

Opportunities and Challenges in Integrating Human Rights Education into National Curriculum in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper explores the integration of Human Rights Education (HRE) within Nepal's national curriculum. The study delves into the challenges and opportunities of implementing HRE at the school level. Data was gathered through open questionnaires, discussions with school administrators and social studies teachers, and focus group discussions with students. In addition, the advice and suggestions were obtained by discussing with the headmaster of the school and the school management committee. A focus group discussion with students has been conducted on the state of human rights education in terms of activities, teaching activities, school teaching environment, and student-to-student behavior. The core theme of the study is the impact of inadequate HRE on students' understanding and appreciation of their rights and responsibilities. This includes limitations in addressing fundamental rights, civic duties, good governance, and social issues like human trafficking and domestic violence. The analysis reveals that the current curriculum underemphasizes crucial aspects such as local history, culture, and ethical values. Furthermore, the limited teaching hours allocated to social studies compared to other subjects hinders effective HRE implementation. The study recommends increasing teaching time for social studies and incorporating a more comprehensive life skills education curriculum that prioritizes local context, harmful practices, and social values.

Keywords: Human-rights education, Child rights, Local curriculum, Gender inclusion, Social studies

Introduction

Human Rights Education (HRE) represents a strategic approach to fostering understanding and appreciation of human rights principles, thereby cultivating a culture of respect and justice. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) of 1948 underscores the significance of education in promoting the full development

of human personality and reinforcing human rights and freedoms (UDHR, 1948). The United Nations further advanced this vision with the *Declaration on Human Rights Education* in 2011, defining HRE as encompassing activities to enhance knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes while fostering a global culture of human rights.

The *Vienna Declaration* of 1993 marked the formal initiation of HRE on the international stage, emphasizing its integration into diverse educational activities. The United Nations designated 1995–2004 as the *Decade of Human Rights Education*, with subsequent phases continuing globally. The current phase focuses on empowering youth through national-level HRE and aligning efforts with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

HRE is typically categorized into three models: the values and awareness model, the accountability model, and the transformational model. The values and awareness model seeks to raise awareness about human rights and promote societal values. The accountability model emphasizes safeguarding human rights within professional roles, while the transformational model addresses and mitigates human rights violations.

In Nepal, social studies are a compulsory subject from primary school to Grade 12 and are offered optionally in graduate programs at Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu University, and Nepal Sanskrit University. Tribhuvan University provides specialized degrees such as the Master in Social Studies Education (MSSSED), a Postgraduate Diploma (PGD), and a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) in Social Studies Education. The higher education curriculum encompasses a broad range of subjects, including geography, economics, history, civics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and psychology.

Articles 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and 28 and 29 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* ensure children's right to education. Nepal is a signatory to these conventions as a member of the United Nations, obliging the government to ensure human rights-friendly and universally accessible education. Similarly, the *Dakar Framework for Action* (2000), adopted at the World Education Forum in Senegal, emphasized civil society's active participation in formulating, implementing, and monitoring educational strategies.

The *National Policy on Children 2022*, the *National Curriculum Framework for School Education in Nepal 2019*, the *Education Act 1971* (and its 2002 Regulation), and the *Compulsory and Free Education Act 2018* (and its 2020 Regulation) collectively aim to eradicate illiteracy, ensure access to school

education, and provide equitable opportunities for technical and professional education. These policies prioritize marginalized communities, including those facing poverty, exclusion, or disabilities, and emphasize the use of mother tongues at the basic education level.

The Fifth National Human Rights Action Plan (2020/21–2024/25) highlights the need for child-friendly and quality school education (Government of Nepal, 2018). Additionally, the Global Periodic Review (Third Cycle) National Human Rights Implementation Action Plan (2021–2025) recommends incorporating gender equality and human rights into the school curriculum, necessitating revisions to textbooks, teacher guides, and training programs (UNHCR 2021). These efforts underscore the need to align school curricula with democratic and human rights principles, as well as to analyze the adequacy of human rights education within existing social studies textbooks.

At the school level, social studies is a compulsory subject from Grades 1 to 12. In this context, it is essential to evaluate the extent to which human rights education is integrated into the school-level social studies curriculum. Key questions include: What are the textual components related to human rights education within social studies? Is the current curriculum sufficient in addressing human rights education from the perspectives of teachers and students?

Materials and Methods

This research employs a theoretical framework grounded in macro (structural) and micro (actor-based) perspectives on conflict and unity. At the macro level, the federal government is mandated with formulating programs and activities to address the needs of the entire nation, whereas local governments are responsible for developing policies, regulations, and programs tailored to local needs and demands. The implementation of policies and curricula formulated by the three levels of government presents both opportunities and challenges.

The study is designed to analyze social realities through a structured research framework, employing questionnaires to collect data from teachers and students at various levels of governance—from the federal to the local. Specifically, data were gathered from the Curriculum Development Center at the federal level, provincial training centers in Kavrepalanchok and Makwanpur districts in Bagmati Province, and Bara and Rautahat districts in Madhesh Province at the local level. The focus was on teachers and students involved in teaching and learning social studies at the school level.

Information on the social studies curriculum was collected using open-ended questionnaires. Additionally, insights were obtained through discussions with school principals and members of school management committees. Targeted group discussions were conducted with students to assess the state of human rights education, focusing on teaching methodologies, school environments, interactions among students, student-teacher relationships, social challenges, and approaches to problem-solving.

Results and Discussion

Historical Development of HRE in Nepal Before Democracy

The formal and modern education system in Nepal was initiated during the Rana regime. During Prime Minister Rana Bir Shamsheer's tenure, discussions on suitable education for Nepal began (Sharma, 2066). However, systematic progress in education occurred following the 2011 report of the National Education Planning Commission. This Commission integrated the fundamental rights and directive principles of the Constitution of Nepal, 2048, into its education policies. The Higher National Education Commission (2055 BS) also emphasized fundamental rights, aiming to ensure equitable access to education for women and other marginalized groups, including Dalits, backward communities, and persons with disabilities (Sharma, G. 2009).

The Commission envisioned the 21st century as a period characterized by economic development, democratic values, human rights, gender equality, children's rights, environmental sustainability, and rapid information dissemination. Consequently, Nepal's contemporary curriculum framework and textbooks were developed based on these principles.

Nepal's commitment to human rights education (HRE) is evident in its ratification of various international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), Convention against Racial Discrimination (1965), and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). These instruments recognize education as a fundamental right essential for securing other rights such as freedom of expression, equality, and the right to earn a living.

The global momentum for HRE gained prominence with the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000. Participants committed to involving civil society in education strategies to achieve the Dakar Framework for Action. The Sustainable

Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) further emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all, promoting lifelong learning by 2030 (Government of Nepal, NPC 2016). This global campaign on HRE was bolstered by the United Nations declaring 1996–2004 as the Decade for Human Rights Education (Cárdenas, 2005).

Articles 78 and 79 of the Vienna Declaration advocate HRE as vital for fostering community harmony, mutual understanding, tolerance, and peace. These articles urge states and institutions to integrate human rights, humanitarian law, democracy, and the rule of law into formal and informal education systems. Supporters of HRE argue that such education promotes social tolerance, strengthens democratic citizenship, and reduces human rights violations. Human rights education is defined as training, dissemination and information efforts aimed at building a global culture of human rights through knowledge, skills and attitudes. According to the supporters of human rights education, such education increases social tolerance and increases democratic citizenship in addition to reducing cases of human rights violations, so they should appeal to the government for this type of education. Human rights education is receiving great support worldwide and events on human rights education have been trending since the dawn of time, networks for advocacy of human rights education at the international level of high importance. Such networks are gradually pressuring governments to accept international human rights standards (Keck & Skink, 1997).

After Democracy

Post-democracy, Nepal's Ministry of Education and the Curriculum Development Center became responsible for formulating and implementing educational policies. The Constitution of Nepal (2072) grants local governments the authority to oversee secondary-level education and mandates teaching in the mother tongue for primary levels as per the Local Government Operation Act 2074 BS (Law Commission of Nepal). However, discrepancies between federal policies and local government priorities have led to challenges in implementation. . It is based on the broad (structural) principle that the federal government should make programs and activities in order to meet the needs of the entire nation, while the local government should make policies, rules and programs according to the local needs and demands and operate according to the demand.

Article 31 of the Constitution enshrines the right to education, every community shall have the right to receive basic education in their mother tongue as provided by law, every citizen shall have the right to receive free education from the state up to secondary level, every community living in Nepal shall protect and promote its language, script, culture, cultural civilization and heritage as provided by law will be right. The government's periodic plans (2081–2086 B.S.) aim to

develop innovative, competitive, and value-oriented human resources to drive socio-economic transformation. The School Sector Development Plan (2079–2088) aligns with SDG 4 to ensure inclusive access to quality education while promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (Ministry of Education, Science & Technology 2079)

The National Children's Policy (2022), prepared by the Ministry of Women, Children, and Social Welfare, emphasizes creating child-friendly educational environments. It seeks to protect children from abuse and discrimination while enhancing their participation and developing juvenile justice systems. The policy also promotes revising curricula to incorporate children's rights, abuse prevention, and exploitation awareness, addressing the needs of marginalized groups such as Dalits, children with disabilities, and conflict-affected children.

The National Curriculum Framework (2076) emphasizes education as a catalyst for social, economic, and cultural transformation (Ministry of Education, Science & Technology 2076). It advocates incorporating sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, and environmental protection into school education. The curriculum also aims to equip students with practical and entrepreneurial skills necessary for national development and global citizenship.

Place of HRE in School Curricula

The National Curriculum Framework (2076) integrates recommendations from various stakeholders, including Dalits, women, persons with disabilities, and indigenous groups, to create an inclusive and human-rights-oriented curriculum (Ministry of Education, Science & Technology 2079). The framework promotes the democratization of education, ensuring the representation of diverse groups in curriculum development.

The curriculum highlights the importance of fostering social justice, democracy, coexistence, and equality. It prioritizes education for disadvantaged groups such as street children, laborers, and those affected by conflict. Addressing global issues like human rights, environmental protection, and rule of law, the framework seeks to produce citizens capable of navigating an interconnected world.

Nepal's textbooks now cover fundamental rights, civic duties, governance, gender inclusiveness, and the challenges of caste-based discrimination. However, implementation gaps persist due to inadequate teacher training, resource constraints, and limited local historical and cultural content in curricula.

Challenges in the Implementation of Human Rights Education

Teachers' Challenges in Delivering HRE

Teachers have reported that a lack of infrastructure, resources, and training are significant barriers to effectively delivering Human Rights Education (HRE) in schools. One of the primary challenges is the limited allocation of teaching hours for social studies, which often results in insufficient time to cover topics related to human rights adequately. As noted by various studies (Insec2013), social studies are often considered less critical compared to other subjects such as mathematics and language, which leads to fewer resources being allocated to the subject. Furthermore, local governments frequently prioritize hiring teachers for core subjects, leaving social studies with a lower priority in teacher recruitment. This trend exacerbates the shortage of qualified social studies teachers

Moreover, many teachers report a lack of specific training or instructional guides on how to effectively teach social studies topics, leading to significant knowledge gaps. As suggested by (Koirala, B.N., Adhikari, K.P. et al), without proper training, educators may feel inadequately prepared to handle complex subjects such as human rights, which require specialized knowledge and pedagogical approaches.

Students' Dissatisfaction with Curriculum Content

From the students' perspective, there is notable dissatisfaction with the exclusion of local histories, languages, and cultures in the textbooks. Research by (Koirala, B.N., Adhikari, K.P. et al) highlighted that national curricula often focus on generalized content that overlooks regional diversity, leaving students disconnected from the subject matter. Furthermore, ethical and moral education, which is vital for the development of critical thinking around issues like child rights and human rights, is underrepresented in the current curriculum. This gap in education leaves students with limited exposure to key ethical issues that are essential for promoting a human rights-conscious society.

School Management Committees' Perceptions of HRE

In Nepal, the government mandates the formation of school management committees (SMCs), typically chaired by parent representatives, to oversee various aspects of school administration, including the implementation of educational policies and monitoring of school infrastructure. These committees have the potential to be powerful advocates for HRE, as they play a key role in promoting policies such as free education and ensuring that schools are adequately resourced (Koirala, B.N., Adhikari, K.P. et al).

However, the effective functioning of SMCs in promoting HRE is hindered by coordination challenges and inadequate policy implementation at the local level. Although these committees are tasked with addressing resource gaps and improving educational outcomes, their capacity to influence HRE is often limited by a lack of awareness and understanding of human rights issues. SMCs are mandated to monitor educational policies and practices, there remains significant room for improvement in terms of empowering these committees to take a more active role in the promotion of HRE within schools. Stronger coordination between local authorities, educational institutions, and community stakeholders is needed to enhance the effectiveness of these committees in promoting human rights education.

Overloaded Curriculum Content

One of the major challenges in implementing HRE in Nepal is the overloaded content in the social studies curriculum. The subject is expected to cover a wide range of topics, including local history, geography, governance, social studies, and ethics, which often leaves insufficient time to address human rights issues in detail. Furthermore, the absence of clear guidelines and resources for teachers on how to effectively teach human rights within this overloaded curriculum exacerbates the issue. The current curriculum is highly theoretical and does not include enough practical examples or case studies that would allow students to engage meaningfully with human rights concepts.

Lack of Adequate Human Resources

The shortage of qualified teachers for social studies is another critical issue. While education policy at the national level emphasizes the importance of social studies, local governments often prioritize hiring teachers for core subjects such as mathematics and languages. Consequently, social studies teachers are frequently undertrained or inexperienced in delivering complex topics such as human rights. The lack of specialized training for teachers in human rights education means that educators are often ill-equipped to effectively teach these critical topics, resulting in significant gaps in students' understanding.

Cultural Stigma and Resistance to Teaching Human Rights

In many communities, there exists a cultural stigma and resistance to teaching and learning about human rights, particularly those related to gender equality, caste-based discrimination, and child rights. Traditional social structures, deeply rooted in cultural norms and practices, often clash with human rights principles, especially in rural areas. This cultural resistance makes it difficult for educators to teach human rights openly, as these topics may be perceived as challenging the established social

order. Teachers may avoid addressing sensitive topics such as child marriage, gender-based violence, and caste discrimination for fear of community backlash.

Limited Teacher Training and Resources

Many teachers lack formal training in human rights education, which limits their ability to teach the subject effectively. Teachers often do not have access to the necessary instructional materials, including textbooks, guides, and multimedia resources, which are essential for teaching human rights topics in an engaging and impactful way. The absence of a clear pedagogical framework for HRE further exacerbates this issue, leaving teachers to rely on outdated or irrelevant materials that fail to meet the educational needs of students.

Inconsistent Implementation at the Local Level

Despite federal policies that mandate the inclusion of human rights education in the curriculum, the implementation at the local level has been inconsistent. Local governments often lack the capacity or political will to prioritize human rights education in their schools. In some regions, particularly in rural or remote areas, schools are ill-equipped to teach human rights effectively due to resource constraints and inadequate infrastructure. Furthermore, local authorities may not have sufficient knowledge or understanding of human rights to ensure that curricula and teaching methods are aligned with national educational goals.

Recommendations for Improving Human Rights Education in Nepal

Curriculum Revision and Realignment

To ensure that human rights education is adequately integrated into the secondary education system, the government should revise the social studies curriculum to better reflect local histories, cultures, and human rights issues. The curriculum should prioritize key human rights topics, such as child rights, gender equality, caste-based discrimination, and environmental justice, and allocate sufficient teaching hours to cover these topics comprehensively. Additionally, the content should include practical case studies, real-life examples, and project-based learning to help students engage with human rights in a meaningful way.

Increased Investment in Teacher Training

Teacher training programs should be expanded to include specialized courses in human rights education. These programs should be designed to equip teachers with the knowledge and pedagogical skills necessary to teach human rights topics effectively. Furthermore, the government should develop clear instructional

guidelines and resources for teachers, including textbooks, multimedia materials, and lesson plans, to support the delivery of human rights education in the classroom.

Addressing Cultural Resistance

To address cultural stigma and resistance to human rights education, the government should launch awareness campaigns that highlight the importance of human rights and their relevance to the local context. These campaigns should engage community leaders, parents, and students to build support for the inclusion of human rights education in the school curriculum. Additionally, schools should offer training and support to teachers to help them navigate sensitive topics and foster open discussions about human rights in the classroom.

Strengthening Local Government Capacity

Local governments should be provided with additional resources and training to ensure the effective implementation of human rights education policies. This includes providing financial support to schools for the development of human rights curricula, teacher training, and the purchase of educational materials. Local authorities should also be encouraged to establish school management committees (SMCs) that are actively involved in promoting human rights education at the community level.

Collaborative Efforts to Develop Context-Specific Curriculum

Curriculum development should involve a collaborative approach, where local governments, teachers, students, and community stakeholders work together to design curricula that reflect the unique human rights challenges faced by their communities. By incorporating regional histories, cultures, and social issues, the curriculum will become more relevant and engaging for students, fostering a deeper understanding of human rights.

Policy Development at Federal and Local Levels

Federal Government: The federal government should incorporate human rights education in its education act. Based on the act, a national level policy to standardize human rights education across the country can be formulated. This includes ensuring that human rights topics are incorporated into national curricula, allocating sufficient funding for educational resources and teacher training, and setting clear guidelines for the implementation of these policies. By establishing federal guidelines, the

government can ensure consistency in human rights education delivery and create uniformity across provinces.

Local Government: Local governments should tailor policies to meet the specific needs of their communities. For instance, local governments can introduce programs that focus on community-specific human rights issues such as gender equality, caste discrimination, or child labor. Local governments should also coordinate with schools and community groups to create educational programs that address pressing regional concerns, ensuring that students receive relevant and practical knowledge. These localized policies will help strengthen community participation in education and ensure that human rights education resonates with local contexts and challenges.

Conclusion

The study highlights significant gaps in the implementation of HRE within the secondary education system in Nepal. The current allocation of 128 hours for social studies, compared to 160 hours for other compulsory subjects, indicates a need to increase teaching hours for social studies to ensure that human rights issues are adequately covered in the curriculum. The absence of comprehensive coverage of human rights in existing educational materials, along with insufficient teacher training and resources, further exacerbates these challenges.

Furthermore, while the government has made strides in mandating social studies as a compulsory subject, the implementation of these policies at the local level remains inconsistent. Curriculum revisions at both the secondary and higher secondary levels are crucial to incorporating human rights education, particularly in areas such as local history, harmful customs, ethics, and social values. Despite the good intentions behind the government's education policies, financial investment, and inter-governmental coordination are essential to meet the goals and indicators outlined in the Education Policy 2076 and the Curriculum Framework 2076.

In addressing child abuse, violence, and discrimination in schools, it is necessary to establish dedicated committees that focus on psycho-social counseling and intervention. These committees should be equipped with the proper authority and resources to address child rights violations effectively.

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