“Schools Need to Wake Up!” Student Participants’ Calls for Human Rights Education

Jill M. Gradwell
Misty Rodeheaver

SUNY Buffalo State

Robert L. Dahlgren

SUNY Fredonia

From labor conditions to public health and environmental justice, globalization has created an increasingly complex web of issues surrounding human rights. Research in social studies education points to adolescents’ intrinsic curiosity when engaged in these multiple issues, as well as their idealistic thirst for involving themselves in social progress campaigns. Many students desire involvement and believe in the importance of human rights education within the formal educational setting, especially within social studies curriculum. We report the findings from a qualitative study conducted during a two-week intensive summer institute on human rights and genocide studies in western New York in the summer of 2011. In our study, we found while student participants felt empowered by the institute and their desire to take action was heightened during the experience, they questioned the disconnect between the genocide and human rights education in the Institute and the human rights education they experienced in their social studies classrooms. In comparing the two, they wished there were more authentic learning experiences and a higher level of academic rigor in their social studies classes. Although the New York State curricula, at the time of the study, included human rights education related topics, the interviewed student participants did not recognize its presence and felt human rights education is not a prevalent part of the enacted public school curriculum.

Key words: human rights education, genocide studies, social studies curriculum, teaching history, activism, high-stakes testing

Introduction

Daily news reports attest to the challenges brought about by rapid globalization. While global capital has modernized and democratized many communities around the world, and improved the health and welfare of millions, it has also put additional pressure on already fragile ecosystems, labor forces, and infrastructures (Friedman, 2008). Social movements toward resource equity are likely to energize much of the world’s population in the coming decades. Innovations in labor, transportation, communications and energy are likely to simultaneously come about as a result of upward pressure from a critical, social consensus from below (Roy, 2012).

Human rights organizations report that young people are at the forefront of many social change movements such as environmental awareness and resource equity, and civil rights
movements (Human Rights Watch, 2012). In a 2012 report, Amnesty International’s Secretary General, Salil Shetty, described 2011 as “the year that young people rose up in protest against governments and other powerful actors in numbers not seen for decades” (p. 1). Movements such as Arab Spring greatly influenced youth revolts around the world, including Occupy Wall Street in the United States (Mason, 2012). In his 2013 work, Henry Giroux commented on these technologically-enhanced protests saying, “young people are demonstrating all over the world against a variety of issues ranging from economic injustice and massive inequality to drastic cuts in education and public services” (p. xi). Global trends challenge educators to develop curricula that will engage young people motivated by human rights issues.

Social studies research reinforces the notion that despite its shortcomings during implementation, the secondary social studies curriculum is ideally poised to engage students in this complex web of interlocking issues surrounding human rights and incidences of genocide (Merryfield, 2008, 2010, 2011; Merryfield, et al., 2012; Parker, 2003; Riley & Totten, 2002; Totten, 2001; Totten & Riley, 2005). While the social studies classroom may be deemed as the appropriate and desirable environment to foster students’ analysis of human interaction and conflict, the extent to which students perceive elements of human rights education present in their social studies classes has yet to be thoroughly investigated.

**Human Rights Education**

Human Rights Education (HRE), as defined by Amnesty International (2012) is, “a deliberate, participatory practice aimed at empowering individuals, groups and communities through fostering knowledge, skills and attitudes consistent with internationally recognized human rights principles (Human Rights Basics, para. 3).” Programs and projects such as the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (2010) and the Political Engagement Project of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2007) suggest the best teaching practices to foster HRE are those which encourage students to exercise and defend their democratic rights, value diversity, and contribute to the building a universal culture of human rights (Gatens & Johnson, 2011).

At its core, Human Rights Education (HRE) calls upon students to empathize with those who suffer at the hands of others and to act on behalf of the common good (Wood, 1992). According to Jennifer Levin-Goldberg (2009), effective HRE promotes empathy, global civic consciousness, and activism by incorporating a myriad of practices. These practices may include exposing students to multiple perspectives on global conflicts as well as different cultural, social, and political ideologies, focusing on experiential learning opportunities, and by allowing students to research, debate, and to reflect upon targeted topics, especially topics directly connected and aligned to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

**Rationale for Human Rights Education in the Social Studies Classroom**

Merry Merryfield’s (2010) research, on global education and its place within the social studies, recognizes there are those who choose to define global education as HRE and those who do not, but regardless of the definition, experts recognize important global educational skills and dispositions as “cross cultural communication, taking part in conflict resolution, intercultural interaction, critical thinking, and perspective consciousness. Dispositions usually aim for open-mindedness, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, anticipation of complexity, and rejection of stereotypes” (p. 212). The inclusion of human rights situates social studies to examine what it means to be human and all its complexities.
The study of human rights is inseparable from social studies. Beyond the basic political, economic, and social freedoms and rights spelled out in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, hundreds of specialized topics have developed that demonstrate the complex nature of human rights in the twenty-first-century world—environmental exploitation of indigenous peoples in Brazil, child soldiers in Sierra Leone, the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa, human trafficking in the United States, and more. (Merryfield, et al., 2012, p. 266)

Walter Parker’s (2003) civic education, while not explicitly tied to HRE, overlaps on the subject of good citizenry and how an educator can foster these traits among his or her students. He examined the connectivity between civic education and multicultural education through an analysis of theoretical and classroom practices. He posits what it means to be a good citizen is not necessarily a given, but is rather constructed via socio-political and historical contexts. Parker believes global skills and dispositions, like those mentioned by Merryfield, can be constructed within the social studies classroom. Democratic citizenship, then, should “embrace individual difference, multiple group identities, and a unifying political community all at once” (p. 25). This kind of citizenship education described by Parker requires development via appropriate contexts. Many of these contexts could and should include human rights topics and issues.

**Human Rights Education within the Social Studies Curriculum**

Over the past 20 years, HRE emerged as a component of both national and state standards. According to a 2001 nationwide survey, 20 states included human rights in some form in their curricula (Banks, 2003). Further analysis of the standards indicates HRE was required only in social studies curricula and what should be taught was only minimally articulated. In a later study examining elements of HRE in state standards, Margaret Crocco (2007) concluded that 22 states included human rights but many of the states only minimally included human rights education in their standards.

Successful HRE programs rely on teachers’ abilities to effectively promote content acquisition in conjunction with experiential learning, including opportunities to impart positive change (Carter & Osler, 2000). Human rights terms, additionally, are rarely mentioned in textbooks and other curricular materials (Gaudelli & Frenekes, 2004). The U.S. culture has not yet embraced the concept of human rights as it relates to issues inside the country (O’Brien, 2000; Stone, 2002). At the heart of the issue is the difficulty behind incorporating new topics into social studies curriculum:

I believe there is little HRE in the U.S schools because of how difficult it is to change curriculum in the U.S., which only takes place on the state and local school board and individual school levels. More importantly, the concept of human rights is not yet part of the culture as it relates to the issues inside the U.S. –human rights violations are thought of as something occurring in other countries, not inside the U.S. (O’Brien, 2000, p. 2)

While it is difficult to implement change within existing curriculum, accomplishing these kinds of human rights goals requires unique educational environments, environments not all teachers have yet established. Katherine Simon (2001) suggests teachers should foster “ethics of care” (p. 25) by asking a series of moral questions. Moral questions and ethics of care are not exclusively intertwined with HRE but play an important role within HRE. An ethics of care
engages students’ passions about HRE in addition to promoting outcomes in which students learn to care for self, intimate others, acquaintances, distant others, nonhuman animals, plants and the physical environment, human-made objects, and ideas. Through her classroom research Simon developed a series of strategies and tools that help teachers more effectively structure educational environments to address moral questions. These strategies include: deciding the kinds of moral questions one can ask, how to plan lessons using moral questions, and how to evaluate lesson effectiveness.

One way in which HRE has found its way into the classroom is through elective courses. For example, Simone Schweber’s (2004; 2003) case studies of Holocaust simulations provide excellent examples of how successful teachers embrace the moral aspect of education and structure elective curriculum so students are engaged and capable of examining moral questions. In one upper level history elective course, the teacher taught the Holocaust through a semester long simulation (Schweber, 2003). From there, Schweber expanded her Holocaust simulation research with a follow-up book (2004) of three case studies in which teachers posed moral questions, examined related case studies or simulations, and asked students to engage in reflective exercises, all of which help to promote moral education. Though similar to Simon’s moral questions’ classroom and Schweber’s examination of Holocaust simulations, HRE expands the curriculum to include a wide swath of topics – past and current events.

While HRE could improve social studies education with its curricular expansion, it is woefully underrepresented in the social studies classroom. The reasons for its absence abound, but its absence indicates a lack of emphasis in the American culture and in its school curriculum. This diminished state reduces the likelihood that a vast majority of social studies teachers will take up the banner and fight for change. The diminished state not only creates a curricular void but also a void in the research. With so few examples, it is difficult to conduct extensive research endeavors and provide a solid platform for change.

While the previously discussed research examined the importance of, and the teaching of, human rights (e.g., Banks, 2003; Crocco, 2007; Simon, 2001), minimal research exists on the impact that HRE, in and outside the social studies classroom, has on students’ ability to use their knowledge and understanding of human rights issues and act upon it. There are gaps in the scholarship on the crucial issue of the potential disconnect between the traditional social studies classroom and the nontraditional human rights educational programs.

This study will add to the existing body of research by examining student beliefs about human rights issues and how the subject has been taught in their traditional social studies classrooms. We argue that as student participants learned to become upstanding individuals through their participation in a teacher-created, seven-day summer institute on human rights and genocide studies they also questioned the ways in which they have been taught about human rights issues in their traditional social studies classrooms. The responses of the Institute participants spoke powerfully to the need for an injection of Human Rights Education and a strategic focus on material centered on historical and contemporary incidences of human rights abuses and genocide.

**Methods**

To examine students’ beliefs about human rights issues and how the subject has been taught in their social studies classes, we collected data observing a teacher-created summer
institute on human rights and genocide held in Western New York. The data were collected during for seven days during a two-week period in the summer of 2011. As social studies teacher educators, we were particularly interested in formal and informal social education curriculum and ways in which to better prepare our teachers in the classroom. The research questions that drove this project, therefore, were:

1. What are the beliefs of a group of students participating in a summer institute on human rights?
2. To what extent did the institute’s mission resonate with the student participants?
3. What are student participants’ perceptions of their experiences studying human rights in their social studies classes?
4. What experiences from the Institute would student participants like to see in their social studies classes?

In order to explore the beliefs and perceptions of human rights issues among a group of high school students participating in a summer institute on human rights and genocide studies, we used a qualitative design based on a social constructivist framework. According to J. Amos Hatch (2002), qualitative research is about understanding the meanings individuals construct in order to participate in their social lives. In studies based on social constructivism, researchers serve as the primary data collection instruments, with the flexibility and freedom of playing the roles of both researchers and participants. These roles are fluid, playing out through mutual engagement. Rather than attempting to locate an absolute truth or reality in social life, researchers within this paradigm describe social groups engaging with objects in the world and making sense of them collectively (Crotty, 1998).

**Research Settings**

As a research group, the principal investigators contacted a group of high school educators who had created a summer institute the focused on human rights education. The theme of the summer institute we observed and participated in was the various campaigns around the world for women’s rights both historically and contemporaneously. We intervened as both researchers and participants in a seven-day Institute series of activities in July 2011. These activities included both traditional lecture and discussion-oriented presentations at the Institute’s home as well as several field trips and a day-long service-learning opportunity.

**Sampling Procedures**

In qualitative studies, researchers work typically with relatively small samples of participants, which are studied intensely and in-depth in order to produce thick data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For the purpose of this study, the principal investigators employed a purposeful sampling approach as described by Michael Patton (2002). This method suggests focusing on “information-rich cases” that will produce data that informs the original research questions (Patton, p. 230). The principal criterion for participation in this study was the active participation of potential research subjects in all of the workshops and activities around the Summer Institute on Human Rights and Genocide Studies. This meant rejecting from the potential pool of participants any student who would not be able to attend all Institute sessions and would thus not engage in the full Institute experience. From the potential pool of 25 students enrolled in the Institute, 17 agreed to participate in our study (Table 1). This study sample included 15 female and two male participants. Nine came from rural schools, seven were from suburban schools, and one was from a city private Catholic school, none of which were
identified as high needs schools. Of these, 11 study participants were first time Institute attendees, four were enrolled in their second Institute, and two were enrolled in third Institute. All of the study participants self-reported in initial surveys as possessing average to above average academic abilities with two participants reporting academic achievement at the honors level. In the upcoming Fall 2011 semester, six of the study participants were entering ninth grade, five were entering tenth grade, four were entering eleventh grade, and two were beginning their college freshman year experiences. None of the participants had participated in an International Baccalaureate (IB) program.

Table 1

*Student Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade Entering Fall 2011</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Year in Institute</th>
<th>Academic Ability</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ainsley</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>A student</td>
<td>South Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>A student</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>B+ student</td>
<td>Polish/Irish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>B student</td>
<td>Jamaican/Pakistani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Callum</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Honors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deanna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>A student</td>
<td>South Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>B student</td>
<td>Jamaican/Pakistani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>B student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>City Catholic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Honors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>A student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>B student</td>
<td>German/Irish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirsten</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>college freshman</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>B+ student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>A student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marjorie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>A student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>A student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saleema</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>college freshman</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>A student</td>
<td>Palestinian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>A student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All the names used in this study are pseudonyms; students self-identified their academic ability and ethnicity.

**Data Collection**

The data collection process began by conducting brief on-line entrance surveys with Institute participants about their educational background, reasons for attending the Institute, and desires for the experience (see Appendix A). According to Charles C. Ragin and Michelle M. Amoroso (2011), “all facets and features of social life offer evidence; virtually everything to a social scientist is ‘data,’ at least potentially” (p. 68). Following this advice, we observed all Institute sessions and participated in all activities. We recorded field notes during these sessions, compared observations at the end of each day, and converted these field notes into more extensive individual research logs.
Toward the end of the first week of the Institute, we conducted individual interviews with our study participants. Our interview protocol followed James Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium’s (2003) framework for constructing effective interview protocols within the social constructivist paradigm. Respondents were asked to define the concept of human rights in their own words, comment on their individual experiences with instruction on human rights issues, and reflect on the effect of the Summer Institute on their lives (see Appendix B). Throughout this process, the principal investigators used a relatively informal, conversational interviewing style, a method recommended by Pamela Maykut and Richard Morehouse (1994).

On the final day of the Institute, the researchers divided the study sample into three groups and conducted focus group interviews. In choosing this method, we were influenced by Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman’s (2006) understanding of the focus groups as “a process [that] takes in a wider variety of information than if there were fewer participants” (p. 102). Interviews were digitally recorded and literally transcribed using the conventions developed by David Silverman (2002) (see Appendix C). The researchers conducted a brief online exit survey with Institute participants regarding their experiences during the seven-day period.

Data Analysis

Following Hatch’s (2002) advice that “analysis is happening from the first moments of data collection” (p. 149), we looked early for patterns emerging from the data collected from survey, individual interviews, focus group and observation sources. From the beginning of the data collection process, the use of narrative analysis or the analyzing the stories told by research participants during the course of interviews, seemed the ideal analytical tool for the project. Narrative analysis assumes people often use stories in order to construct meaning of their life experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As Catherine Riessman (2008) delineated, narrative analysis has particular power within social constructivist studies in that it gives voice to the meanings drawn from the experiences of participants. In this case, we were particularly interested in the ways in which the experience of participating in the Summer Institute compared and contrasted to that in their social studies classrooms.

The data analysis procedure began with open coding in order to extract the valuable narratives and to eliminate portions of the interview data that did not directly relate to the research questions. We found the descriptive coding as referenced in Miles and Huberman (1994) was the most accessible method. After transcribing the interviews, we reviewed the transcripts several times, correcting mistakes and identifying message units. We then divided the transcript in large sections based on major topics; the transcript was further divided into more specific subtopics. This process led us to focus more intently on the narratives emerging from the data that spoke to our research questions and could prove valuable to the project.

We coded the narratives, using a method described by Michael Bamberg (2004) intended to probe the identities of the subjects involved. We analyzed and compared the structure of each narrative in an attempt to understand what elements were used to assert positionality as a student. This method of focusing on the positioning of individual students within their storytelling roles allowed us to conceptualize the subjects’ identities as impinged by both the person-to-world and world-to-person positions.

Based on the data collected during the Institute, we developed an analysis matrix displayed in Table 2 below.
Table 2
Data Analysis Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Ideal</th>
<th>Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ainsley</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Callum</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deanna</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirsten</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marjorie</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyah</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saleema</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These thematic data points included student participants’ beliefs about human rights, student participants’ perception of human rights in the classroom, ideal classroom experiences, and suggested implications of human rights education. The following section explores these themes in depth with comments culled from the data collected from surveys, interviews and focus groups.

Student Participants and the Summer Institute

The Institute

For seven days during the start of the 2011 summer vacation, 25 high school students and three teachers from across western New York State participated in a teacher-facilitated Summer Institute that focused on human rights and genocide studies. Throughout the Institute, participants listened to Holocaust survivors, genocide victims, activists, and participated in two field trips. During the first day of the program, in his opening speech to the student participants, the Institute’s director explained the history and rationale of the organization:

We started four years ago in a school library not far from here and it was a modest institute. You learn about these issues at your school but maybe at best on a DBQ (document-based question) on genocide or the Holocaust. But you do not focus on women’s rights, water equality. Unfortunately, not. There are volleyball camps, softball camps, but there is no camp to make the world a better place. Where are there Institutes for good girls and good boys?

The director and other facilitators of the Institute explained they began the summer program to complement and augment what they were doing in their classrooms since time and curricular constraints limited their capacity to address human rights education effectively. They wanted to
foster students’ ability to stand up against injustice. As the director announced in his welcome speech:

Once this experience is over, your study of human rights and genocide has just begun. We must take what we learn and plan a course of action for the future…. We want to focus on the rock stars, the upstanders, as Samantha Power calls them.

An upstander is an individual who is willing to stand up and take action in defense of others (Power, 2002). The term encompasses individuals who take large risks on a global level as well as individuals who take a stand on a more personal level, such as those who prevent bullying. This is in contrast to bystanders, who are present during acts of injustice but who do not take part in the situation or event to assist those in need.

For the next seven days, the teachers and students embarked on a path of learning about historical and modern day acts of genocide. They heard from community members about various human rights violations and ways to become involved to combat such atrocities. The focus of this year’s Institute was women’s rights as human rights. The following is a sketch of the seven-day schedule:

Day 1: Introduction and the Holocaust (learning stations on female human rights founders and key issues; Holocaust lecture and video; Holocaust female survivors with small group discussion)
Day 2: Women’s History in the World (Eleanor Roosevelt historical impersonator; women’s rights play; Iron Jawed Angels film)
Day 3: Women’s History in New York State (field trips to National Women’s Rights National Historic Park in Seneca Falls, NY and Susan B. Anthony House in Rochester, NY)
Day 4: From Memory to Action: What you can do… (readings about non-government organizations; panel discussion of student and community activists; 1964 Freedom Summer Project guest presenter; film viewing clips of Blood Diamond for preparation of next field trip)
Day 5: International Justice and the Jackson Center (field trip to the Robert H. Jackson Center in Jamestown, NY; presentation by David Crane, former Chief Prosecutor for the Special Court for Sierra Leone and founder of Impunity Watch; presentation by Nazi Hunter Eli Rosenbaum, Director of the Office of Special Investigations in the US Justice Department)
Day 6: A Day of Service (participants volunteer for the day at a local refugee center to clean, paint, and furnish an apartment for two newly arrived Burmese refugees)
Day 7: Wrap-up and Closing Ceremony (panel discussion of women from conflict zones and genocide survivors; human rights and the arts exercise; Speak Truth to Power play, participant action plan writing; Institute graduation ceremony)

While student participants felt empowered by the Summer Institute and their desire to engage in activist works was heightened during the experience, they questioned the disconnect between the genocide and human rights education in the Institute and that found in their social studies classrooms. In comparing the two, they wished there were more authentic learning experiences and a higher level of academic rigor in their social studies classes. Despite numerous instances of participants remarking about wanting more rather than less in their classrooms, several cited inspirational teachers who guided them and fostered a sense of caring about human rights issues.
They believed other students would benefit from such exemplary teachers and the types of experiences they had in the Summer Institute should be a part of the regular secondary social studies educational program.

**Student Participants’ Beliefs on Human Rights: Becoming an Upstanding Individual is Essential**

As with any successful Human Rights Educational program, activism is important. The benefit of HRE is students move beyond fact acquisition and examine ways to affect change (Levin-Goldberg, 2009). The student participants identified several elements of the Institute they felt contributed to their ability to be upstanding individuals who to take action. They overwhelmingly expressed their preference for the active volunteering moments and hearing from local and international activists.

In preparation for their Day of Service, student participants learned about displaced peoples, such as Holocaust and genocide survivors, and what their lives were like after they fled their oppressive nations. As a service to augment their learning, the student participants worked together to prepare a home for two refugees from Myanmar on the sixth day of the Institute. Their service day began with a visit to a local refugee center where they learned of the center’s mission, its services, and its group affiliations. Following the introduction, the student participants were driven to the center’s warehouse where they selected donated furniture and other household items to furnish an apartment. The student participants were driven across town to an apartment of which they cleaned, painted, and decorated for the remainder of the day. Near the end of the day when the two refugees arrived, the student participants spoke with them to learn more about their country and the circumstances that brought them to the United States. Annie described the service experience as something that “makes you want to do more.” Other participants such as Hillary felt the refugee experience was a great way for the participants to serve their community. To become civically minded, students need opportunities not only in school but also outside of school to engage with their communities (Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009; NCSS, 2007). One way to do so is through service-learning projects (Wade, 2008). When students participate in service-learning extra-curricular activities, they are more likely to be committed to future democratic practices (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; McFarland & Thomas, 2006).

Several participants felt hearing from local activists was pivotal in helping them become upstanding individuals who take positive actions. These activists included genocide survivors, non-governmental organization program leaders, and governmental human rights prosecutors. Destiny commented on how powerful it was to listen to the speakers in order to hear about the ways in which people have imparted change. She believed those experiences shaped their teenage lives:

- It’s helped mold us into people that other people would look up to when we get older and want to be like us. Maybe we’ll be remembered. I mean, that’s what I think of and I think that we are doing something good and it’s molded me.

Guest speakers who are experts in their fields or first-hand witnesses to events can impact student attitudes and foster political civic engagement (Hess, 2004). For Destiny and other Institute participants, having models of upstanding behavior allows them to consider how they might in the future positively impact other people’s lives. Although the student participants believed the Institute provided numerous ways to help them be active upstanding individuals and
learned some examples of human rights violations in their schools, they questioned why more of this focus was not taking place in their social studies classrooms.

**Perceptions of Human Rights Education Within the Classroom: Genocide Education**

When participants were asked about their experiences in schools learning about genocide, all remarked their learning was limited and uneven. In U.S. history classes, participants said they studied human rights violations against Native Americans and the Holocaust. The French Revolution and Reign of Terror were discussed in world history classes, but examples of modern day genocide were rarely mentioned. As Kirsten explained, “We don’t learn about a lot of genocides. You don’t learn about Cambodia or Sierra Leone.” However, in classrooms where modern day genocides were discussed, according to Annie, it was because her teacher “specializes in” the human rights violations in Rwanda and Darfur. Most student participants, however, believed when discussions about human rights violations entered the classroom, it was an add-on and not as part of the official school curriculum. Ainsley stated, “We talked about things outside of the curriculum like genocide and women’s rights in social studies class.” According to the student participants, the focus on HRE often came as the result of ambitious individual teachers with a particular content interest rather than due to HRE topics embedded in the curriculum frameworks.

**Perceptions of Human Rights in the Classroom: Inspirational Teachers Exist**

While social studies educators might feel the pressure to succumb to test preparation to the point of jeopardizing academic rigor, there were still some participants who felt their teachers successfully infused their curricula with a rigorous examination of human rights issues and genocide education. The Institute Director’s former students lauded not only his social studies class but also his academic intervention class, noting how often they engaged in hands-on activities directly related to the Holocaust or genocide studies. Ainsley spoke of how he, “opened up a whole new way of looking at things” and “showed me a way I can use my compassion to help people.”

Participants’ comments indicated that a small group of passionate teachers played a large role in recruiting students to participate in the Summer Institute and become involved with human rights issues. One of the participants, Saleema, noted the work of her social studies teacher in encouraging her to get involved in human rights issues within a Model United Nations club and a Global Impact club. She said, “He’s definitely been my mentor through this whole thing, and he is one of the reasons why I’ve chosen this path.” Kirsten also credits her social studies teacher for inspiring her and encouraging her to attend the Institute:

To tell you the truth I always cared about other people, but I was never into human rights, never got involved, never really knew how to get involved. Then, my teacher encouraged me to come here. He influenced me to get into human rights because every time we had a conversation about it, I would be always thinking about it that night and it would stem off into other ideas. I have a newfound opinion on human rights and really want to study it when I go to college. He really transformed me.

Several other participants commented they had heard firsthand about the Institute from their teachers, many of whom had distributed Institute materials or showed Institute videos in their classroom. Others still spoke of dynamic teachers who created activist groups at their respective schools. When passionate teachers, like the ones the student participants referred to, support their students’ understanding by making the subject matter relevant, provide encouragement,
maintain good rapport, and connect interpersonally with students through self-biography, student motivation increases and learning occurs (Anderman, Andrezewski, & Allen, 2011). According to the Institute participants, many of their teachers possessed these qualities and as a result, were able to inspire them to become more interested in human rights issues.

**Ideal Classroom Experiences: More Authentic Learning**

When asked about content and exercises from the Institute they would like in their schools, participants unanimously suggested more authentic and relevant learning experiences. While speaking during his focus group interview, Ed captured the tone of many of the Institute participants:

One of the things that always kind of stuck out for me is school teaches us information, but the Institute teaches us ethics (one participant murmurs “morals”). Coming here you learn about the Holocaust and things you learn about in school, but learning about it through the eyes of somebody who experienced it first-hand and then comparing it to what’s happening today.

Like Ed, Lisa described the distinction between the Institute and school: “In school we learn facts. I think we should go more into detail and learn about it on a more personal level and then we’ll understand.” Institute participants desired more relevant and personal experiences in their social studies classrooms.

Many of the activities the participants were drawn to included simulations, art activities, and film viewings. However, the most referenced suggestions to augment their social studies knowledge were field trips and guest speakers, two elements central to the Institute experience. While she acknowledged the limitations caused by current school budget constraints, Saleema commented, "it’s so important to take kids on field trips…seeing things for yourself is a great way to learn, so schools need more field trips…." Sally agreed because the field trips allowed her to, “see a visual and connect it to the actual world.” Field trips, once a common feature in schools, have been slowly disappearing due to budgetary and testing constraints (Wheeler, 2011). Ending field trips results in a loss of what could be significant immediate and long-term learning experiences (Coughlin, 2010; Wolins & Ulzheimer, 1992) as field trips are linked directly to the school curriculum and have the potential to foster disciplinary knowledge, elevate cultural awareness, and promote social justice (Jakubowski, 2003; Noel, 2007; Noel & Colopy, 2006). Although the Institute participants understood the current climate constraints of field trip offerings, they still believed they should be included as part of the official curriculum as they are beneficial for promoting student learning.

Several student participants highlighted the role guest speakers played in personalizing the social studies content material of the Institute and suggested guest speakers to be a more consistent feature of instruction in school. Callum stated:

I believe one of the most influential parts is all of the speakers that we get to hear from. Here we’ve been able to get a glimpse into all of these acts by just the people who went through them. It brings it into a more relatable form.

The quality of rich, contextualized experiences found at the Summer Institute was something many of the student participants found lacking in their regular classrooms.

**Ideal Classroom Experiences: Increased Historical Content and Academic Rigor**
Institute participants consistently suggested several aspects of the Institute they would like to see in their schools, and also had additional suggestions. A couple of those suggestions included: less test preparation and more coverage of content and skills. Several participants suggested they wanted more academic rigor in their social studies classes, as they felt short-changed. Eliza said, “To be honest, we didn’t cover much. Teachers stuck to the curriculum and that’s what we did. It’s kind of upsetting.” Beth was sad teachers prioritized other topics, “Teachers will say, ‘Oh, we’ll get to that later because there’s more important stuff that needs to be learned,’ while people are killing other people!” Nyah wished more students learned about recent human rights violations because, “people don’t know past the Holocaust. They think it all over after that and then there is Rwanda and there are other genocides happening and they don’t know anything about this. They are totally blinded about these.” Sally, too, wanted more attention given to modern day acts of genocide, “We learned just the basics; only learned what we had to know for the exam, not extra stuff that most kids would like to learn about.”

Test preparation struck a chord with several student participants. Marjorie indicated too much time was spent reviewing for state exams instead of discussing human rights issues, “I think they could have gone into it but they did a lot of review. I hated review.” Eliza summed up the group’s feelings with her impassioned speech during her focus group interview:

I don’t want to learn just enough information to pass an exam at the end of the year. It is not an accurate measure of someone’s intelligence. I want to learn life skills; things I can use. We’re the people, the next generation; we’re the ones who are going to make a difference. If we don’t know what’s going on [in the world], how are we going to help all the people [in need]?

In an era of standards and high-stakes testing, the “just the facts” narrow curriculum approach is becoming all too frequent (Vogler & Virtue, 2007). Teachers feel pressured to devote substantial amounts of time for test preparation and in doing so, promote rote memorization of facts and limit student-centered activities (Grant, 2006). Institute participants resented this narrowing of the curriculum due to testing pressures and desired for more allocation of time devoted to real world issues, namely human rights issues.

**Suggested Implications of Human Rights Education**

In speaking with the student participants, it became abundantly clear many were deeply concerned about the current and future state of social studies education in schools if human rights issues are not more comprehensively addressed. Callum suggested the cycle of genocide would continue if children are not taught about it in school:

Schools need to teach people about genocide, why it’s wrong, and what the warning signs are, because eventually one of the kids who’s not being taught is going to grow up and be a warlord and won’t know what they’re doing is wrong, until after they’ve done it.

Lisa believed if students learned more about genocide in school, they would take more interest in human rights issues, and may be more likely to act. She explained, “I don’t think it’s just that people don’t care. It’s just they don’t have the information to care enough to be able to do something.” The student participants fervently held if what they learned in the Institute was taught in their respective schools, it might impact others in the way it has impacted them. “I think that if we had this program or opportunities like this in normal school,” Beth offered, “it would probably make more people less hateful towards other individuals.” Ed took it one step further and insisted genocide studies be a mandatory requirement in schools. “I think if people
were forced to [learn about it] in school, it would almost force them to have a different perspective. I just think that if that is what has to be done, then it does, ” he insisted. The Institute participants’ overall sentiments are not unlike other students who have engaged in similar HRE programs. For example, in Washington, DC, a group of 40 underprivileged youths who participated in a Mid-Atlantic Region Non-Governmental Organization Human Rights Education school program were similarly eager for human rights knowledge (Bronson, 2012). In programs such as these, young people are exposed to issues surrounding human rights, which leave them with a sense of wanting to learn more and to do more to affect positive change.

“Schools need to wake up!”

The student participants believed that even if schools expanded the content and included modern day atrocities in day-to-day social studies instruction, it would not be enough. They wanted a more comprehensive examination of human rights issues through authentic, meaningful experiences so they could be in a better position to make a difference, to serve the common good. Although human rights concepts are present in the current curriculum and in the recent test iterations, the mere presence of human rights concepts does not imply social studies is being taught from a HRE perspective. Human Rights Education is about moving beyond the cursory attention and the very narrowly focused tidbits of information to include student-based activism projects and opportunities for individual growth and development. The language of the current curriculum coupled with the testing format dictates what a teacher must teach but does not guide teachers on how to handle these topics. The current level of ambiguity, while welcome in some instances, may result in paying human rights issues only a cursory amount of attention. Student participants’ comments indicate, even in cases in which the social studies curriculum may refer to issues rich in their HRE potential, it is still largely incumbent on passionate teachers to take up the charge of HRE education in their classrooms.

Since the time of the study, New York along with 45 other states adopted the Common Core Standards. In New York these standards have been integrated into the new New York State K-12 Social Studies Framework (New York State Education Department, 2014b) and demonstrate an increase of the instances of human rights concepts compared to the past curriculum of which the participants of this study were under. The language in the new Framework also aligns closer with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Amnesty International’s definition of human rights. It is stated in key idea 10.10 Human Rights Violations:

Since the Holocaust, human rights violations have generated worldwide attention and concern. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights has provided a set of principles to guide efforts to protect threatened groups and has served as a lens by which historical occurrences of oppression can be evaluated. (New York State Education Department, 2014b, p. 27)

While the revised curriculum significantly increases the number of human rights concepts than its predecessor it is too soon to determine just how closely the future implementation matches HRE and our student participants’ desires. These additional learning opportunities start as early as Kindergarten and are present in every grade level. The changes, while not the truest embodiment of HRE, are a step closer to those promoted by HRE researchers and the Summer Institute participants.
Explicitly lacking from New York State’s Framework are opportunities for student activism. There are suggested activities, which may include activism-based opportunities, but teachers could implement this revised core curriculum in a predominately direct instruction-based classroom with minimal student-driven activities and meet the standards and core curriculum guidelines. This is most problematic as simply defining and minimally addressing human rights concepts falls quite short of the definition of HRE and certainly short of the definition of an effective social studies curricula.

What’s promising is the recently released *New York State K-12 Social Studies Field Guide* (New York State Education Department, 2014a) created to complement the Framework by providing guidance to teachers about its implementation.

In short, the Framework articulates what students should learn in social studies, while the Field Guide will provide guidance about how to integrate social studies content, practices, and Common Core Learning Strategies (CCLS) in the context of rigorous, inquiry-driven instruction. (New York State Education Department, 2014b, New York State K-12 Social Studies Framework, para. 3)

Future research should examine the implementation of New York State’s Framework and Field Guide and their adoption’s consequences, both positive and negative. In a persistent era of standards and standardized testing, could these proposed changes actually produce the kind of classroom environment the student participants’ desire? Researchers should consider the available professional development opportunities and the level of support (socially and institutionally) teachers receive in order to teach social studies from a HRE perspective.

When students are presented with content and experiences they believe to be informative and relevant to their everyday lives, they may be more motivated to extend that learning and potentially act upon it. More succinctly stated by Beth, “Schools need to wake up because it is important to know what happens in the world!”

**References**


**Web-Based References**


**Appendix A**

1. Please provide your first and last name.
2. Describe your own educational background.
3. When did you first become aware of human rights issues?
4. What led you to consider participating in the Summer Institute?
5. What are your general expectations for the Institute?
6. What content do you expect to learn?
7. What skills do you expect to gain?

Appendix B
1. Describe your own educational background. (grade - Fall 2011, related clubs).
2. When did you first become aware of human rights issues? Describe any experiences (in and out of school) that led to this awareness?
3. What led you to consider participating in the Summer Institute?
4. What are your expectations for the Institute? What content are you expecting to learn? What skills are you expecting to gain?
5. In what ways are your expectations for the Institute being met? In what ways are your expectations for the Institute not being met? What, if any, suggestions do you have for the Institute to meet your expectations?
6. To date, what has been the most valuable experience that you had during the Institute? Describe the most memorable session.
7. If this is not your first Institute, how does this Institute compare with previous ones you have attended?
8. What is your plan going forward for implementing the goals of the Institute in your school?
9. What, if any, barriers exist in terms of implementing the goals of the Institute in your school?
10. Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix C
1. Are there important people in your life that influenced the ways in which you think about human rights?
2. What did you most like about the Institute?
3. What did you least like about the Institute?
4. What are your short-term goals for pursuing the Institute agenda?
5. What are your long-term goals for pursuing the Institute agenda?
6. What aspects of the institute have been most effective in helping you to take the next step forward in your goals?
7. What did you wish that you had learned at the Institute that would help you to take those next steps?
8. Describe your experiences with studying human rights and genocide issues in your social studies classes?
9. Which of the experiences of the Institute would you like to see as part of your social studies classes? What about your other classes?
10. What are the most pressing human rights issues today? Why that particular issue?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Author Bios
Jill M. Gradwell is Associate Professor and Coordinator of Social Studies Education at SUNY Buffalo State. She teaches graduate courses in history, social studies education, and museum studies. Her research interests focus on teaching, learning, and assessing history. E-mail: gradwejm@buffalostate.edu.

Misty Rodeheaver is Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at SUNY Buffalo State. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in social studies education and history. Her research interests focus on human rights education, service learning, and technology integration.

Robert L. Dahlgren is Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at SUNY Fredonia. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in social studies methods, contemporary issues in education and philosophy of education. His primary research interest is in the nexus between the history of academic freedom and strategies for teaching controversial public policy issues.