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A qualitative study of human rights education: An insight from United Kingdom and Malaysia bridging the curriculum needs of students

ABSTRACT

1. This study aimed to investigate teachers' opinions in terms of human rights education (HRE). The study was conducted in four schools including two faith schools and two secular schools in England and in Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews of eight teachers, four from England and four from Malaysia, were used as a qualitative instrument to collect data for this study to know the needs of students in terms of HRE. The data of interviews were fully transcribed and scrutinized and, for each question, the responses were categorized. A further coding process then took place to identify categories that could be grouped together. This study provided the most promising findings to develop HRE among students. The findings revealed that in England, students study human rights in relation to moral responsibility, social involvement and political literacy; in Malaysia students start their topics by knowing themselves, friends and family, school and community. The results also revealed
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KEYWORDS

curriculum needs
human rights
human rights
education
citizenship
faith school
secular school
teacher

that in England, a belief in God underpinned HRE in the faith school but not the secular, whereas in Malaysia such a belief underpinned the curriculum regardless of type of school.

INTRODUCTION

Human rights education (HRE) is not only about political literacy but also economic and social issues. HRE in schools enables students to develop the skills and attributes for active citizenship to learn, to share, and to tolerate individuals who are different from themselves. Students may be equipped to transfer the knowledge and understanding gained in their school community to the wider world. The study of human rights and citizenship can help to develop empathy and understanding with people from different cultures and societies. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2009) indicates that HRE can contribute to the development of individuals who possess the skills to interact in a society by 'providing students with the abilities to accompany and produce societal changes' as a way to empower people, improve their quality of life to 'participate in decision making processes leading to social cultural and economic policies'. Hicks and Holden (1995, 2007) have asserted that students may learn about issues including poverty and the environment and may be encouraged to participate in school activities and to positively engage with their communities both local and internationally. As Ross (2007: 2) states with reference to the HRE that it is the relationship between the individual and society, between the self and others regarding curriculum which may reflect by helping the individuals to understand both their own identity and the nature of society and the ways to manage the complex relationship of rights and responsibilities that exist between the two. Education is seen as a way to teach young people about the fundamental principles of human rights and the introduction of citizenship as a subject in primary and secondary schools provides a platform to teach human rights to young citizens. Alderson argues that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is 'an ideal basis for citizenship education' and argues that 'rights are central to concepts of citizenship and democracy in clarifying the standards which the citizens agree to share' (Kiwan 2005: 37).

HRE: INTERNATIONAL APPROACHES

Since the end of the Second World War, the development of HRE has taken place in Asia, Europe, America and Africa. In Japan after the Second World War and in Taiwan in 1997 new curricula were introduced in civic and moral education to teach about democracy and to encourage active citizenship. Similarly, the 1980s saw proposals in many countries in Europe, North America and Latin America to introduce HRE (Osler and Starkey 2006). By the late 1990s these proposals had become a reality in the United Kingdom with the introduction of the citizenship curriculum, which included HRE.

In Hong Kong and China, with the 'One nation two systems' (Law 2004), citizenship education was introduced to focus on democratic citizenship after Hong Kong was handed over to be administered by China in 1997. In Korea, HRE was introduced in 2000 (Lee 2000) and in Singapore in 2001 (Boon Yee Sim and Print 2005). Citizenship education was later extended to include teachers, policy-makers and education officials to strengthen the