

"We are Dumbledore's Army:" Forging the Foundation For Future Upstanders

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Abstract: The profusion of human rights atrocities and purported incidents of genocide across the globe in recent decades has increasingly forced multiple and complicated issues associated with combating these violations onto the political agendas of world leaders and institutions. Scholars are united in recognizing the growing importance and need for critical instruction on the complex issues related to human rights and genocide studies to inspire high school students toward a global, democratic citizenship for the 21st century. Therefore, how do educators and student programs prepare students to critically examine these complex questions in a way that encourages global citizenship? This study, conducted during a two-week intensive summer institute on human rights and genocide studies in western New York state, assessed the ability of a human rights and genocide educational institute to foster higher levels of self-efficacy among the participating students and their ability to be "upstanders," rather than bystanders in their daily lives. We argue that the students felt empowered to pursue their short- and long-term goals regarding becoming human rights upstanders through the role models in their lives who influenced them to come to the Institute and the various experiences they had during the Institute's workshops and field trips.

Key words: Alternative pedagogy, human rights, and social studies education

Introduction

The profusion of human rights atrocities and purported incidents of genocide across the globe in recent decades increasingly forced the multiple and complex issues associated with combating these violations onto the political agendas of world leaders and institutions. Upon receiving the Nobel Prize, President Barack Obama (2009) spoke passionately about the need for the United States to be a force for policing these issues. He commented:

I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism – it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason. (2009 p. 3)

At the same time, the United States, having struggled through a decade of major military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq – as well as in smaller global conflicts– is seemingly exhausted with the burden of playing the role of a global police force. This vacuum has been filled by a number of ad hoc organizations pursuing human rights campaigns through social media sources. For example, a viral YouTube video campaign entitled "KONY 2012 " attempted to raise awareness of the human rights violations of the Uganda-based Lord's Resistance Army militia leader Joseph Kony. Critics, however, have charged that, as noble an effort as campaign like this may be, it presents a simplistic view of long-standing conflicts between a bewildering network of competing groups.

Upstanders and Engagement

A number of significant scholarly projects have altered the landscape of human rights advocacy and research in order to accommodate an agenda closely focused on the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and charitable groups. Each agenda requires that individuals actively engage in human rights advocacy to become upstanders. An "upstander" is defined as an individual who is willing to stand up and take action in defense of others (Power, 2002). While the origins of the term are attributed to several individuals and organizations, the researchers chose the term as it was defined by Power (2002). The term encompasses individuals who take large risks on a global level as well as individuals who take a stand on a more personal level, such as those who prevent bullying. The process by which one develops an upstander identity is an involved process that requires outside assistance. It is not merely enough for a person to want to be an upstander, the individual must be immersed in a supportive environment where activism is appropriately modeled, the individual's commitment to act is supported and ample opportunities for action and reflection are provided (Eyler, 2002; Harré, 2007).

The reasons why individuals decide to take up this mantle are as varied as the individual, but several factors, both experiential and contextual, contribute to this decision. These factors may include having personal experiences with injustice (Kaplan & Xiaoru, 2000), contact with prominent figures, possessing influential religious values (Harré, 2007), and for the rise of a collective crisis. For example, collective crises, like genocide or government-sanctioned acts of aggression, can mobilize large portions of society to act. When the global community witnessed acts of aggression like those recently waged in Syria, several activist efforts sprang forth providing individuals with a variety of ways to become involved and advocate for change (Amnesty International, 2013; I Am Syria, 2013). For students, effective modeling remains one of the most potent methods for increasing activism. When activism is imbedded in the ethos of an educational organization and is modeled by its leaders, youth perceive the activist activities as more genuine and authentic and their own rate of activism increases (Harré, 2007). Ormond (2006) concluded that:

When students actually *see* others of similar age and ability successfully reaching a goal, they are especially likely to believe that they, too, can achieve that goal. Hence, students sometimes develop greater self-efficacy when they see a fellow student model a behavior than when they see their teacher model the behavior. (p. 343, emphasis in original)

American educational organizations such as the Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership program and the Pearl S. Buck International Leadership Program, while not human rights programs per se, claim to do just that. They provide students with the opportunities to put rights into action and engage in activism and volunteerism. They dispel the myth that youth must be apathetic. Rather, they empower participants to engage in activism through modeling activist practices, emphasizing the importance of activism, of connecting participants with current activists, educating them on how to become leaders and activists, allowing participants to develop their own activist projects, and providing networks and support systems after the programs have ended.

While these programs could provide the potential benefit of increasing a participant's desire to become empowered and take action, little is known about the extent of their effectiveness. It is thus necessary to examine the reflections of participants in such programs and to assess whether educational institutions are able to prepare American high-school aged students to critically examine complex questions about human rights issues and increase their sense of empowerment. This study investigated a two-week genocide and human rights summer institute, heretofore known as the Summer Institute, for high school students that took place in western New York during the summer of 2011.

The research questions that drove this project, therefore, are:

- a) Why do these particular high school students choose to attend a summer institute on human rights and genocide studies?
- b) What is the general experience of a group of high school students attending a summer institute on human rights and genocide studies?
- c) How do high school students feel their participation in a summer institute on human rights and genocide studies impacts their beliefs about and their perceptions of their ability to respond to human rights issues?

In this article we argue that the students felt empowered to pursue their short- and long-term goals of becoming human rights upstanders because of their perceptions of the role models in their lives who encouraged them to attend the Institute and because of the various experiences they had during the Institute program.

Methods

Framework

We employed a qualitative research design that hewed closely to the social constructivist paradigm as defined by Crotty (1998). Social constructivism, for von Glasersfeld (1995), emphasizes the social nature of knowledge and knowledge building, with researchers playing the role of the primary data collection instrument.

Setting

The principal investigators in this study initially made contact with a group of K-12 American educators who developed and led the Summer Institute for high school students on human rights issues. The Summer Institute met over two weeks in an educational center in western New York State in late June and early July 2011.

Sampling Procedures

The investigators used a purposeful sampling approach with the “focus on selecting information-rich cases. Of the 25 students enrolled in the Institute, 17 participants consented to be part of the study. There were 15 females and 2 males, 11 were first time attendees, 4 were attending the institute for a second time, and 2 were attending their third. All students identified themselves as average to above average in their academic ability with 2 at the honors level. In the upcoming Fall 2011 semester, there were 6 entering ninth graders, 5 tenth graders, 4 eleventh graders, and 2 college freshman.

Data Collection

In the first stage of the study, students participating in the Institute completed an on-line entrance survey (See Appendix A). During the first week of the Institute individual interviews were conducted with participants using a semi-structured interview protocol recommended by Holstein and Gubrium (2003). Participants were asked about why they attended the Institute, their conceptions of human rights, their experiences learning about human rights issues within their regular social studies classes, and the impact of the Institute on their understandings of these issues (See Appendix B).

We used an informal interview approach as a “conversation with a purpose” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 79). Interviews were recorded and literally transcribed using the conventions developed by

Silverman (2002). On the last day of the Institute, we conducted three focus group sessions as a final data point for our study. The advantage of the focus group method is that it is a “process (that) takes in a wider variety of information than if there were fewer participants” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 102). (See Appendix C). Throughout the Institute, we observed all sessions and took detailed field notes in order to capture the intent of the Institute and its leaders, the content and pedagogical methods of the sessions, and the ways in which the students participated.

Data Analysis

Understanding that “analysis is happening from the first moments of data collection” (Hatch, 2002, p. 149), we looked early for patterns emerging from the data collected from surveys, individual interviews, focus groups and observations. In this case, we were particularly interested in the ways in which participating in the Institute influenced the participant’s sense of empowerment to act as an activist.

The data analysis procedure began with a process of open coding in order to extract the most valuable themes and to eliminate portions of the interview data that did not directly relate to the research questions at hand (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After transcription, we reread the transcripts several times and then divided the transcript broadly into large sections based on major topics and then into more specific subtopics.

In the next section we outline the Institute’s mission, provide students’ reasons for attending, describe their most powerful Institute experiences, and share the students’ perceptions of the impact the Institute had on their ability to be upstanders.

“We are Dumbledore’s Army”

For seven days during the start of the 2011 summer vacation, 25 high school students and three teachers participated in a human rights and genocide institute created and facilitated by local teachers. During the Institute, students heard from Holocaust survivors, genocide victims, and upstanders, and went on two field trips. The Institute director, Adam Becker, set the tone on the first day:

The fact that you are taking part in this opportunity for learning demonstrates a great compassion for those who are still suffering in a world unable to provide actual gravity to the phrase, “never again.” It is important that you recognize the need to continually assess the circumstances surrounding human rights violations. Once this experience is over, your study of human rights and genocide has just begun. We must take what we learn and plan a course of action for the future.... We want to focus on the rock stars, the upstanders, as Samantha Power calls them. This is not a Peace Institute; we are assuming evil is around us. Like in Harry Potter, we are Dumbledore’s Army!

The surveys, interviews, and focus groups conducted during the Summer Institute spoke powerfully to the dynamic impact that a critical focus on human rights issues can have on the lives of young students who perceive themselves as activists. Institute facilitators made no secret of their intentions for the participants. As Becker emphasized, “We expect you to change the world and to want to do it right now.”

Reasons for Attending the Summer Institute Women's Rights Theme

In 1995, United States First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton declared, "Women's rights are human rights" at the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, China. Embracing the thesis of her speech, Institute leaders framed their 2011 summer program around this theme. One returning participant, in particular, was very enthusiastic about program's focus.

Saleema shared;

When I realized it was a women's rights kind of theme, I wanted to definitely be a part of it. This was an opportunity I did not want to miss, especially when I realized it was women's rights, as I want to help women in the Middle East.

While only one participant explicitly mentioned the women's right theme as a major reason for attending the Institute, many others spoke highly of the infusion of women's human rights issues throughout the two-week seminars.

Identified as a Potential Upstander

Some participants attended because they were identified by their school districts as student leaders who might benefit from the Institute experience. Destiny shared how she came to be a participant in the Institute:

My principal picked me out of the whole school. She called me down one day and asked if I wanted to go to this Institute. She said the Summer Institute is for people who have leadership and show it. She said I really show leadership because I don't leave anyone out of anything. I always include them and I treat everyone the way I want to be treated.

Destiny not only was identified by her school administration but was also given a scholarship to attend the Institute. At Saleema's school three students were invited to attend the Institute and given scholarships because of their leadership qualities and interest level in human rights issues. "They just came up to me," Saleema explained, "because they knew how much I like this stuff and how interested I was."

Inspirational Teachers

By far the most reported reason for participants attending the Institute was the presence of inspirational teachers, many of whom were affiliated with the Institute itself, like Director Becker. "In eighth grade Mr. Becker was my teacher," shared Beth, "and I would talk a lot in school about [human rights] and he told me about [the Institute]. He said I would really enjoy it so I thought I would try it and I've been back ever since." Bella was also encouraged to attend because of Mr. Becker. "He figured this was the perfect thing for me, what I cared about, and how I felt about things like discrimination," she explained.

Initially, Kirsten learned about the Institute from her English language arts teacher but because of other summer obligations she could not attend at first. She was then reminded by her social studies teacher about the Institute the following summer and found time in her schedule. "Mr. Grayson told me about the program and I thought this was the perfect opportunity because I want to be an international lawyer one day so I wanted to [go to the Institute]," Kirsten said.

Student choice is certainly influenced by several factors, but one of the most influential is the teacher. When students experience teachers who are emotionally engaged and that present clear

expectations they are more likely to remain engaged and follow the urgings of the teachers (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). When students perceive teachers as involved and invested, they are more receptive to a teacher's guidance and direction (Brophy, 1986).

The Summer Institute Participant Experience

Experiencing the Women's Right Theme

Some participants found the modern day women's rights topics relevant to their learning. A pressing issue for Eliza was the global exploitation of women: "[The] human trafficking issue is a really big thing because it happens in the United States too. I think the public is kind of ignorant and it's not their fault. It is just they are not informed so I think we really need to raise awareness about exploitation of women in countless countries and human trafficking issue."

Many participants were drawn to the theme of women's rights and the historical content connected to it for empowering their future activism. For example, in the beginning of the Institute, the participants were exposed to historic women's rights activists. "Throughout the institute we've heard so many success stories about people getting stuff done and reaching their goals, like when Alice Paul helped to get women the right to vote," Eliza pointed out. Beth found the Eleanor Roosevelt historic impersonator engaging: "I would have to say seeing the Eleanor Roosevelt experience yesterday. She was such a powerful woman and it was great to see that."

It has been found that purposeful integration of women into the curriculum can have positive effects on a student's attitude towards personal empowerment (Baxter, Sproul, Kelly, & Franco, 2006) and for these students women's rights issues drew high marks.

Attending Field Trips

Over the course of the Institute the participants attended three field trips to foster their ability to be upstanders. To complement the women's rights theme, the group visited the Women's Rights National Historic Park in Seneca Falls and the Susan B. Anthony House in Rochester. Julie was impressed that such historic events took place close to where she lives: "We went to the Susan B. Anthony house. It was cool to be in the actual house where she was...that it is there in Rochester, in our backyard." Destiny found the trip to Seneca Falls inspiring: "I think it will mold us teenagers into people that other people will look up to when we get older."

Several students also noted the trip to the Robert Jackson Center in Jamestown, NY when they heard from speakers about the Nuremberg Trials and current International Criminal Court. Some students thought the trip was "life-changing" and mentioned future career choices being influenced by the speakers. For example, Hillary explained how impactful a former prosecutor of the court was with his simulation activity: "He is a good motivational speaker and it moved me when he did that demonstration with the line and talked about what actually happened during the genocide."

Field trips can provide meaningful learning opportunities for students (Coughlin, 2010) as long as they are connected to the history curriculum in the classroom (Noel & Colopy, 2006). Field trips also have the potential to raise cultural awareness and promote social justice (Jakubowski, 2003). In the case of these students, they believed the field trips were extremely worthwhile and beneficial to their learning and future endeavors.

Participating in a day of Service-Learning

Within the Institute, there was an emphasis on both *doing* as well as *knowing*, implicit in Parker's (2010) notions of democratic citizenship education. Students commented on several *doing* aspects of the Institute that fostered their ability to be upstanders, in particular, the day of service. This daylong activity, in which students travelled to a nearby city to renovate a house for a group of recently arrived Burmese refugees, was an especially powerful one for many of the participants. Ed commented:

Yesterday, when we went to the refugee house and actually helped paint the walls, move in the furniture, clean up, and help these people resettle, that was really humbling to me. That was my favorite part because I've always been active and have wanted to get involved in things like that.

The service-learning experience caused participants to want to continue helping others in need, and as Annie put it, "It's instant results, you see what we can do and it just makes you want to do it more!"

According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2007) and leading social studies scholars (e.g., Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009; Wade, 2008) students need opportunities to engage in democratic practices outside of school, and one way is through service-learning. Additionally, research suggests that when adolescents are engaged in extra-curricular activities that include opportunities for service-learning, it significantly impacts their commitment to civic participation (Kahne & Sporte, 2008) and positively affects their future adult civic participation (McFarland & Thomas, 2006). The service-learning project day allowed Institute participants to see the immediate results of their activism and encouraged them to continue similar work within their respective communities.

Limitations of the Institute Structure

While the narratives regarding the Summer Institute were generally positive, several still expressed areas of need for improvement. Student participants were quite reflective in response to questions about the ways in which they would like to see future Institute sessions modified. Some simply wished to be exposed to more content on other areas of the world and human rights issues that were missing from their high school social studies curriculum, while recognizing the limited nature of a two-week institute. Kirsten, for example, stated that, "I just wish we learned more about the women in Afghanistan and Pakistan." This desire would seem perfectly natural given the United State's recent, expanded political and military role in the Near East. Comments like this suggest a strong desire among these participants who also considered themselves to be young activists, to learn about pressing human rights concerns across the globe, which is in accordance with Zong, Wilson and Quashiga's (2008) scholarship on global social education.

Participants' Beliefs about the Impact of the Summer Institute

Using Upstanders as Role Models

The consistent presence of successful upstanders, including past participants, who have gone on to conduct their own activist projects, left an indelible mark on many of the participants and led them to feel as though they too were capable of imparting change. Sally spoke of the power of a past Institute participant, Angel, and her forthcoming humanitarian trip to Africa saying, "I liked hearing Angel's story about how she started her own charity because then it makes you feel like you can do that too."

Other participants echoed similar sentiments when discussing the opportunity to meet other activists such as Holocaust survivors, non-profit activists, and prosecutors specializing in human rights violations. Ainsley noted the power of hearing the upstanders: “in motivating her to make a difference in the world and that just one person can make a huge difference.”

When outside experts such as political activists are involved in interactive lessons, they can positively influence what students learn about politics and foster attitudes more likely to lead to political engagement (Hess, 2004). For past participants such as Angel, hearing from local upstanders about their work inspired her to start her own charity. For current Institute participants, having models of activist behavior allows them to consider future possibilities.

Community Atmosphere

In addition to surrounding the participants with successful upstanders, the Institute’s structure provided the participants with an environment that fostered growth and supported its members by providing a network of like-minded people in whom they could seek refuge and reassurance. Ed emphasized several times how important it was that he had a network of friends who kept him motivated and inspired:

I have so many friends from the Institute who are here and some past Institutes and we still talk to this day. It is kind of like a home away from home. When you are having a terrible day, and you just go back to talk to these people who understand what you are about and know what your beliefs are. Even to talk to them and know there are other people out there and that you are not just this [single] person, it’s amazing.

The support found within this circle of like-minded individuals was echoed by many participants, both old and new, and at various stages of the program. The peer bonding that formed at this Institute is not unlike the student interactions reported by middle level students enrolled in a social studies year-long course about the study of race, class, and gender (Caldwell, 2012). In that eighth grade course, students attributed the safe community environment of the class to fostering strong relationships with their peers. Institute participants, such as Ed, acknowledged that their passions for human rights activism are unlike those of many of their peers and that they relied on the connections made through the Institute to persevere and work to affect positive change.

Forging the Foundation for Future Student Upstanders

The participant narratives were clear in the effect the two-week experience had on their beliefs to be human rights activists. Many of the participants spoke about their immediate, short-term plans for implementing the recommendations of the Institute in their various school settings. Eliza, for example, stated forcefully that, “Next year at school I’m going to definitely join the Amnesty International Club because last year I was really busy and didn’t have any interest in it. But coming here and learning all the things I learned, I’m going to definitely make time for it next year.” The Institute thus had a profound influence on these students’ immediate sense of the need and their beliefs to seek out, reinvigorate, and organize human rights clubs in their schools.

At the same time, several participants spoke passionately about their future career plans, many of which involved human rights campaigns and activities. Lisa, for example, mentioned her desire “to become a lawyer and maybe do human rights stuff.” In a moving testimony, Deanna outlined her ambitious future plans:

I'm thinking of being a reconstructive plastic surgeon. After I become a doctor, I'm planning to go to the Middle East to help the girls that have acid sprayed on their faces for trying to work. I'm going to try to make them feel beautiful again.

Other students are already involved in several innovative projects that touch on ways that their experiences at the Institutes over several summers have inspired them. Ed explained his on-going Eagle Scout project, which involves making birthing kits and sending them to Rwanda.

In the end, it is clear from this testimony that the Institute provided student participants with precisely the kinds of experiences that modeled practices found to increase a willingness to engage in activism. These often moving narratives express in straightforward ways the impact that this voluntary participation in the Summer Institute on human rights and genocide studies has had on their perceptions to affecting social change in their communities and as global citizens.

Summer Institute Implications

The Institute Community

As noted, the community of the Summer Institute was a key factor in engendering a sense of empowerment among Institute participants. From the opening moments of the Institute, it was clear that its leaders had taken care to create an atmosphere that would be conducive to furthering their goals. The main meeting space had been decorated with posters featuring images and slogans such as "Stand up for what is right even if you're standing alone" and "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world: indeed it's the only thing that ever has." These simple measures taken together served to create a sense of community quite apart from that of the participants' public school experiences.

The Use of Role Models

The use of role models has clearly been a large part of the Institute's success. Many of the student participants referred to the important role of dynamic social studies teachers, especially the Institute founder Adam Becker, in their lives. Indeed, the clear majority of the participants had been recruited by either their own teachers or by former student participants. The Institute's leaders strategically employed alumni of past Institutes often as examples of upstanders. As much as the curriculum and pedagogy of the Institute, these role models encouraged participants to imagine having the ability to affect change in significant ways in their own contexts.

This agenda is especially important, as several Institute leaders acknowledged, in a time of economic contraction that puts the future dreams of many young people in jeopardy. Institute leaders put forward a consistent message of hope, empowering students to imagine more imaginative career paths that included public service and international travel. The upstanders included in the Institute program reinforced these messages. During the service-learning day in Buffalo, for example, participants took the advantage of meeting an Americorps intern working with Burmese refugees to ask questions about service opportunities.

Conclusion

The Summer Institute participants believed that superficial learning about the Holocaust and modern day atrocities was not enough. They wanted comprehensive examinations of human rights issues and to then take this knowledge and carry out the work that the Institute organizers envisioned for them as “Dumbledore's Army.” They wanted to do something to serve the common good locally, nationally, and globally. This often meant articulating bold and ambitious future academic and career plans that will potentially take them around the world in search of meaningful interventions surrounding human rights violations.

Although in this article we describe the ways in which participants believed a summer institute about human rights and genocide studies forged the foundation for them to become upstanders, there are still several questions and opportunities for future research. For example, to what extent does this Institute reflect the recommendations from human rights education experts? What is the long-term impact of this Institute on participants’ human rights activism?

When students are informed by dedicated human rights educators and engaged by genocide activists and survivors, they may be more likely to care about real world events and, in turn, try to affect positive change. Within an institute format and its multiplicity of experiences, students could clearly articulate immediate and long-range human rights issues plans, specific to their own needs and interests. However, to be exposed to such experiences, such as a summer institute, they need a support network that may consist of parents, teachers, and/or peers. Perhaps, as more generations of students attend similar summer institutes, they may in turn influence their peers and children, thereby increasing the ratio of upstanders to bystanders in a world that continues to face troubling times.

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Appendix A

Pre-Intervention On-Line Survey Protocol.

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

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