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Human Rights Education and Intercultural Competence: Foundations for Democratic and Inclusive Schools

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Abstract

This essay examines the essential integration of human rights education (HRE) and intercultural competence (IC) as foundational principles for fostering more democratic and inclusive education in contemporary multicultural societies. In this context, school education must serve not only as a means of knowledge transfer but also as an effective transformative practice at the heart of social justice, equality, and active citizenship. At the pedagogical level, this paper explores human rights education and intercultural competence alongside experiential learning, which is crucial for developing a deeper understanding of power relations, cultural biases, and the abuse of rights through action-based approaches such as role-playing and service learning. Integrating HRE and intercultural education into curricula enables students to develop democratic principles and values and to adopt a democratic way of life.

Keywords: Human rights education, democracy, intercultural competence, inclusive education.

1. Introduction

Education is more than a source of knowledge in contemporary pluralistic societies. For its part, it is a powerful vehicle for instilling basic democratic principles such as social justice and inclusive citizenship (Banks, 2015; Dewey, 2011). Mainly, the rapid demographic evolution of migration and its transition have made the need for education to go beyond knowing and access points for students to make it not only about providing access points but to prepare students to think thoughtfully from different social backgrounds all the more pressing (Byram, 2021; Crul et al., 2012).

In contrast, education in human rights and intercultural competence are some of the basic principles for an inclusive political state that is based on both (Banks, 2015; Dewey, 2011). Human rights education offers a normative moral framework that recognizes human dignity and the universals of freedoms and duties (Poché, 2021; James & Arthur et al., 2008). It accomplishes its goal by providing students with elementary rights, urging students to face objectively the injustice of differences among individuals, and encouraging the upbringing of strong notions of fairness and equity (Osler & Starkey, 1996; Reardon, 1995).

Human rights education teaches students how to respect their humanity, where students are affirmed that they have the right to be safe, free from discrimination related to race or gender, etc. It is also closely related to a democratic education aiming at facilitating participation in sociopolitical life through equitable access through power, thereby enhancing citizenry (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2012). Intercultural competence includes

the mindsets, attitudes, and abilities needed to be able to sensitively comprehend and to understand cultural differences (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Deardorff, 2011). In addition to language proficiency, this is highly self-reflective about one's own biases/assumptions (Byram, 2021; Fantini, 2020).

On the other hand, intercultural competence allows individuals to engage in meaningful dialogue, adjudicate conflicts, and develop mutual respect around cultural differences—crucial skills for social cohesion in democracies (Nelson et al., 2019; Sarwari et al., 2024). The educational paradigm that includes the significance of intercultural competence promotes equitable learning systems where diversity is considered an asset (Avgousti, 2018; Osler & Starkey, 2006). While human rights education and intercultural competence have similar aims, the integration of these aims within education systems is not always successful (Porto et al., 2017; Osler & Skarra, 2021).

Education in human rights is often framed in legalistic or abstract language that is not appropriate for culturally diverse learners, and there may not be strong links between intercultural competence (IC) interventions and rights and justice initiatives (Courey & LePage, 2013; Goodhart, 2022). Linking these domains helps to integrate the education in an integrated manner, which, in so doing, will foster an overall knowledge and skills base, and attitudes of respect, responsibility, and democratic empowerment (Veugelers, 2019; Merry, 2020).

Inclusive education, a cornerstone of democratic countries, must take this integration further by ensuring that a learning environment recognizes and values diversity; thus all students are able to participate fully (Banks & Banks, 2019; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2012). This involves curricular, pedagogical, and policy-based mechanisms that reinforce rights-based and intercultural principles to address structural inequalities and the marginalisation of cultures (Dei, 2017; Conti, 2025).

Despite this, ensuring democratic and inclusive education anchored in human rights, and intercultural competence is fraught with socio-political tensions, xenophobia, and an inconsistent policy agenda (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009; Bacher, 2024). Hence, educational interventions must be context-specific and durable, developing critical thinking and empathy as barriers to social fragmentation and marginalization (Osler & Starkey, 1996). UNESCO, among other international organizations, promotes education for worldwide citizens, explicitly connecting human rights with intercultural dialogue, that are critical for sustainable peace and development (UNESCO, 2015, 2022).

This essay hopes to make clearer the theoretical and concrete connections between human rights and intercultural competence as antecedents for democratic and inclusive schooling. Based on current literature and policy efforts, drawing upon the evidence in this field, it positions the argument for both theory and practice integration so as to address knowledge, skills and attitudes in preparation and engagement for learner participation in democratic plural society (Sarwari et al., 2024; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). By positioning human rights education and intercultural competence within education reform, this essay offers timely context to the growing dialogue as to how schools can be transformative entities that promote equity, respect and social cohesion.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Understanding the role of human rights education in intercultural competence requires an all-encompassing analysis of its primary theoretical perspectives. This is the basis of what can be achieved by design and its implementation into democratic and inclusive education. Human Rights Education (HRE) is rooted in universalist ethical imperatives that are enshrined within international human rights instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. More than passing on rights-related knowledge, HRE is a transformative process and one that aims to engender awareness, empathy and agency in learners to identify and challenge injustice (Poché, 2021; Arthur et al., 2008).

By drawing from theoretical perspectives around HRE, respect for human dignity, equality, and non-discrimination are emphasised as normative educational aims (Osler & Starkey, 1996). Critical pedagogy (Reardon, 1995) is at the forefront as it invites learners to question structures of power and privilege and

assume social responsibility. Therefore, HRE is inherently linked to democratic education that promotes the capacities necessary for participatory and informed citizenship (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2012).

On the other hand, Intercultural Competence (IC) represents a living, developmental ability allowing individuals to speak and collaborate skillfully and correctly across cultural lines (Byram, 2021; Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Theoretical paradigms of IC focus on the cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of interactions, such as understanding cultural norms, attitudes of openness and respect, and abilities such as empathy and conflict resolution (Deardorff, 2011). A core component of IC is intercultural critical consciousness; that is, being conscious of how one's own cultural assumptions shape views and interaction (Fantini, 2020).

The process orientation that characterises IC scholarship has been described as a focus on ongoing learning and adaptability rather than fixed capabilities (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Educational IC allows for important intercultural dialogue to take place, enabling understanding and a conducive environment for the peaceful cohabitation of differences amongst disparate people of different cultural backgrounds in democratic societies (Nelson et al., 2019; Sarwari et al., 2024). In this base, HRE and IC share similarities in philosophical positions. Both place high value on respect to diversity, the formation of empathy and giving power to individuals to act ethically in the context of pluralism in a plural community (Veugelers, 2019).

In theory, these two domains also overlap with respect to their common objective to support social and civic justice and democratic principles through teaching and learning (Porto et al., 2017). The coupling between HRE and IC therefore represents an excellent theoretical tool for addressing the cognitive, affective, and moral aspects of learning that underpin inclusive citizenship. The theory of democratic education offers further insights into this integration, emphasising how education develops important participatory capacities, critical thinking (as well as rights awareness) for successful democracies (Dewey, 2011; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2012).

Democratic schooling theorists advocate for inclusive educational forms that deliberately address cultural diversity as well as structural inequalities in service of justice and social solidarity and integration (Banks, 2015). In this regard, education as a transformative social practice is crucial, and education by focusing on intercultural and human rights competence contributes to the deconstruction of barriers and the creation of a democratic culture. These theories are complemented by robust multicultural education concepts that underscore the importance of confronting inequity embedded in curricula and school practices (Banks & Banks, 2019).

Human rights and intercultural competence, specifically, they are to be recognized as aspects within a wider educational process designed to prepare students to work in democracy in varied social contexts (Conti, 2025). If we are to have a model for democracy as a whole, we need the harmonization of these two frameworks. Respect, agency, and intercultural dialogue are key to constructing democratic educational communities. They are derived from normative principles and developmental perspectives.

3. Human Rights Education as a Foundation for Democratic Inclusion

Human rights education (HRE) is an essential component of democratic inclusive practice, equipping learners by offering knowledge, skills and dispositions to participate in just and equitable communities. Based on human rights frameworks like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and backed by pledges from organizations such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe, HRE aims to operationalize abstract rights principles within education (Poché, 2021; European Commission, 2018).

As a transformative educational approach, HRE calls on learners to critically engage with power, privilege, systemic inequality and issues affecting people, respecting human dignity and social justice as goals (Osler & Starkey, 1996). The central competences of human rights education go beyond the mere understanding of legal rights to consideration of social facts and active involvement in democratic processes (Arthur et al., 2008). This 'tripartite approach' of knowledge - critical reflection and agency - is necessary for the

development of democratic citizens who can critically appraise oppressive systems and seek to be included (Reardon, 1995).

Focusing on both individual freedom and social obligations, HRE helps students understand diversity as an asset and democracy as a way of living that is marked by dialogue, negotiation, and solidarity (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2012). Educationally, HRE is a cross-cutting approach with a focus on connecting humanities pedagogy such as history, law, ethics, social sciences to establish learning on subjects of rights in local, national and global contexts (Poché, 2021). Such novel curricular approaches emphasize a hands-on approach to learning to engage learners so they experience what it is like to enact rights-based decision-making or engage in service projects, creating a stronger connection between theory and praxis (Osler & Starkey, 1996).

In this sence, teachers are facilitators who create safe, inclusive classroom environments in an environment where dialogue, critical inquiry and empathy can be encouraged to take place (Dei, 2017). This strategy is in line with Dewey's (2011) views of education as a democratic practice for the cultivation of reflective and socially sensitive people. As HRE promotes fairness, directly targets social inequalities and social inclusion, that is, the social issues that arise when schools serve with regards to racism, xenophobia and marginalization. For example, empirical findings suggest that the success of rights-based education projects has shown to increase the consciousness of students regarding discrimination, increase sensitivity to the needs of marginalized people, and reduce prejudiced attitudes toward groups on the margins and prejudices (Bacher, 2024; Osler & Skarra, 2021).

Positioning universal rights principles right alongside culturally competent pedagogy, HRE contributes in removing potential entry and in fostering interconnectedness-key of a comprehensive collective democracy (Veugelers, 2019). HRE also facilitates inclusive education by guiding policies and practices within national policies for protection of disadvantaged groups and increased equitable access to educational experiences (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2012). It promotes institutional re-formulation in education as it integrates nondiscrimination principles, participatory principles and accountability in the governance of education (European Commission, 2018). Such inclusive policies rooted in human rights perspectives have been previously demonstrated in research to have an impact on representation of minority voices in school decision-making and programming and ultimately foster more democratic school cultures (Dei, 2017).
It is worth noting that teacher education is essential to reap results from HRE as a basis for democratic inclusion. Designing professional learning processes such as these enable teachers to embed rights-based content into culturally responsive pedagogies and to effectively address high stakes classroom work (Sarwari et al., 2024; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). It urges teachers to become advocates for social justice in their own schools and thus helps to create democratic-driven inclusive educational settings (Banks & Banks, 2019).

However, there are considerable barriers to the widespread introduction of the human rights education as a tool for democratic inclusion. The resistance caused by socio-political ideologies, either nationalistic or from entrenched discriminatory ideologies, often acts as a limitation on curricula and the opportunities for critical engagement with controversial issues (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009). Further, resources for HRE systems that are generally still do not exist in sufficient numbers and far too few schools offer comprehensive HRE resources and so exacerbate problems of the educational quality and accessibility (Bacher, 2024).

In order to address these challenges, it will take strong lobbying by decision-makers, public leaders, educators, civil society and communities, and all stakeholders to make rights education part of democratic schooling in fundamental ways. International organizations have been the main actors in the development of the HRE framework as they have been central to the development of democratic-based approaches to promoting the HRE paradigm for democratic participation and inclusion. UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education initiative (2020) specifically includes human rights competencies and intercultural dialogue in the framework of sustainable peace and development, arguing that pedagogical frameworks that cultivate such competencies (e.g. intercultural dialogue; human rights knowledge) are needed Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009.

4. Intercultural Competence: Enabling Dialogue and Mutual Respect

Intercultural competence (IC) has been recognised as a crucial component of contemporary education, where its importance is to serve a purpose in creating inclusive societies that value diversity and encourage social integration. Based on the capability to communicate across cultures, IC extends beyond linguistic capacity to a range of dispositions, knowledge and skills necessary to enable a successful cross-cultural association (Bennett & Bennett, 2004).

Empathy and respect for otherness are essential components of competence as critical to democratic competence and that a commitment to common space and co-construction of civic norms that includes the exercise of intercultural competence is crucial toward democratic practice (Sarwari et al., 2024). Theoretical approaches to intercultural competency conceptualise it as a process for constructing intercultural competence within a dynamic, developmental and cultural environment. Deardorff states that IC is "a collection of cognitive, affective and behavioral skills and characteristics that assist individuals in effectively and appropriately interacting in a variety of cultural situations" (2011, p.3). This multilevel model extends to cultural self-awareness, openness, empathy, adaptability and negotiation of work meanings beyond cultural boundaries. Thus, intercultural competence is not a fixed characteristic but rather an inquiring and modifying endeavor that is informed by context and experience (Bennett, 2009).

In a cross-cutting field of intercultural education, a key plank of this understanding is an intercultural critical consciousness (Fantini, 2020)—the awareness of one's own cultural assumptions and the recognition of the cultural biases that underpin them (their power, for instance), and the relationships those biases build in intercultural contexts. The reflexive and conscious mind not only helps learners overcome shallow cultural stereotypes, but intercultural conversations with varied intercultural communities' surface richly on intercultural terrain, tearing down the barriers that relegate inclusion solely to the niche of minority groups. Without this awareness, intercultural interactions can also perpetuate and magnify prejudice (Nelson et al., 2019).Thus, education for IC focuses not just on developing communicative competences but rather offers significant critical thinking regarding social justice matters which can become incorporated into cultural divides (Avgousti, 2018).

On the pedagogical level, intercultural competence is a purposeful curriculum & teaching activity. (Roiha & Sommier, 2021). Experiential learning experiences such as role plays, simulations, service learning, and intercultural exchanges give realistic situations where students confront cultural differences and confront them in the experiential learning journey (Avgousti, 2018).These approaches foster affective/behavioral development in addition to cognitive development by allowing for empathy and behaviour change and develop trust (Sinicrope et al., 2007). There are models to inform IC assessment and development in education. For example, Byram's (2021) model sets out some essential elements including attitudes (openness to learning, curiosity), knowledge and understanding of oneself and others, ability to interpret and relate, cultural awareness and critical reflexivity, and language skills.

This all-encompassing framework emphasizes the confluence of the cognitive, affective and practical domains that contribute to sustainable intercultural competence. Assessments focus on the reflective practice alongside self-assessment enabling learners to monitor their progress and the areas where they need more growth (Deardorff, 2011). The benefits of IC development for democratic inclusion are supported by educational research. As shown in studies, learners that had experiences of intercultural competence education showed higher tolerance, lower ethnocentrism, and higher social responsibility (Sarwari et al., 2024; Osler & Starkey, 2006). IC helps individuals develop these to help them navigate multicultural communities featuring various cultures and fluid ways culture flows and identities (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). These knowledge-management skills enhance effective democratic thinking, negotiating in the face of intercultural conflict with competency to build a fairer society (Byram & Wagner, 2018).

The importance of intercultural competence is widely recognized but the application of theorization to an appropriate international teaching system challenges the world's students' sense learning to be consistent across contexts, countries and continents. One problem is that IC is inherently conflicted in the ways it is

framed and addressed in education – IC development may be country or institution or political based (Holliday, 2016).

In certain places intercultural education runs the risk of tokenism (or "doing the shallow job") because that is not connected to much broader matters of power, privilege and systemic inequity (Courey & LePage, 2013). Moreover, the rise of politicisation of dissimilar cultural forms could backfire and prompt objections from actors who view intercultural activities as threatening the national character or social harmony (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009). These challenges require teachers to be able to develop culturally responsive pedagogies which place intercultural competence in the context of learners' life worlds and with the sociopolitical conditions in which the learning environment offers them access (Conti, 2025).

Therefore, intercultural competence in schools needs appropriate teacher education systems. These ideas intercultural theories provide necessary perspectives and tools that teachers can build into their professional experiences through intercultural workshops so that teachers can become facilitators of a wide-ranging, inclusive dialogue and cultural exchange (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). These programs urge teachers to recognize their own cultural and historical biases, and practice intercultural sensitivity and respect (Sarwari et al., 2024). When you model and support IC as teachers, a space of democracy, mutual respect, and democratic participation in the classroom is created in part by the environment where teachers live and practice IC. This is particularly true when you include community and family work in the curriculum which emphasizes that intercultural competence cannot be one-dimensional, as it also affects the quality of experiences people take on. Inclusive education does not stop at the school level, it requires partnerships with different cultural groups that co-construct learning environments that reflect the rights of various groups within schools (Banks & Banks, 2019).

Initiatives for collaboration between and among parents, cultural organizations and local leaders can enable schools to offer students meaningful intercultural experiences and contribute shared ownership of inclusive democratic practices (Avgousti, 2018). International organizations promote this kind of cultural competency in international schools and advocacy for a more inclusive pedagogy: international organizations recognize the value of intercultural competence, in a context of globalization, in creating, implementing, and integrating intercultural competence in academic and vocational curriculum of education. The UNESCO Global Citizenship Education frameworks directly relate intercultural dialogue to sustainable peace and development (UNESCO, 2015), while also supporting pedagogies to advance human rights and cultural diversity.

Their efforts are an excellent reminder of human rights education and intercultural competence as both tools for addressing major challenges of our time including migration, social polarization and discrimination. Intercultural competence is an important aspect of democracy and education. IC promotes a sense of critical consciousness, empathy, social communication and open-mindedness, IC equips an individual or learner with experience working with many cultures and involving themselves with the diverse populations with which they already form part of their community, all of which are essential to fully participating in the community. Deliberate cultivation of intercultural competence in educational institutions engenders democracy, characterized by mutual respect, shared values of equity, and collective commitment to social justice. It is imperative to retain an understanding of the realities of intercultural competence, as the practice of translation—an enduring and ephemeral occurrence in educational and social contexts globally—necessitates the continuous evolution of theory, pedagogical innovation, and societal endorsement amidst numerous obstacles, steering towards a novel paradigm shift, which the literature characterizes as a transition to a lived experience of intercultural competence (Osler & Starkey, 2006).

5. Integrating Human Rights Education and Intercultural Competence

The integration of Human Rights Education (HRE) and Intercultural Competence (IC) processes provides a cohesive framework essential for the intentional development of a more democratic and inclusive educational environment. Although the two areas had been distinct areas of research and practice at the forefront of educational research and practice, it is increasingly understood that interrelations between the

domain they operate in together are critical to the effective preparation of students who will be in an increasingly diverse and plural society. This integration assists in obtaining a global awareness of the cognitive, affective and behavioral outcomes it points to that are consequently necessary to advance social justice, equity, and efficient intercultural communication (Veugelers, 2019; Porto et al., 2017).

HRE and IC are integrated due to humanistic democratic values like respect for diversity, the promotion of equity, and social responsibility (Byram & Wagner, 2018; Merry, 2020). Where HRE establishes a normative and moral framework for human relation based on universal rights and freedoms, IC equips students with the practical tools and relational capabilities for embedding these norms in culture-responsive settings (Fantini, 2020; Osler & Skarra, 2021). This kind of integration in educational practice is effective, but not so much as an intellectual set-up as it is action—intercultural conversation, and cooperation. It's with these threads in mind that students get a strategic footing within the ongoing learning journey. Curricula with human rights components (as well as other themes of intercultural learning) also have a positive effect on understanding on both ends, that human rights are universal and indivisible and students can negotiate difference of culture respectfully (Courey & LePage, 2013).

This integrated curriculum acknowledges the understanding that the foundational concepts of power dynamics underpinning discriminatory practices, and the development of relational competences, such as perspective-taking and conflict mediation, are central to inclusive democratic practice (Veugelers, 2019). Include case studies which look at how human rights violations are intertwined with intercultural conflicts to prompt the students to consider and think through implications (respect for rights and the rights of others) as well as what that looks like for intercultural conflict, and that encourages deeper learning.

Therefore, the pedagogical strategy is highly helpful for integrating human rights with intercultural competence in education. Dialogic and experiential methods, such as collaborative problem-solving, simulations, role-plays, and culturally immersive activities, enhance active learning by integrating cognitive understanding and practical application (Avgousti, 2018; Roiha & Sommier, 2021). These strategies challenge the students to critically represent multiple perspectives, learn to feel various experiences, and assume agency within democracies (Deardorff, 2011). In addition, promoting a culture of openness, respect, and critical inquiry resonates with the core principles of HRE and IC (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2012).

In addition, training of teachers is essential for the successful mainstreaming of human and intercultural competence education. Professional learning programs integrating these areas allow educators to plan lessons and the classroom process of interculturally aware teaching and learning as well as in an environment of rights education (Sarwari et al., 2024; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017).). Teachers may thus be trained to be theoretically trained, reflective about their learning and to implement concrete ways of engaging in difficult conversations about inequality, cultural difference, and relations of power (Banks & Banks, 2019).

Institutional and policy structures are key determinants on how HRE and IC integration can deliver in practice. Indeed, policies that directly promote rights-based and intercultural education as foundational learning aims are needed to lend legitimacy and resources for schools to create well-balanced programs (European Commission, 2018; UNESCO, 2015). Standards and learning outcomes which merge rights knowledge with intercultural skills allow curriculum designers to link assessments and instruction with democratic inclusion (Merry, 2020). Where policy pronouncements advance the reduction of marginalization and social cohesion, we recommend the educational system to be aligned with the new policies, giving rise to integrated pedagogies and responsive to diverse learners (Dei, 2017).

Community engagement offers the second strategic aspect to promote a successful integration of HRE and IC. Schools that collaborate with local cultural organisations, human rights institutions, and families help to promote joint responsibility for educational objectives such as democracy and inclusiveness (Banks & Banks, 2019; Avgousti, 2018). By embedding lessons in authentic social worlds, these collaborations enrich students' intercultural interactions and enhance human rights calls. Finally, involving local community encourages prolonged dialogues across difference in the classroom and as part of a wider system-level change (Roiha & Sommier, 2021).

Several obstacles are cited to a successful combination of human rights and intercultural competence education. Nationalist or exclusionary discourses and political resistance may limit curriculum reform (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009) and discussion of contentious aspects of society. Resource constraints such as inadequate teacher training and a dearth of culturally sensitive materials can also limit program delivery (Bacher, 2024). In addition, integration is often at risk of either domain being treated superficially if it is not contextualised in a way that recognizes the inherent potential for systemic inequality if it does not address the context (i.e. human rights principles become abstract constructs that are disconnected from the cultural experiences of learners) or if intercultural education neglects to explore structural issues of inequality (Courey & LePage, 2013).

Advocacy, professional learning, and policies that prioritize democracy at multiple systemic levels are essential for overcoming these challenges, which cannot be solved without continued support. Indeed, the need to reconcile human rights education with an understanding of skills necessary to navigate intercultural competence is acknowledged in the international framework for global citizenship education. Sustainable peace and social justice cannot exist without, therefore, teaching people both respect for human rights and the skills to facilitate interactions across cultures; this is emphasized by the UNESCO guide (2020, 2022). Education can be designed through curricular approaches, pedagogical approaches, teacher capacity-building, and through the implementation of appropriate policies and an environment in which human dignity exists within cultural diversity, respectful of different cultures, and a society with active citizenship are the norm and in which it occurs. This synthesis helps to place education as a transformative force in the quest for social justice and democratic flourishing as a radical educational agenda.

6. Challenges and Considerations

Although there is a great potential to combine human rights education (HRE) and intercultural competence (IC) as a means of promoting democratic and inclusive education, the successful application of those educational goals is hampered by serious concerns. These challenges include sociopolitical, organisational and pedagogical factors that will enable or inhibit educational systems from adopting and implementing rights based and intercultural responses. The chief obstacles are related to the general sociopolitical surroundings. Heightened nationalism and xenophobia, as well as deepening political polarization in many countries, challenge the fundamental values of diversity, inclusion and human dignity on which HRE and IC are based (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009).

Those ideologies frequently reject curricula that nurture inclusive, pluralist and critical reflections on inequality, and see it as attacks on national identity or national unity (Bacher, 2024). There can even be political resistance in the form of legislated regulation, the narrowing of access to inclusive and non-discriminatory programs, and curricular restrictions on educators' ability to teach sensitive or contentious issues of human rights and cultural specificity (which impact on human rights and gender diversity) as an act of cultural diversity (Courey & LePage, 2013).

Such a context complicates the position of educators as vehicles of democratic deliberation and active engagement as participants in active culture. Institutional factors in educational institutes also pose several difficulties for the full implementation. Numerous classrooms are resource-constrained, with teacher preparedness, the availability of culturally responsive resources, and rigid curricula in place that emphasize standardized testing over critical and inclusive pedagogy (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2012). In the absence of appropriate professional development, teachers may be unable or reluctant to master the effective inclusion of HRE and IC or learn how to handle a heterogeneous and interactive classroom (Sarwari et al., 2024).

Equally, system wide discrepancies — such as tracking, segregation and exclusion of stigmatized groups in the educational system by those with access to the education system, for example, to tracking, and targeting marginalized groups, or their exclusion or exclusionary practices, erode such inclusive aspirations for accessibility and access (Banks, 2019). Pedagogically, teaching not only human rights and intercultural competence, but also human rights awareness, and its connections with the need to promote human rights, require pedagogy that promotes critical analysis (e.g., critical thinking, mutual empathy and open dialogue).

Nevertheless, these approaches can clash with mainstream didactic methodologies of administration common in multiple environments (Deardorff, 2011).

The danger of teaching both HRE and IC in isolation, as separate units of study and not integrated into curricula and in school policy, is the potential for these content areas to become 'empty' or tokenistic (Porto et al., 2017). Insufficient contextualization also presents barriers: methods that work in one cultural or political framework may not be applicable to another if they are not adapted to contexts and the experiences of students' lived ways of knowing (Conti, 2025). It requires the culturally relevant pedagogy that is rooted in complexities of identity and power and social justice. Balancing universals and cultural specificity in human rights is another area of concern. From time to time, critics point out that the principles of human rights are grounded by Western liberal norms and that these may not be compatible—particularly in globalised societies—with collective or traditional culture (Banks, 2019).

All told, the resistance, the barriers of sociopolitical, institutional, pedagogical, sociological, and cultural forces make formidable challenges, and make a case for durable, situative and value-laden methodologies; they present a pressing need for sustained and locally-embedded, values-bound means. Solving these challenges will contribute to allow educators and policy makers to build a democratic education system and policy making process that is democratic and inclusive, which promotes human rights and cultural competence as symbiotic aspects of social justice.

7. Conclusion

As this essay has shown, human rights education and intercultural competence are fundamentally related to other critical determinants of democracy and integrated curricula. Training in knowledge and skills, as well as attitudes that promote respect for dignity, and cultural diversity as well as the ability to participate actively and ethically in pluralistic societies, is a result of these educational strands. Human rights education builds a normative framework on principles of equality, justice and social responsibility, and training interculturally enhances a learner's ability to engage with different cultures with empathy, critical awareness and effective communication. When these domains are interconnected the quality of learning increases by advancing democratic values and social integration as learners are better able to understand and contest exclusion and discrimination (European Commission, 2018).

But despite socio-political resistance, the paucity of resources, the challenge of pedagogy, and all sorts of complications, the same kind of difficulties are shown to point to the fact that the necessity to embed rights-based/intercultural perspectives can and should be at the core of education's work. Such obstacles can be overcome, however, only through policy change, teacher preparedness, inclusive curricula and communities' investment in teaching and learning. International work, as with UNESCO, highlights its international value in pursuit of peace and equality in a sustainable fashion. Ultimately, education that combines human rights education with intercultural competence is a transformative intervention — it places learners on the ground as advocates and enablers of democratic life, and contributes to communities that value each other and respect justice (UNESCO, 2015).

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