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Human Rights Education and the Performing Arts

ANDREA McEVOY SPERO

On December 10, 2010, thirty East Oakland students performed to a rapt audience of their fellow students, teachers, administrators and parents. “I am Oscar Grant,” “E. 14th/Wrong Color,” “Driving While Black,” “La Maquina Para Cortar Pasto,” and “Through Their Voices” are a few of the original pieces showcased as part of Hamer High School’s (HHS) International Human Rights Day performance. Their creative multi-media compilation illustrated the human rights issues of their lives and community. The youth performed poetry, song, short film, and theatrical vignettes. Despite the intensity of the issues, the message of unity and hope prevailed.

I was honored to witness the performance and the four-month journey to its creation and believe the teaching process and the performance itself provide a powerful model of Human Rights Education (HRE) in action. The project at HHS began when three teachers participated in a summer institute by The World As It Could Be Human Rights Education Project (TWAICB). The institute trains educators in the integration of performing arts and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The teachers brought the idea to the community and, over the next few months, the students worked inside and outside the classroom to represent their experiences through a human rights framework. Although the various forms of creative expression are worthy of attention, the original poetry performances offer a unique representation of the transformative goals of HRE.

The High Commissioner for Human Rights defines HRE as: providing content knowledge about human rights and the mechanisms that protect them; imparting the skills needed to promote, defend, and apply human rights in everyday life; and fostering the attitudes and behavior needed to promote a universal culture of human dignity. If the ultimate goal of HRE is to foster a culture of human rights, then identifying and applying human rights principles to lived experience is only the beginning. HRE requires a type of educational experience that empowers youth to transform their reality, and the use of performance art, particularly poetry, achieves this aim.

Being that HRE is an inherently transformational process, the operating philosophy underlying HRE is critical pedagogy. Paulo Friere and Augusto Boal identified the potential for the performing arts as a form of critical pedagogy. Contrary to the traditional “banking” methods of education, Freire believed in the power inherent in individuals to develop critical consciousness through analysis of the world around them. Via a process of “conscientization,” individuals name their world through problem posing and dialogue. A result of the process is the recognition that individuals are both historical products and producers of their reality. The process requires creativity, dialogue, reflection, decision-making, analysis, and synthesis skills—all practices inherent in a transformational educational experience. Creating unique performance pieces called upon the HHS students to name their world, analyze it against a human rights framework, and communicate their understanding. Music, dance, visual art, and theatrical performance are a form of communal dialogue.

Augusto Boal expanded the role of creative arts in critical pedagogy to include theatre techniques to empower participants. Boal presented the creative process as a way to develop critical consciousness. He explained: “The aesthetics of the oppressed tries to help people in discovering Art, discovering their own art and by that, discovering themselves; in discovering the world, discovering their own world, and by that, discovering themselves.” Both Freire and Boal saw the role of art as a way for participants to name their world, create a vision for a new way of being, and, through public performance, transform vision to reality. In recognizing their power to create a new reality, youth may begin to transform their world.

Educator, artist, and scholar G. Reyes argued that the experience of MCing spoken word, or performance poetry is a way to cultivate public intellectuals capable of reclaiming their culture. Reyes recognized that youth in urban contexts are not inherently born with access to certain rights in society, but through rigorous study and encouragement, these students become public intellectuals armed with urban sociology. He explained that “building this culture takes us one step further to helping our youth become authorities, to feel active in their own education, and to ‘take control of the language of their lives.’” The role of educator is to facilitate this transformative experience and allow students to showcase their knowledge. By performing their poetry publicly, the HHS youth’s power is exposed.

Identifying performance poetry as a successful pedagogy is not a theoretical or academic exercise. Concrete teaching strategies for HRE are urgently needed in the United States, where many students experience persistent human rights violations in their schools and communities. Although equity of education and human dignity are cornerstone American concepts of democracy, public schools are more segregated than they were in 1970. The average state spending per student is one thousand dollars less

in high-poverty districts than in low-poverty districts, the suspension and expulsion rates have more than doubled in the last three decades, and the achievement gap for African-American and Latino students as compared to white students continues to increase. Urban youth are particularly impacted by racism, poverty, and violence. They deserve access to the knowledge and skills required to transform the material conditions of their lives. HRE holds a potentially important piece of this struggle.

HHS, a comprehensive urban high school, is part of Oakland Unified School District. It provides a unique series of courses in international and U.S. law in order to prepare students for careers in law and public service. The school mission is to provide “a rigorous academic environment where students become articulate, skilled, active, caring critical thinkers.” The student ethnic and racial distribution includes 36.5 percent African American, 33.7 percent Hispanic or Latino, 15.3 percent Asian, 6.8 percent white (not Hispanic), 5.4 percent multiple or no response, 1.2 percent Pacific Islander, 0.8 percent Filipino, and 0.4 percent American Indian or Alaska Native. English language learners make up 29.9 percent of the student population and 66.85 percent qualify for free or reduced price lunch. The attendance rate is 93.79 percent. The schools within the district represent a diverse urban student population.

The school’s focus on international law and social justice aligned with HRE goals, but integrating the arts as part of the school-wide curriculum and pedagogy presented a new challenge, one that the teachers and students embraced. The HRE project’s lead teachers, Deborah Juarez, John Nepomuceno, and Anita Smiley, developed in-class curriculum and assignments around the UDHR. Ellen Sebastian Chang, the creative director of TWAICB, assisted the teachers periodically through the semester. Approximately thirty students dedicated themselves to create and perform in the show, and all students in the school were exposed to the UDHR through their classes and the performance.

Two of the teachers, John and Deborah, shared their experiences using performance art to teach about human rights. As English teachers, they wanted to strengthen communication skills, but their objectives went beyond simply reading and writing. John revamped his semester curriculum to cover the UDHR’s historical background, as well as current issues relevant to students’ lives. He met with students at lunch and after school to guide them through the process of creating their own performance.

Deborah took a slightly different approach. She launched the semester with a poetry lesson and used the UDHR’s 30 articles as a framework for literary themes and conflicts. In both classes, the teachers connected literary themes to human rights principles. Although their curriculum and activities varied, they both viewed the poetry and performance as a way to elevate the voices of youth and build critical consciousness.

John felt strongly that teaching the UDHR through performance art was critical to community transformation. He explained, “I want them to be able

to arm themselves with thinking to effectively voice out their opinions . . . to effectively back up their statements because the rest of the world won't listen to them." He shared the impact the project had on him, "This is what I came to teaching for; for the kids, for the youth, put out their voices when they have to. Establish their voice if they don't think they have one, give voice to the voiceless and what better way to do it than this?" Although it required he revamp a new approach to his curriculum and long hours outside of class, John felt the project "gave more purpose to my practice." He believed the students' collective voices had the potential to cause positive change in the community.

One of Deborah's objectives was to develop her students' ability to articulate their experiences and to analyze systems of inequality. To achieve this, she grounded her poetry lesson with the lived experiences of the students. She asked students to write about a moment when they witnessed a human right upheld or denied. Their descriptive and emotional poetry overwhelmingly depicted violations.

They ended up writing about something that was real specific to their own lives—somebody dying because this is a dangerous community, you know? We have the right to feel safe, or, you know, other issues related to their personal lives. It definitely came up in the poetry and I think more immediate for them because they're immediate concerns are around their community and how the community presents itself to them, you know, kind of as a threatening place and that came up quite a bit . . .

This exercise reflects both the first goal of HRE, identifying and applying human rights, and what Friere refers to as "naming their world." Naming their reality without providing a path for agency does not constitute transformative teaching. The performing arts offers a potential path for agency.

Deborah believed strongly in empowering her students to transform the reality of their lives. An important element of this type of pedagogical approach is to allow students to express themselves through their own language. She explains, "They don't have to use somebody else's words. They can use their own words to say something that's profound but simple at the same time and it reflects their reality." Instead of using lofty or academic language, which distances the writer and audience from the experience, Deborah encourages her students to communicate in a more authentic, organic way. She saw the next step in developing their consciousness was to connect their very personal experiences with universal human rights principals.

Deborah created a space for the critical analysis of oppressive systems and patterns of injustice that her students witness. She believed that creative arts, including poetry, ask students to articulate their place in the world and begin to deconstruct the systems that oppress or marginalize them and their community. She explained:

Any kind of artwork asks them to articulate it. If they create skits they are articulating it so there is something that they are developing, a consciousness right now. . . . So the UDHR becomes a lens by which they can articulate their experiences. Which ends up developing their consciousness about society, about their community and it also develops their ability to articulate about it.

The process moved students from first identifying their experience, to analyzing it through a human rights lens, and then placing it as part of a more complex understanding of their world.

What do students do with their analysis? Deborah and John saw the performance as a powerful experience for the school community. Deborah described the importance for the student body to hear the human rights message from their peers.

It really does mean something for you to be told that you have Human Rights and that no one can take those rights away from you and especially if you are coming up in this community where people are getting killed right and left. It's like, to the point where you are not paying attention anymore. . . . You need to feel empowered sometimes because this environment can disempower you. . . . You don't have that evidence so then you get this set of articles that says, 'you are equal to everybody else. You are the same.' You know, 'These are your rights just so much as they are anybody else's rights.' So you have to keep getting those reminders, you know, to lift you up.

The poems performed by Lucias Potter and Nixon Callejas serve as prime examples of the transformational potential of human rights through the arts. At the time of the performance, healthcare reform was a contentious national debate, and Lucias felt strongly that the public needed to see healthcare as a human right. Students on stage acted out a violent club scene that had occurred in their city just weeks before. At the end of the scene, one individual who had been shot was rushed to the emergency room, but denied care because he lacked health insurance. At that moment, Lucias walked on stage and standing next to the doctor and victim, recited his poem, "Health Care." In the first stanza of his poem, Lucias asks:

Is it not true we as humans have
 Right to life?
 Or are you only allowed life
 If you have the proper wealth?
 If those in such power
 Must protect our rights as human
 What is life without the guarantee
 Of the common health?
 Before we are countries
 And before we are nations
 We are first human

His poem weaves the right to healthcare, or lack thereof, to economic disparity. He identified the universal nature of this right and the primacy of human rights above national boundaries or political ideologies. Furthermore, he questioned the U.S. failure to guarantee healthcare, despite its power and wealth. Lucias exposed this with the following lines:

Some countries rich
 So some countries got it
 Some countries claim super power
 But still don't have it
 Some countries' too impoverished hands
 Can't grasp it
 Some countries can give it
 But too selfish to route it

His words also blend the interconnectedness of the right to life, the right to the security of basic needs, and the special protections of women and children. The following lines illustrate his point:

No one shall be denied it yet
 The world spins despite it
 Some single mothers are forced to choose
 Is it dinner or medicine her child will lose?

In his poem, Lucias not only clearly identified and applied the rights enumerated in the UDHR, but he also presented three major conceptual elements of human rights principles: universality, inalienability, and interdependency. By doing so, he achieved the first goal of HRE—content knowledge. But, to achieve a level of empowerment and transformation, the educational experience must move beyond content knowledge.

HRE is an empty promise if individuals know their rights but fail to act in defense of human dignity. Lucias communicated a complex understanding of the content and moved to a level of action by performing on stage. When asked why he decided to perform his poem, Lucias explained:

I am really happy because this is a very important issue and I believe that a lot of people in America, especially students, they don't get introduced to the UDHR . . . now that people are conscious of it they can start to act about it and become activists with it and hopefully if we get enough power behind it, health care can be passed.

His aim to ignite others to act in order to affect national policy exemplifies the ultimate goal of HRE: to influence attitude and behavior toward the defense of human dignity. In writing the poem, he exhibited knowledge and application skills. By performing his poem, he transformed from a student to a teacher and activist.

In reflecting on the experience, Lucias identified the unique way performance art reaches youth, especially those active in social justice issues. Lucias argued that rap and poetry catch the attention and engage youth versus learning from a “boring ten-pound book.” Lucias said it best: “If I write a poem, it is like a difference between speaking to your mind because all day we are in school, they just talking to our mind, we get burnt out. But, when you write a poem, it is not only speaking to your mind, but it is speaking to your heart.” Through the arts, human rights remain a personal experience that requires emotional and intellectual understanding.

He further argued that his peers are acutely aware of the human rights issues of their lives and are ready to act in solidarity toward solutions. Lucias was not surprised at the enthusiasm and commitment at HHS for the human rights project. Rather, he explained,

In the cities like Oakland, a lot of people might not look at it or a lot of people might not acknowledge it but there are a lot of young youth, like myself, that are very conscious about what things are going on in the world, on political levels, social levels. There are a lot of really conscious people and I believe that also adds to the driving force of the UDHR project.

In Lucias’ view, the performance was an opportunity to share knowledge about the UDHR and to ignite the many young activists already critically aware.

Nixon Callejas, a sophomore, expressed similar motivation for participating. The event was the first time he performed one of his raps in front of a live audience. He admitted, “I was getting kind of nervous and I was like, nah I don’t know if I should like quit. I don’t want to do it no more, but then I thought to myself it was important because I got to send out a message . . . ” He focused his poem on the right to live in safety. Nixon used his performance to identify and apply human rights principles to local conditions, thus achieving the primary goals of HRE.

Nixon does not stop there. After he identified the violation, he demanded action. Beyond naming his world and connecting it to the UDHR, Nixon called upon Latinos to unite against racism, poverty, and violence so that together they may fight for their right to safety:

I believe in change, let’s make it a better place,
Where people come in and out, no matter the color, no matter the race.
If you think about it, we all want the same little thing,
No matter if you’re broke, or you carry bling.
We all want to be equal,
But how can we get that if we’re killing our own people.
Let’s not fight ourselves, let’s stick together,
Let’s unite to make this world better.

When I asked Nixon about his message, he explained:

I guess, in a way, it is because we see a lot of people like, killing each other and especially here in Oakland when I say the line that says, ‘We took the same risks, walking the same street, but knowing we could die faster than a heartbeat.’ That’s true cuz I find that line, I can remember it because here in Oakland it is like, I feel almost like it could be a, in certain places, it could be a risk to walk on the street because you wear a certain color. . . . I feel like if we unite people, it is like, I feel that we could probably end violence, senseless violence at least.

Nixon not only identified his right to be safe, but, by performing, he transformed his critical consciousness to activism. He called upon others to act in unity to create a culture of human dignity.

Schools are cultural and political spheres and, therefore, are the location for cultural and societal norms, values, and language. When students take the stage and proclaim, in their own words, the harsh realities of their lives, it is a powerful political act. Lucias and Nixon named their world and by performing, they required the audience to bear witness to the human rights issues of their community. By speaking their truth and calling for action, they created a new normative standard and culture—one of human dignity. Teaching human rights through performance poetry holds a potential path to a culture of human dignity. To achieve true transformative change, we must find ways to build critical consciousness and activism among youth so that they may create a new reality.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

The interviews took place in November and December of 2010 and January of 2011.

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