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From "time pass" to transformative force: School-based human rights education in Tamil Nadu, India

Monisha Bajaj *

Department of International & Transcultural Studies, Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th St., Box 55, New York, NY 10027, United States

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ABSTRACT

This article presents data collected at the level of practice to highlight one non-governmental organization's approach to human rights education and how household-, school-, and community-level factors mediated student impact. Findings suggest that a variety of factors at the three levels contribute to the program's successful implementation in government schools serving marginalized students (where most HRE programs are in operation in India today). These responses emerge along a continuum from 'time pass'—a commonly used term in India for anything that does not directly contribute to greater performance on high-stakes exams—to 'transformative force', wherein students internalize knowledge and values related to human rights and take action based on it. Responses to HRE were characterized in four areas and representative examples are provided of each: (1) personal changes; (2) attempts to intervene in situations of abuse; (3) reporting (or threatening to report) abuse; and (4) spreading awareness about human rights.

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1. Introduction

Once at the periphery, human rights education (HRE)—the incorporation of content and pedagogy related to international human rights norms—is now being adopted by governments across the globe facilitated largely by funding and support from inter-governmental agencies.[1] In India, efforts towards human rights education are seen at the policy level, in textbook revision and development, and in the work of grassroots non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who carry out in- and out-of-school programs related to human rights. This article examines the impact of one Indian non-governmental organization, the Institute of Human Rights Education—that has been training teachers, developing textbooks, and offering HRE to students in "class" (or grade)[2] six, seven, and eight in hundreds of government schools in the southern state of Tamil Nadu since 1997. While selective

implementation may be an issue in other large-scale human rights education programs, my research found that headmasters and teachers were, in fact, implementing human rights education despite its not being a mandatory or examinable subject. I attribute this implementation to three factors that are discussed briefly later in this paper and more extensively elsewhere[3]: (1) the securing of government support, (2) the buy-in of teachers, and (3) the legitimacy of printed information in rural and semi-literate contexts.[4]

As such, this article focuses on the impact of human rights instruction and how household-, school-, and community-level conditions mediated the impact of HRE as experienced by participants. I found that while students were eager to implement

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 212 678 3194; fax: +1 212 678 8237.
  E-mail address: bajaj@tc.edu.

[1] Among the agencies most active in advocating for and supporting the integration of human rights education into national curricula are UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the UN High Commission for Human Rights and the World Programme for Human Rights Education, which was established in 2005 to build on the considerable momentum towards HRE generated during the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004).

[2] The Indian educational system categorizes students into classes or standards one through 12, roughly corresponding with age. A class one student is typically six years of age and a twelfth class student is typically 17, though child labor, late enrollment, and other factors often result in over-age children in rural schools.

[3] I further discuss the issue of implementation and the strategies used by NGOs to ensure compliance in a manuscript that is being finalized entitled "Schooling for Social Change: The Rise and Impact of Human Rights Education in India".

[4] Research on implementation broadly in policy analysis (Elmore, 1980) and in educational research more specifically (Dyer, 1999; Leithwood and Montgomery, 1980) has suggested that what policymakers envision often bears little resemblance to what actually happens on the ground. The use of tools, such as 'backward mapping' (Elmore, 1980) can reveal what really occurs in the so-called 'black box' of implementation (Dyer, 1999) and how reforms can fundamentally change along the way. For the purposes of this article, given the NGO under study's centralized administration and relatively small staff, little evidence was found of considerable re-invention of the human rights education program. Although, as the program scales up and as state- and national-level policymakers consider such reforms, attention should be paid to what vision of the reform dominates in policy documents all the way down to the point of implementation.

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the new learnings that human rights education offered them, their enthusiasm was oftentimes tempered by realities in their homes, schools, and communities, which limited their ability to act in the face of injustices. Literature on human rights education often assumes that proper implementation will automatically lead to impact without an analysis of how a program may be differentially experienced by students depending on the social and material conditions of their lives. The negative responses experienced by some students (e.g. physical threats, punishment at school, etc.) who attempt to enact human rights learnings suggest the limits or complications in implementation of HRE that bears examining. I do not explore these adverse reactions in extensive detail in this article given the focus here on the scale and quality of the impact that these programs have achieved, but the unintended outcomes of HRE are important to consider for subsequent studies.

This article contributes to the discussion of human rights education, an increasingly popular international educational reform, by offering students' perspectives on how human rights learning is enabled, experienced, and enacted at the local level. The following sections first review literature on human rights education (Section 2), how it has developed in India (Section 2.1), and the methods by which the information presented here was collected (Section 3); next, the results are presented vis-à-vis schooling realities in Tamil Nadu (Section 4.1) with quantitative and then qualitative findings on student impact (Sections 5 and 5.1); finally, the results are discussed and analyzed (Section 6), suggesting the contribution of the findings for better understanding the role of rights-based educational initiatives in the global South.

2. Human rights education

Human rights education can be defined as education, training and information aimed at building a universal culture of human rights through the sharing of knowledge, imparting of skills and moulding of attitudes directed to:

(a) *The strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.*
(b) *The full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity.*
(c) *The promotion of understanding, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples and racial, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups.*
(d) *The enabling of all persons to participate effectively in a free and democratic society governed by the rule of law.*
(e) *The building and maintenance of peace.*
 (f) *The promotion of people-centered sustainable development and social justice* (United Nations, 2006).

Human rights education, from its initial mention in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, has evolved to include a variety of constituents in formal and non-formal settings. Human rights education can include school-based instruction (integrated into civics and history or taught separately), after-school programs, workshops with professionals ranging from teachers to police officers to judges and lawyers, and university courses in human rights, among others. Scholars have generally identified three dimensions as central to HRE: the cultivation of knowledge about human rights; the fostering of attitudes and skills towards human rights; and the development of action-oriented strategies for intervening in situations of abuse at the global, regional, or local level (Flowers et al., 2000; Tibbitts, 2008).

Though popular education aimed at raising awareness of human rights issues has been a strategy utilized by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) since the 1950s in building

social movements (Kapoor, 2004), the advancement of national initiatives by more than 100 countries of the world indicates the current prominence taken by HRE in international educational policy discourse (UNHCHR, 2005). In contrast to the substantial literature over the past three decades exploring civic education and political socialization (e.g., Boli et al., 1985; Fagerlind and Saha, 1989; Fuller and Rubinson, 1992; Torney-Purta et al., 1999), HRE implies that students will develop allegiance to a supra-national structure of norms developed through international human rights law and, in effect, claim global rather than national citizenship (Soysal, 1994; Suarez and Ramirez, 2004). Human rights mechanisms also offer the promise of protection when national systems fail to provide justice for abuses and education for human rights raises awareness about how to participate in these global justice structures.

Previous scholarly approaches have primarily examined the proliferation of HRE, the impetus for its growing popularity, and the role of states, international institutions, and NGOs in advancing efforts towards it. Scholars have attributed the worldwide rise in human rights education and the increased emphasis on individual rights in textbooks to expanded access to education and the greater integration of the international community, which valorizes universal rights (Meyer et al., 2010; Ramirez et al., 2007). Other scholars in the fields of education, sociology, and political science have (1) interrogated the role of the state in human rights education (Cardenas, 2005); (2) documented the rise of human rights content in civics courses and the conceptual shifts towards global citizenship (Suarez, 2007); and (3) offered description and evaluation of human rights education programs in practice across the globe (Andreopoulos and Claude, 1997), noting diverse constituents (students, police, military officers, judges, among others) and curricular approaches (e.g. formal, non-formal, community-based). This article contributes to the discussion by offering a glimpse into one HRE program's impact on youth in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and how curricular efforts are mediated by and understood through individual-, household/family-, school-, and community-level realities.

2.1. Human rights education in India

Since the late 1990s, Indian policymakers have discussed how to implement recommendations of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004) with primary attention devoted to the development of higher education programs in human rights. Policy efforts have included greater inclusion of human rights concepts into documents such as the National Curriculum Framework of 2005, workshops and courses for pre- and in-service teachers, and the announcement of the intention to develop an elective course on human rights for nationally administered schools in India (Indo-Asian News Service, 2009). India's highly competitive examination-driven system, however, has served as an impediment to the expansion of human rights education as a formal requirement to the extent that fierce competition for scores and resulting admissions to further studies limits the institutional space for other forms of education.

At the local level, however, Indian NGOs, such as the Institute of Human Rights Education (IHRE), had already been active in using educational strategies to promote their work on human rights (largely related to issues of police torture, illegal detentions, caste and gender discrimination, and child labor). Rather than an intentional educational strategy, IHRE's first educational activities resulted from teachers attending a community training on human rights and suggesting that their schools be a site for raising human rights awareness. The organization then developed a course on human rights education for students, without knowledge of the larger U.N. Decade for Human Rights Education already underway;

later, however, substantial linkages were made. A pilot project was initiated with secondary school students in nine schools in 1997, but for reasons related to the broad focus on high-stakes exams at the tenth class level, educators decided that the human rights course should be offered over three years and during classes six, seven, and eight. Teachers would be trained to offer the course twice a week for an hour and textbooks were developed by IHRE.

Since the late 1990s, IHRE has offered more than 300,000 students a three-year course in human rights education and has expanded to 18 states across India working through partner institutions and organizations. At present, IHRE is the largest NGO working towards human rights education in India. In Tamil Nadu, the Indian state in focus here, HRE is currently offered in more than two thousand, primarily government-run, schools and this article presents the voices of students who were participating or had participated in human rights instruction.

3. Methods

This article is based on a larger study that sought to examine rights-based educational initiatives and their corresponding engagement with and reformulations of notions of democracy and citizenship as well as the straightforward assertion of rights (to protection) for participants through an examination of local practice, regional pedagogical development, and national policy. The study examined these issues through the work of the Institute of Human Rights Education in five states. This article draws on a subset of the data from the state of Tamil Nadu and consists primarily of observations of 24 schools in 13 districts (of the state's 32), interviews, and focus groups. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 teachers, 22 students, and 44 individuals associated with IHRE's program, including staff, advisory committee members, and collaborating government officials in Tamil Nadu. Additionally, 29 focus groups were carried out with current and former HRE students.

In Tamil Nadu, most of the schools which are implementing the human rights education program are those governed by the Adi Dravida Welfare (ADW) Ministry and specifically seek to increase the enrollment of those students who belong to "scheduled castes," also known as Dalits (formerly called "untouchables").[5] Because villages had students from slightly higher caste backgrounds (such as those known as "Other Backward Castes, OBCs" and "Backward Castes, BCs" in Indian legal parlance), these students would also often attend the local ADW schools. In schools, caste discrimination was often perpetrated along these lines between OBC or BC and Dalit students.

In focus groups with students, I asked questions about their experiences with human rights education, which also led into discussions about social relations and conditions in their schools and communities. My formal prepared questions asked what students had learned in human rights education classes and what action, if any, they had taken after learning about human rights. As the primary researcher, I also attended various teacher trainings and a human rights summer camp to carry out participant observation. Data were coded for significant themes and analyzed after the 13-month fieldwork period (2008–2009).

The findings presented in the subsequent sections highlight themes that consistently emerged from the data and were deemed representative. This article presents instances of student impact (1)

quantitatively and categorized by types of impact as emerging from the data, and (2) qualitatively through student responses representative of larger themes. An inductive data analysis and interpretation strategy rooted in grounded theory was utilized (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), in which I regularly reviewed the interviews, observations, focus groups, and documents in order to identify themes emerging from the data. The data that follow discuss how students were impacted by instruction in human rights and how their responses to the educational program were mediated by household-, school-, and community-level realities.

4. Human rights education in Tamil Nadu

4.1. Schooling in Tamil Nadu

This article examines IHRE's work in the southern state of Tamil Nadu and a brief discussion of state-wide educational realities situates the program in its larger context. Tamil Nadu has a population of approximately 60 million, and while not among India's poorest states—recent figures indicate that 22.5 percent live below the national poverty line as compared with a national average of 27.5 percent (Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission, 2005)—the state still has a high incidence of malnutrition and underweight children under age five (30 percent) (IFPRI, 2009). In educational terms, the 2009 ASER (Annual Status of Education Report), which tracks educational quality across India, found that less than 60 percent of children in class seven could read a class two-level text in Tamil. Undoubtedly related to this low indicator of educational quality, a national survey cited that teacher absenteeism averaged 21.3 percent in Tamil Nadu (nearly on par with the national average of 24.8 percent) (Kremer et al., 2005).

IHRE operates primarily in government schools where predominantly low-income students attend. Broadly, my larger research project found that school-based human rights issues include the still-common (though illegal) practices of corporal punishment; caste discrimination (that manifests itself in a variety of ways such as forcing Dalit children to clean toilets while others are in class, making them sit separately during mid-day meals, or arranging seating where lower caste students are placed in the back of the classroom); and insufficient or non-existent latrines, which, as girls hit puberty, is a significant cause of drop out. In fact, the ASER report (2009) found that, of the several hundred schools they surveyed in the state of Tamil Nadu, just 52 percent had a separate girls' toilet that was usable for children in classes one through eight.

In school visits and in discussions with students, teachers, and policymakers, other corrupt and abusive practices in schools also emerged to situate the context for human rights education programs undertaken by the Institute of Human Rights Education (IHRE). Among those that were repeatedly mentioned were the extraction of money from students by teachers and headmasters, the siphoning off of government-allotted funds intended for students' mid-day meals and/or uniforms by headmasters and/or teachers, and the sexual abuse of children without report or sanction.

4.2. IHRE program overview

Given these problems within schools, not to mention human rights issues surrounding schools in the communities in which children live, the Institute of Human Rights Education developed a three-year course on human rights as an experiment in a handful of schools over a decade ago. The course is presently offered in 18 states and in more than 3500 schools across India, many of which are in Tamil Nadu given the length of IHRE's engagement in the state. While content varies in different states, the course generally covers human rights standards and ideals with reference to the

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[5] Dalits [literally translated as "broken people"] constitute 15 percent of India's population. Human Rights Watch (2007) finds that "entrenched discrimination violates Dalits' rights to education, health, housing, property, freedom of religion, free choice of employment, and equal treatment before the law. Dalits also suffer routine violations of their right to life and security of person through state-sponsored or -sanctioned acts of violence, including torture" (p. 1).

Indian Constitution and some United Nations documents in class six, children's rights and experiences in class seven, and discrimination—based on caste, religion, gender, ability, income, skin color, and language, among others—and the right to equal treatment in class eight. In terms of pedagogy, the books contain interactive features such as stories, participatory activities, and discussion questions to foster investigation into school and community realities. The Institute has started developing clubs for students who are still interested in human rights as they move into classes nine and 10, and also holds summer camps on human rights for students. International- and national-level donors fund the program and, while many schools have expressed interest, the program has scaled up selectively given funding constraints.

Teacher training is a core component of IHRE's program. After government permission is secured in a state (the level at which curriculum is set in India), headmasters select one to two teachers from each school who are sent for a multiple-day training. Trainings consist of sessions by curriculum and human rights experts who seek to convince teachers about the importance of human rights and enlist their support for the program. Significant time is dedicated to the issues of corporal punishment and alternative disciplinary methods, and the need to identify and report cases of sexual abuse. Teachers are asked to teach the course twice a week throughout the academic year. While some schools have designated HRE periods during the week, other schools use the "Moral Education" periods which are timetabled twice a week, but have no books or set curriculum for instruction from the state.

The Institute of Human Rights Education has been able to secure government permission in all the schools in which it operates in Tamil Nadu, and while there are different levels of interest and implementation by teachers and headmasters, the fact that district and state-wide officials send memoranda asking schools to carry out the program has resulted in a greater degree of implementation than one might otherwise expect. In a highly examination-driven system of education, the introduction of a non-examinable subject that is overseen by an NGO presumably might seem to students and teachers like an exercise in "time pass", a term used locally to refer to something that has no relevance to preparation for the exams or one's future. Surprisingly, however, a majority of students and teachers identified substantial impact, ranging from increased content knowledge about human rights to students citing HRE as an extremely positive experience—a "transformative force"—that has influenced their lives greatly. The following sections present the types of impact students reported as well as the levels—household, school, and community—at which students attempted to enact their human rights learnings.

5. Results: types of impact

Students repeatedly narrated experiences in interviews and focus groups indicating the impact of instruction in human rights on their lives; teachers and parents also corroborated these accounts. The real-life impacts that students offered can broadly be categorized in four areas, the first three of which were action-oriented responses: (1) intervening in situations of abuse; (2) reporting or threatening to report abuse; (3) spreading awareness of human rights; and (4) attitudinal and behavioral shifts at home or in school that were more aligned with human rights learnings. All of these four areas correspond with scholars' articulations of what human rights education should consist of: namely, a combination of information, values/behavioral changes, and active responses.

The first category of impact involved students intervening in situations of abuse to assist or advocate for victims, be they household or community members. Examples of this type of impact included trying to convince a peer involved in full-time

remunerated work to return to school or visiting a family in the neighborhood to convince them not to kill a female baby given the common practice of female infanticide in many of the communities in which this study was carried out. Several students also mentioned trying to stop the practice of early marriage of their classmates, in which adolescent girls' marriages were arranged soon after they hit puberty, because it impeded their right to education. Most schools were reluctant to have a married girl (regardless of age) continue on with her studies and, oftentimes, these young women soon had considerable domestic responsibilities related to cooking, cleaning, agricultural activities, and child-rearing.

The second category of impact consisted of students who, after learning about human rights, identified an abuse and reported it—or equally effective, threatened to report it—to an authority, such as a headmaster, village level leader, or the police. Students might intervene in this way in the afore-mentioned types of abuses since child labor, marriage under the age of 18, and female infanticide are all illegal practices. The primary difference between category one and two is that in the first, students directly intervened in situations, and in the second—and perhaps more strategically given HRE students' ages (11–15) and oftentimes low caste or gender status—students sought an intermediary with (or at least the specter of) greater authority to induce changed behavior on the part of those they identified as violating rights.

The third category of impact was more proactive than reactive and included educating others or spreading awareness in some way about human rights based on what was learned at school. Students reported sharing their human rights education books or learnings with parents, siblings, neighbors, and/or friends, as well as seeking out venues to teach about human rights, such as in community self-help groups (often organized around micro-finance) that their parents belonged to or in other settings. Students who were slightly more affluent or socially privileged often engaged in more awareness-raising related activities if abuses were not immediately visible in their households or communities.

The fourth category of impact related to personal changes or shifts in behaviors or attitudes at home or in school that resulted in greater respect for human rights. Students discussed re-negotiating household norms related to gender, such as a class seven boy noting that he cleaned his own plate after eating rather than having his sister do all the dishes as was previously done; and caste and/or religion, with students interacting with students of different backgrounds more readily than before HRE, even if it meant discontent on the part of parents, grandparents, or neighbors (since many villages in Tamil Nadu are still largely residentially segregated by caste, subcaste, and religion).

Fig. 1 offers a graphic representation of the frequency of each type of impact narrated by students.

TAMIL NADU: ANALYSIS OF STUDENT IMPACT (n=103)

- Report Abuse (or threaten to report) — 10%
- Intervene/Take Action — 56%
- Educate others/ Raise Awareness — 20%
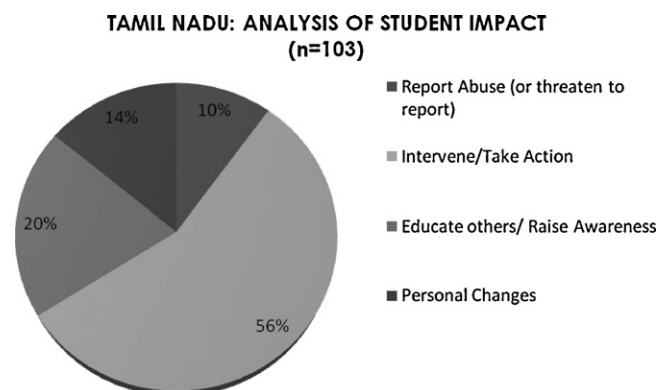- Personal Changes — 14%

Fig. 1. Categorization of impact – Tamil Nadu.

While all four areas were consistently mentioned by students, the majority of responses fell into the first category where students attempted to intervene in situations of abuse in some way— whether successful or not. This suggests that students, through human rights education, were imbibed with a sense of agency to intervene and confront violations, and that such intervention might produce positive changes. In assessing the qualitative nature of impact, students' accounts of human rights learning and the ways that various factors intersected with their ability to act on what they learned are quite instructive. All four types of impact were noted at the levels of the household, school, and community, and representative data are offered in the subsequent section to provide greater texture to the summary of impact presented above.

5.1. Results: impact of HRE at different levels

5.1.1. Household
Students repeatedly indicated that what they had learned in the HRE program affected their household realities in different ways. One area had to do with gender differences in the household. Several boys talked about refusing to be given more food at mealtime, as is commonly practiced, and participating in the cleaning of dishes or other household tasks. While boys might be able to assert their willingness to take on gendered roles related to 'women's work' like cleaning or advocating for their sisters' equal share in household resources, girls had a more difficult time asserting equal rights. Several young women studying HRE did mention, albeit not always successfully, standing up for their right to equality so they could play outside or a limit to their household work since their brothers were free from such responsibilities. One student, Uma,[6] who had partaken in three years of HRE as well as a residential summer camp for HRE students and was now in class eleven, narrated the following changes in her home after HRE:

Some parents show off their children's talent whereas my family was not even willing to accept it. Once I took part in a dance program at school and I was beaten very badly at home after. They said, "How can you give up your honor for a dance program?" What happened was that slowly I started telling them that, "This is my right and I should be able to express myself even through an art form, like dance." Slowly, they accepted that I could do a dance on stage for school, and when I did, a lot of people came and appreciated saying, "You are a brilliant dancer" and things like that. So after that, they let me dance and now they let me follow my passion. If anyone had to ask me something that I will never forget in my life, I would tell them about this HRE program. (individual interview, May 20, 2009)

Uma's experience demonstrates the way that students utilized human rights messages to stand up to their families, going against many of the hierarchical, gendered, and age-structured traditions that are part of Indian and Tamil society. These changes were sometimes slow and incremental, but students' persistence, based on their belief in what human rights teachers and books—both sources of knowledge deemed legitimate and authoritative—were advocating, often resulted in greater freedom from restrictions that limited their lives.

While the participants in HRE were mostly students in government schools, which serve predominantly low-income and low-status communities, divisions existed among these groups related to caste and subcaste. Headmasters, teachers, and students themselves often reified these distinctions in schools, with Dalit students being barred from taking part in school

activities or being made to clean the school while other children were in class. After beginning HRE, students reported changing behaviors inside and outside of schools related to caste. One male student in class eleven, Murugan, from a slightly higher subcaste narrated the following:

Before, I wouldn't go into lower caste people's homes, and I wouldn't allow them to enter into my home because my grandma will scold me. When human rights education was introduced, I thought, "I won't be interested in this." But our HRE teacher used to be very harsh; she used to beat us by using the stick. But after attending this HRE training program, she came and told us, "Hereafter I won't beat you people because you are also human beings." Then she told us about the human rights education book. When we were taking the class, there are some lessons related to caste discrimination. So during that class I realized that we should not discriminate [against] people on the basis of caste. So now we are all mixing, but my grandma used to scold me if I was playing with that [Dalit] boy or going to his home. But I didn't care about that because I am learning human rights education. I know that everyone has their rights. (individual interview, May 22, 2009)

While Murugan noted his grandmother's resistance to his new learnings, he persisted in acting on what he believed in based on what his teacher and human rights textbook had taught him. Murugan's efficacy may be related to the fact that as a son of the family, he had greater flexibility to challenge tradition than a young woman would. However, in the absence of a counterfactual scenario, ascertaining the gendered dimension of such action becomes difficult. Nonetheless, human rights learnings influenced home realities given that traditional beliefs about caste posited that if a Dalit entered the home of someone from a higher caste, that home would become 'polluted' or 'defiled' (HRW, 2007). Human rights education also influenced students' actions and behaviors at the school-level.

5.1.2. School
After reading about human rights and situations in which individuals or groups took action to address abuses, students often felt empowered to speak up against things they felt were wrong in their schools. As mentioned earlier, various social inequalities based on caste, gender, class, and religion are reproduced in schools through teacher and student practices (e.g. segregated seating, additional responsibilities for Dalit students, teacher absenteeism, among others). After human rights education, examples repeatedly emerged of students holding teachers to what they considered 'human rights' standards by calling them from the teachers' room if they were late for class, demanding that their right to education was being violated. Some students even discussed visiting the District Collector, who oversees all matters in the district including education, to complain that their headmaster was beating them, a practice outlawed, but still practiced, throughout India (focus group, January 20, 2009).

Other interventions related to improving the administration of government schemes, such as the provision of mid-day meals, in schools. For example, a group of human rights education students related the following incident that occurred the first year they were learning about human rights in class six:

In the school mid-day meal scheme, the food was not good – there were insects, flies, and stones in the food. Before reading HRE, we used to take those insects out and then eat since we are not getting any food from home. The teacher also didn't care about the noon meal scheme, what's going on, he don't bother

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[6] All student and adult respondents have been assigned pseudonyms.

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about that. But after going to the training, after teaching this HRE to us, we learnt about the basic right to food, right to clothing, right to have clean water. What we did one day in 6th, we got the food from the cook. We brought the food to her and said, "See this food, insects and stones are there, how can one eat this food? We won't have this food; we also have rights. We should have clean food and water. But you are not providing clean or good food for us." Then what she told us was, "I am working for the past 27 years. No one has ever asked me any single question. You children are asking me like this?" We told her, "Yes, we have the right. See this book." We also complained to the headmaster. She had to realize the mistake she was doing. Now we are getting noon meal from her and we are having good meals. (focus group, February 17, 2009)

Whether for fear of losing her job or a genuine belief in students' right to clean food, the cook changed her behavior and the students claimed this as a victory resulting from their actions. The example offered above is predicated on a responsive and supportive headmaster, which was not always the case in schools. In another case of students attempting to intervene in protesting the quality of the mid-day meals, the headmaster, rather than supporting the students' demands against the cook, beat the children who were complaining and threatened to expel them. The threatened physical safety of students alluded to in this example, and many others offered by students, offers important information about the backlash for the increased activism of marginalized youth as a result of HRE. This phenomenon needs to be further explored given that it may put students at considerable risk as the program proliferates.

Important factors in students' ability to effect change in schools were related to the headmaster and human rights education teacher's interest in the subject and willingness to support student action. This often resulted in tensions between the HRE teacher and others who enjoyed the status quo and the benefits it afforded. For example, in a report published by the Institute of Human Rights Education, and in my own fieldwork, a case was mentioned where Dalit students were irregularly showing up for school in a rural district in Tamil Nadu. The HRE teacher, citing her training in human rights and motivated to find out the cause of the problem, investigated why her students' attendance was erratic. She found that other teachers were using the students from school as unpaid domestic servants for cleaning, cooking, and other tasks in their homes during the school-day when their parents thought they were at school. The HRE teacher took action and reported this issue to the authorities. The headmaster—perhaps out of fear of sanction or his own rejection of this practice—prohibited teachers from engaging in this and consequently, this practice stopped. The teacher did note, however, the anger of her colleagues in response to her actions (IHRE, 2008, p. 102). Similar backlash was felt by HRE teachers who attempted to intervene to stop corporal punishment or other abusive/unlawful practices, suggesting the difficulty in eradicating school-level abuses without support from higher authorities.

5.1.3. Community

While many students and teachers became active in confronting abuses in their schools through HRE, some went beyond the school gates to address issues taking place in the larger community, be they related to caste or gender discrimination, child labor, or early marriage. The issue of female infanticide was also prevalent in many communities in Tamil Nadu where HRE was being offered and students understood the infringements upon gender equality and the right to life that this practice caused. The following incident was narrated by a group of human rights

education students now in class 12, but who had taken the HRE course in their middle school years:

After reading human rights education in 6th, I overheard in my area that a neighbor was planning to kill their newborn girl baby. I formed a group of classmates and we went to their home. We explained to the lady [that this is wrong], but the father didn't accept. He scolded us and slapped us. We told [him] that the child also has a right to life, you should not kill the child. We said, "If you are going to kill the child, we will complain to the police, we won't move from this area. We will stand here and watch what you are doing with this child." Often we used to go to that home and watch that child. But now that child is older and is even studying in school. (focus group, May 22, 2009)

These students felt a great deal of pride in having influenced this family's decision not to kill their child and used their own intervention as well as the threat of reporting them to the police to influence the abuse they saw. This example of collective action was, to a large extent, successful but this was not always typical of attempted interventions.

Another way in which students could enact their human rights learnings related to the issue of child labor and access to schooling. Many children remain out of school despite the substantial decrease in the number of out-of-school children from an estimated 13.4 million in 2005 to 8 million in 2009 (Mukul, 2009), largely a result of the Indian government's push to meet Education for All mandates. Oftentimes, children would be pulled out of school if the father, the usual breadwinner, passed away or left the family, or if the student's performance in school was not very promising and the family felt the time be better spent on income generation.

Human rights education students learned about children's rights and the importance of schooling, and, as such, regularly identified and took action in cases where children were involved in labor. Some of these interventions resulted in children being sent back to school or negotiating a schedule wherein both school and work could be accommodated. One student in class seven, Ganesan, after reading about children's rights in the textbook given by IHRE, decided to take action after seeing children working nearby his community:

In one of the construction areas, I saw a small kid working along with their mother and father so what I told them was, "Children should not be work[ing] in this age, please send him to the school. See, I have rights, I'm going to school. You should send him to the school." But, due to the family situation, they are making the child also work along with them. But the parents didn't listen and they told me, "You are a small boy. What do you know about our situation? You go away." Then I went home and didn't say anything to anybody else. (focus group, February 16, 2009)

While Ganesan's intervention was ultimately unsuccessful and discouraging to him, his desire to act upon realities in his community had its roots in human rights education. This phenomenon points to the need for HRE to further take into account the challenges to acting upon human rights knowledge and perhaps better consider how to support students' desire to impact their community in meaningful ways. Considering the impediments to social action is an important component of how HRE is mediated in students' lives and communities.

After attempting to take action, but not receiving a positive response, as in Ganesan's case, students may feel unmotivated to

intervene again. Some students even reported facing physical violence when trying to intervene, like a 13-year-old girl who tried to tell a drunken neighbor not to beat his wife and daughter, and ended up getting slapped as well. Again, the issue of backlash is relevant to consider here. Given these impediments to intervention and without sufficient support from teachers or other adults who could provide strategies or back-up as higher status community members, students sometimes had a difficult time sustaining the activist impulse that their studies in human rights had inculcated in them. Some students reported that they continued to intervene despite the risk to their physical safety, others desisted like Ganesan or said they would wait until they were older, while others discussed being more strategic in interventions by having a parent or teacher accompany them. In most cases, nonetheless, the impetus for action was spurred by what they learned in HRE and the framework they developed for situating the abuses that permeated their communities.

5.2. Selective implementation

While the three levels mentioned above illustrate impact at the household, school, and community level, there were also some schools where little impact of HRE was found given the limited interest by teachers and headmasters. For example, in one school, a now class 10 student noted students' response to the subject matter given the teacher's approach:

> In the beginning, teachers were not giving lessons properly. 'There is no exam for this subject; this is for you to read only,' the teachers were saying, and they didn't give the lessons. They just gave us the books. Teachers were not teaching us, so we thought, 'Why should we read the books?' We would just read it for time pass sometimes. (individual interview, May 21, 2009)

Despite the teacher's lack of interest in the HRE program, this student was selected for a regional training program in human rights, in which students were chosen from all the schools carrying out HRE, and, through the process of interacting with human rights activists, educators, government officials, and other HRE students, he became very interested in the subject. Upon his return to his school, he encouraged the teacher to teach the subject and got other students excited about reading the books, forming a club for human rights. In other schools where teachers hold similar attitudes and where students may not be highly motivated to demand instruction, the program and its benefits remain contained in closed books in the corner of the classroom.

As mentioned in Section 1, although implementation may have been selective in some sites, the overall successful integration of the HRE program in schools, despite it not being an examinable subject, can be attributed to three factors: government support, buy-in of teachers, and the legitimacy of printed information. Prior to implementation, government support was secured at the highest levels, and a memo was sent to headmasters authorizing the program, asking that teachers be released for trainings, and giving permission for IHRE personnel to visit schools. This endorsement ensured, in most cases, support from headmasters due to their understanding that it was a government-authorized program and/or fear that failure to implement the program would result in some form of sanction.

The second area of buy-in from teachers was, by and large, secured through training programs which were carried out in relatively nice retreat centers where noted speakers, well-known personalities, and educational experts spent considerable time with teachers in a participatory format. Many teachers related that this was a unique experience and that the training was instrumental in changing their behaviors in the classroom and instilling within them a desire to teach human rights to their students. I discuss the issue of teacher training and teachers' responses to HRE elsewhere,[7] though it is important to highlight that the role of teacher training in the transmission of HRE is a significant part of the success of these initiatives.

The third area of the legitimacy of printed information had to do with the use of textbooks for human rights education and the respect with which communities viewed books. In many low-income communities, knowledge printed in a book was automatically afforded legitimacy and authority. These three areas ensured that, for the most part, HRE was implemented in schools, with some exceptions based on teacher or headmaster resistance to the program. After the program was implemented, impact could be assessed and analyzed vis-à-vis the realities of the schools and communities. While considerable impact of HRE was noted, several reasons for the variance across schools and areas came to light.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In looking at the differentiated impact of human rights education, experiences with HRE emerge across a continuum of impact with school and individual level factors playing a key role. On one end of the continuum, students find the program to be a 'time pass' either based on their inability to enact their learnings in a meaningful way or based on some teachers'/headmasters' resistance to implementing the program. At the other end, students repeatedly reported that HRE was a 'transformative force' in their lives. Two different levels seemed to influence the process of impact; on the one hand, individual and household level factors played a significant role, and on the other, school- and community-level factors also shaped the program's impact. As noted in Fig. 2, various components work together at each level in order for human rights instruction to have a significant impact on students.

At the individual and household level, impact was dependent on the level of violence and discrimination, caste and economic status, and gender roles in the home. For example, if a student demanded a reconsideration of household practices related to caste or gender and faced considerable violence, vehement responses or reluctance on the part of adults, it was difficult to enact the lessons learnt in the human rights classroom. Rigid hierarchies that were sometimes rooted in 'culture' and 'tradition' sometimes proved difficult to overcome through student action. With regard to intervening in early and arranged marriages especially, those resistant often invoked culture and custom as a counter-weight to human rights norms. Along the spectrum of factors and responses were various ideas related to human rights and the legality of customs and traditionally held practices. Often, those students with families open to new ideas—for example, rural and illiterate parents who valued the knowledge brought home by children from school—were most impacted by human rights information at the household level.

At the level of school and community, for the program to be a 'transformative force,' teachers and headmasters were needed who were willing to comply with officials and the NGO to carry out the program. When rigid hierarchies or entrenched corruption dampened the motivation for teachers and headmasters to take on a new program or be open to students' demands about their rights, the program seemed to remain at the level of 'time pass'. Ingredients that contributed to a more transformative role for the HRE program included; close contact between the school, teachers, and IHRE; frequent visits by IHRE staff and participation in regional

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[7] Bajaj (forthcoming). The Role of Teachers and Textbooks in Human Rights Education in the global South: Evidence from India.
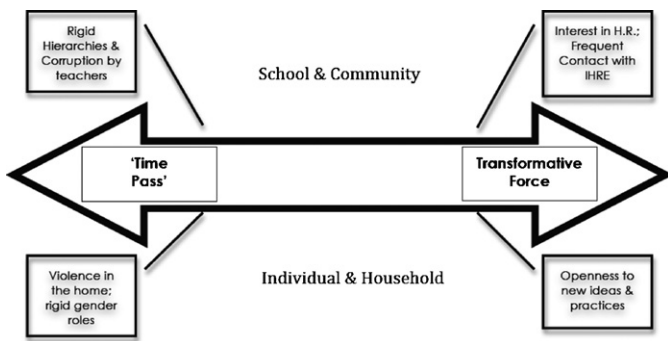
Fig. 2. Continuum of impact.

programs; teachers' interest in nurturing student activism; and teachers' willingness to intervene in situations of inequality or abuse in schools, students' homes, and the broader community. There were also schools where teachers and headmasters were supportive, but where differing individual and household circumstances influenced students' interest in the program. Alternatively, with the example cited in Section 5.2 of this article, there were cases of noticeable impact where students gained exposure to the program despite the school/teachers' lack of interest. The continuum in Fig. 2 offers a broad framework based in the data to conceptualize the ways in which impact was facilitated through individual-, household-, school-, and community-level factors.

Scholars of Indian development, most notably Nobel laureate and economist Amartya Sen, have discussed extensively the way in which social realities can impede inclusive growth and the exercise of freedom (Sen, 1999). Sen's capabilities approach relates directly to freedom and "the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead" (Drèze and Sen, 1995, p. 10). While Sen's advocacy and approach has been directed towards expanding the way development indicators are structured, arguably, reforms such as human rights education that expand marginalized youth's ability to work to dismantle barriers based on class, caste, gender, and/or religion, can be seen as a mechanism by which to enhance one's opportunities and capabilities. Sen's capabilities approach has been taken up in various fields, but little educational scholarship has sought to examine experiments that seek to expand the space between lived reality and capabilities for marginalized groups through sustained intervention. Further research on human rights education and other efforts aimed at restructuring social relations that restrict the exercise of freedom would offer fruitful evidence of the limits and possibilities of such approaches.

6.1. Conclusion

Literature on human rights education to date has largely offered prescriptions for what must be done and presented programs as exemplars of a given educational reform (usually by those involved with implementation).[8] This article sought to further analyze the impact demonstrated through student responses to understand the diverse types of impact and how information about human rights and resultant actions were mediated by various factors in rural Tamil Nadu.

Student actions in response to HRE demonstrated both the promise of this type of learning as well as the peril of marginalized

students placing themselves at greater risk for backlash. Similarly, students taking action that does not result in positive social change can serve to discourage and frustrate future attempts. As briefly mentioned earlier, reaction, backlash, and the limits and challenges of implementing HRE is an area that deserves further exploration to the extent that literature in this emerging field to date does not significantly address this topic.

This article presented the voices of participants in one NGO's human rights education program with the goal of exploring differentiated impact and how individual-, household-, school-, and community-level factors contributed to the diverse responses of students. Insights about the variegated nature of human rights education implementation and outcomes provide scholars and practitioners alike with greater information about the reform. Viewed through the conventional lenses of prescriptive literature on HRE, IHRE employs a strategy that espouses content and pedagogy aimed at fostering knowledge, skills, and actions related to human rights; through an evaluative lens, the program's impact is significant given the considerable number of student responses related to behavior changes and actions.

However, applying a perspective that allows us to qualitatively understand impact rather than document its occurrence, provides texture to what factors account for some students' transformative experience and others' experience of it as a mere 'time pass'. As human rights education programs expand and deepen across the globe, greater empirical research on the educational reform—rather than repetitive claims of its importance—can contribute to our understanding of how various forms of human rights instruction interact with and sometimes overlay existing patterns of inequality, culture, and power that can mediate and shape the lives of participants. Ultimately, engaging with educational efforts towards democratic citizenship and human rights for marginalized youth provides information about the possibility and promise of schooling to impact, in some way, broader processes of social change.

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[8] My initial contact with the NGO, People's Watch and its Institute of Human Rights Education, was as an independent researcher. While I am personally interested and supportive of their work, I believe my gaze as a researcher, rather than a staff member, allows for a healthy distance to analyze both effective and ineffective aspects of their strategy and approach.

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Monisha Bajaj is Assistant Professor of Education in the Programs in International and Comparative Education (Department of International & Transcultural Studies) at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research and teaching interests center on the meanings of education, peace and human rights education, and educational innovation in the global South.