolteacher note that many administrators themselves lack the knowledge of human rights to be helpful to teachers seeking to include this content in their teaching (Personal Communication, March 15, 2007; Personal Communication, February 1, 2007).

Second, several interviewees commented on teacher resistance to promoting a non-authoritarian, democratic climate within schools and classrooms that would embody human rights principles. According to many interviewed, teachers are willing to introduce human rights content into curriculum, but they resist efforts to transform power relationships in the classroom to promote a more respectful, fair classroom environment. There appears to be an authoritarian propensity in many teachers that is difficult to change. This discovery is consistent with my own experience as a human rights education workshop leader in other parts of the world (i.e., South Africa, Poland, Guyana, and the United States of America). The implicit attitude of teachers seems to be: Change content, yes; alter power relations between students and teachers, no.

Third, there are resource shortages that interfere with MEP efforts to promote human rights education in schools. There is a lack of personnel in the MEP division on values education, and there are only two professionals in the central Ministry office whose full-time



responsibility is values education for the entire country. There are, however, other field-based personnel who have values education as part of their responsibilities. Their work involves: curriculum writing and development, evaluation, in-service education, and classroom observation, among others. While the values division of the MEP has procedures to try to keep abreast of what is happening in Costa Rican schools with respect to the four transversal themes, the personnel available to do the necessary work seems quite inadequate.

Fourth, the MEP makes few curriculum resources about human rights available to teachers. In 2000, the MEP distributed a book to teachers (principally in social studies and civics) of curriculum activities on human rights that had been developed by the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights . Nothing has been distributed in the few years since and, according to this MEP official, it is doubtful that this one resource is easily available to teachers who have entered the profession since that time. Other materials on values distributed by the MEP focus predominantly on individual moral decision-making and social development, with almost no specific references to human rights (Personal Communication, February 28, 2007).

Efforts to advance human rights education in Costa Rican schools have been less than vigorous over the years, however, now there might be increased calls for its promotion through the schools. Costa Ricans are raising serious questions about the economic, social, and political health of the nation, as it moves down its present development path. As will be discussed in the following section, those interviewed assert that human rights conditions are deteriorating, and declare the need for the government and the citizenry to respond.

The Challenges before Costa Rica

Every person interviewed, and almost every source read, acknowledges that Costa Rica is at a moment in her history when she needs to mobilize resources to attend to human rights and development issues pressing upon the nation. Many interviewees point to an increase in violence: domestic violence, use of weapons brought by immigrants, intra-school bullying and fights, and property crimes and muggings related to the growing gap between the rich and poor.

One researcher does actually connect this with a need for human rights education in the schools. He states, "When you are talking about human rights, we don't have human rights as central to our curriculum. Some say we don't need it in the schools because we already have it....But we do need to have it in formal education" (Personal Communication, March 15, 2007). He argues that the school is more important now than it ever was in Costa Rican history, and points to the challenge of immigration (legal and illegal), particularly those Nicaraguans whom he describes as swelling Costa Rica's underclass. "They didn't grow up in this culture and they need this education...with a focus on human rights... They lack the same cultural background" (Personal Communication, March 15, 2007). He is also concerned that Costa Ricans don't recognize discrimination because, he argues, "they think that there is no discrimination in Costa Rica, and that they don't have any prejudices. And, then you say what about the Nicaraguans and homosexuals, and they say, 'Well, that's different'" (Personal Communication, March 15, 2007).

An expert on human rights and development at UNA places concerns about the condition of human rights in Costa Rica in a larger analytical framework. He states:



They say Costa Rica has a civilized tradition, and with respect to human rights, a long history, and that's basically true... [In] Costa Rica, rights of electoral liberties are more or less guaranteed, there's a good deal of trust in the system, there are periodic elections, and the situation of torture has been eradicated - not totally, but in the face of what has emerged in the rest of America, Costa Rica is an exception in that sense. So, we responded very well to liberal paradigms and procedures of human rights, and because of this, Costa Rica doesn't have bigger problems today. (Personal Communication, February 23, 2007).

However, he worries about the erosion of democracy and social and economic rights as his country becomes more entwined in a global economy. He argues that those who control the media frame, control, and limit the conversation about the nation's future, thereby stifling freedom of speech, which is an area of particular concern identified by the CIRI Human Rights Data Project in its generally favorable assessment of Costa Rica. He points to human rights education as a means to empower people to take back their rights.

An especially harsh criticism of human rights conditions in Costa Rica and of its government's lack of commitment to human rights education comes from another human rights activist interviewed. She responds to the assertion, often heard from others interviewed, that Costa Ricans are better off than their neighbors and live in a healthy country where there is no urgency or need to develop national plans for human rights education.

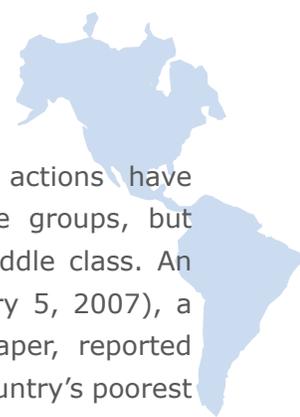
...But if you walk in San José, you will see children sleeping in the streets. There is poverty. There is an increase in violence...

The reality is that Costa Rica has many human rights problems that they refuse to face...The government moves ahead with TLC (Tratado de Libre Comercio) that will result in a decline in health, environment, distribution of wealth, education. These problems have been on the rise since the 1980s. Our ministries make declarations, but they don't follow through. They talk about human rights but they don't promote them in schools... The government changes directions and priorities every few years, with changes in leadership. But, it is really the gap between what they say and what they do (Personal Communication, February 28, 2007).

A more overarching explanation of Costa Rica's failure to embrace a more aggressive human rights education policy lies with an expansive criticism of the government's national development policies and its perceived retreat from being a social welfare state. Scholars and some interviewees pointed to the economic crisis in the early 1980s as a watershed for the commencement of this retreat. The crisis was precipitated by Costa Rica's neoliberal economic policies based on a free market and export dependence, which caused cuts in major social programs developed over the previous decades (Mas, 2004). In particular, there were major reductions in government provision of health services and in support for the extensive medical infrastructure (Edelman & Kenen, 1989).

The prestigious Consejo Nacional de Rectores (CONARE), which issues a yearly report on the state of the nation, has been warning the country for several years that:

... [Costa Rica] had only a few years in which it could bring about, with the necessary foresight, the changes



needed to boost productivity, improve social equity, and make sustainable use of biodiversity, while tapping the relatively favorable conditions offered by the demographic profile and the growing working-age population, conditions that will persist into the near future (2006, p. 14).

They liken Costa Rica to a large family:

...living in a large, old house that has cracks and leaks, and is poorly maintained. The members of the family begin pulling doors off the hinges to build fires to keep warm since the electricity has been cut off because they haven't paid the bills. They begin selling windows for cash to buy food. Those who live on the floor with the fireplace do keep warm; the lot of the others barely improves, and some shiver with cold. Moreover, since the money obtained by selling the windows is not enough to buy food for everyone, the struggle over food distribution heightens disputes, and dissatisfaction poisons relations among family members. The unrest intensifies when it is discovered that some family members are opportunists who have, on the sly, begun to disassemble the house for their own benefit. The strongest and most opportunistic family members eat well, those who tag along get a little to eat, and the rest receive little or nothing. However, even this unfair arrangement will be short-lived: unless an alternative is found, tomorrow the family will have to sacrifice more of its assets, some to burn and others to sell (2006, p. 15).

CONARE (2006) points out that Costa Rica has cut back on social investments to maintain fiscal equilibrium and prevent further risks

to economic stability. These actions have primarily impacted lower income groups, but are beginning to squeeze the middle class. An article in *The Tico Times* (January 5, 2007), a weekly English language newspaper, reported that the average income of the country's poorest homes had decreased by 13.9 percent, while the average income of the richest ones increased by 67 percent. CONARE (2006) also identifies as serious areas of concern declining tax revenues, cutbacks in investment in the infrastructure, lack of a national energy policy coupled with soaring oil prices, increased export competition with the Chinese, and a decline of public trust in government and democracy after corruption scandals involving three former presidents.

The 2006 CONARE *State of the Nation* report asserts that the Government of Costa Rica "... has begun to 'consume its future' to be able to maintain, in the short term, the (appearance of) normalcy" (p.14). This act of consuming, I believe, has the same effect as holding a comforting self-assessment of human rights conditions. It results in a failure to mobilize the resources to address challenges ahead in the classroom and the larger society.

Conclusion

While education for human rights has increased in Costa Rican schools in the past twenty years, the advances have not gone as far and as fast as many human rights advocates would have hoped, or as someone aware of the government's longstanding and public commitment to human rights might have expected. There is unevenness in the development of human rights education in Costa Rica. The language of human rights is more evident in curriculum guidelines and on the textbook pages than it was two decades ago. However, while the Ministry of Public Education declares a commitment to human rights infusion across the curriculum, there is no national plan to



systematically advance human rights learning in the nation's schools and few curriculum resources about human rights available for teachers to use. There is, however, at least one state university that appears to be moving towards incorporating human rights throughout its teacher preparation curriculum.

There are Costa Rican human rights educators and activists questioning the oft-heard assertion that this is an "exceptional"

nation possessing a human rights culture. They seek to increase the role of schools to prepare youth to address the disturbing conditions, such as poverty, increased violence, environmental decline, and discrimination, that accompany the nation's economic, political, and social development efforts. The next few years should witness increased discussion of the school's place in responding to these challenges and achieving its human rights and democratic goals.

Endnotes

¹ Special thanks to everyone at the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights in San José, Costa Rica who provided me with a base from which to conduct research, a supportive environment, and assistance in gathering and interpreting data during my stay in Costa Rica in early 2007. I am also grateful to those interviewees who gave of their time. I have chosen anonymity for them because of concerns, theirs and mine, about possible repercussions resulting from some comments made.

² The Human Development Index is a composite of three measures of development: living a long and healthy life (measured by life expectancy), being educated (measured by adult literacy and enrollment at the primary, secondary and tertiary level), and having a decent standard of living (measured by purchasing power parity, PPP, income) (United Nations, *Human Development Report*, 2006).

³ The Human Poverty Index focuses on the proportion of people below a threshold level in the same dimensions of the human development index (United Nations, *Human Development Report*, 2006).

⁴ These indicators are: 1) Pedagogy of human rights, 2) Human rights in general, 3) Democracy and citizenship, 4) Values, 5) Diversity and multiculturalism, 6) Racial, ethnic, and religious groups, 7) Gender equity, 8) Participation and interaction, 9) Education for peace, 10) Friendship among nations, 11) Rights of the child, 12) Education law, 13) Institutional order, 14) Equality and social differentiation, 15) Environmental and ecological issues (IIDH, 2005, part 3, p. 16).



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