

United Nations Standards and Chinese Approach for Human Rights Education in Primary and Secondary Schools

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Abstract: *Human rights education in primary and secondary schools is the initial and crucial phase of human rights education. Based on the normative documents formulated by the United Nations for human rights education during this phase, this paper constructs the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools, which include four major aspects: educational content, educational methods, reference mechanisms, and human rights concepts. They correspond respectively to the core connotations, practical pathways, institutional protections, and spiritual pursuits of human rights education in primary and secondary schools. On the basis of critically reflecting on these standards, and in reference to the United Nations standards and in accordance with China's actual conditions, this paper proposes the "Chinese Approach" for human rights education in primary and secondary schools: first, in terms of legislation, clear legal basis should be provided; second, in terms of administration, clear goals and action guidelines should be provided; third, in terms of resource guarantee, sufficient resource support should be provided; fourth, in terms of curriculum design, it should be suitable for Chinese primary and secondary school students; fifth, in terms of evaluation mechanism, a variety of evaluation mechanisms should be constructed.*

Keywords: human rights education in primary and secondary schools ♦ united nations standards ♦ Chinese approach ♦ human rights concepts

I. Research Background and Proposition Statement

Human rights education plays a significant role in disseminating human rights knowledge, constructing human rights theories, shaping human rights concepts, and fostering a culture of human rights. In recent years, its importance and fundamental role in protecting and realizing human rights has been increasingly recognized and accepted in the international community.¹ Since 1994, the United Nations has formulated and adopted several normative documents, including the *United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education*, the *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training*, and the World Programme for Human Rights Education spanning five phases. Since 2009, China has also included "human rights education" in its four published national human rights action plans, each dedicating a specific chapter to this topic. Therefore, it can be seen that human rights education has garnered significant attention both internationally and domestically. Within the broader scope of human rights education, human rights education in primary and secondary schools can be deemed the foundational, initial and critical stage. It refers to the scientific and reasonable integration of human rights education into the primary and secondary education system, with a primary focus on educating students about human rights. Human rights education can help the primary and secondary education system fulfill its fundamental mission of providing universal quality education, and can enhance the overall efficiency of the national education system.² Given that primary and secondary school students are in the early stages of physiological and psychological development, their values are not yet fully formed, and they have

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¹ Felisa Tibbitts and Peter G. Kirchschlaeger, "Perspective of Research on Human Rights Education", in *Teaching about Social Issues in the 20th and 21st Centuries: Innovative Approaches, Programs, Strategies*, S. Totten and J. E. Pederson ed., 2010, page 8.

² Plan of Action for the First Phase (2005-2009) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, Part II, para. 19, 2005.

had limited exposure to ideological influences, launching human rights education in this period is particularly helpful for promoting the holistic development of their personalities and their cultivation of well-rounded character. It also contributes to the formation of values of respecting and protecting human rights for students, encouraging students to grow into law-abiding, patriotic, and respectful citizens. This, in turn, supports the broader societal goal of fostering individuals who understand and follow the law, embrace self-respect and self-reliance, respect others, cherish peace, and pursue justice and fairness. In the five phases of the World Programme for Human Rights Education launched by the United Nations, different educational sectors and target groups have been addressed. The first phase (2005-2009) specifically focused on human rights education in primary and secondary schools; the fourth phase (2020-2024) emphasized human rights education for young people; while the fifth phase (2025-2029) once again highlights human rights education for children and youth, with special emphasis on human rights and digital technologies, the environment and climate change, and gender equality. Similarly, all four of China's national human rights action plans explicitly mention human rights education in primary and secondary schools, giving it top priority within the broader framework of human rights education. For instance, the *Human Rights Action Plan of China (2021-2025)* specifically sets forth the goal of "conducting extensive research, education, and training, and building awareness in this field, to create a social atmosphere of respecting and protecting human rights." In Part V, titled "Education and Research on Human Rights," the plan specifically calls for "strengthening human rights education during primary and secondary education."³

However, the scale of theoretical achievements related to human rights education in primary and secondary schools is far from commensurate with its significance. As of the second quarter of 2025, there have been some outstanding research achievements in the field of human rights education both domestically and internationally,⁴ but theoretical studies specifically focused on human rights education in primary and secondary schools remain scarce.⁵ Existing research on this

³ *Human Rights Action Plan of China (2021-2025)*, available on the official website of the Chinese government, accessed May 29, 2025, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-09/09/content_5636384.htm.

⁴ Representative research findings include: Felisa Tibbitts, Peter G. Kirchschlaeger, "Perspectives of Research on Human Rights Education," *Journal of Human Rights Education* 2 (1), September 2010; Monisha Bajaj, "Human Rights Education: Ideology, Location, and Approaches," *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2011): 481-508; Felisa Tibbitts, "Understanding What We Do: Emerging Models For Human Rights Education," *International Review of Education* 48 (2002): 159-171; Sonia Cardenas, "Constructing Rights: Human Rights Education and the State," *International Policy Science Review* 26 (2005): 363-364; Todd Jennings, "Human Rights Education Standards for Teachers and Teacher Education," *Teaching Education*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2006): 287-298; Yesemin Karaman Kepenekci, "A Study of Effectiveness of Human Rights Education in Turkey," *Journal of Peace Education*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2006): 53-68; Chen Youwu, "Theoretical Exploration and Practical Pursuit of the Chinese Human Rights Knowledge System," *Huxiang Law Review* 3 (2024); Zhan Weiqing, *Human Rights and Education* (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2009); Zhang Xuelian, *Research on Human Rights Education in China* (Nanjing: Southeast University Press, 2012); Liu Jihe, "The History and Notion of International Education on Human Rights," *Comparative Education Review* 2 (2003): 40-45; Yang Songcai and Chen Youwu (ed.), *Human Rights Research Institutions and Human Rights Education in China* (Beijing: China Procuratorial Press, 2010); Wang Kongxiang, *Human Rights Education from the Perspective of International Human Rights Law* (Current Affairs Press, 2008); Yang Chunfu, "On the Role of the State in Human Rights Education: From the Perspective of New Institutional Economics," *Nanjing Journal of Social Sciences* 11 (2005): 73-76; Zhang Yanling, "Discussion on Issues of Human Rights Education in China," *Journal of Nanjing College for Population Programme Management*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2006): 67-70; Peng Yu, "Human Rights Education in the Context of United Nations," *Human Rights* 2 (2016): 76-91; Chen Youwu, "On Human Rights Education in the Human Rights Action Plan of China," *Academics* 9 (2010); Wang Xigen and Chen Xiaoxiao, "Comparative Analysis of Human Rights Education Values Between Taiwan and the Mainland," *Journal of South-Central Minzu University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2018): 133-137.

⁵ Representative research findings include: Qiu Anbang, "An Empirical Study on the Integration of the Concept of Human Rights into Chinese Textbooks of Senior High Schools in the New Era," *Chinese Journal of Human Rights* 2 (2023); Liu Huawen, "Thoughts on Human Rights Education for Children," *Human Rights* 4 (2017): 46-57; Ying Peichang and Wu Sheng, "Thoughts on Human Right Education in Basic Education System," *Journal of Schooling Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2011): 40-45; Liu Shiping, "The Core and Approaches of Integrated Human

topic primarily includes macro-level general reflections, micro-level analyses of current situations and countermeasures, analyses of content and methods, and other fragmented and superficial studies. Against this backdrop, this article selects “human rights education in primary and secondary schools” as its research domain. Starting with an analysis of a series of normative documents issued by the United Nations, including international conventions, regarding human rights education in primary and secondary schools, the study aims to extract and construct the United Nations standards for human rights education at this level. It then critically reflects on these standards and, in light of China’s specific context, seeks to answer the core question: How should the “Chinese approach” to implementing human rights education in primary and secondary schools be designed with reference to the United Nations standards?

II. United Nations Standards for Human Rights Education in Primary and Secondary Schools

A. Basis for the construction of united nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools

The construction of United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools should be based on the normative documents developed by the United Nations specifically for human rights education at these educational levels. The normative basis for human rights education can be traced back to Article 26 of the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which states: “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.”⁶ In addition, the provisions on the right to education and the purpose of education in Article 13 of the 1966 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* also pertain to human rights education in a general sense.⁷ The 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) is considered the first international normative document directly related to human rights education in primary and secondary schools. Article 28 of the CRC addresses the right of the child to education, while Article 29 outlines the aims of education⁸, both of which are closely linked to human rights education in primary and secondary schools. The relevant provisions of the CRC provide a normative foundation for subsequent United Nations actions regarding human rights education for children in primary and secondary schools. The *General Comment No. 1: The Aims of Education* (2001), adopted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2001, offers further analysis of Article 29 (1) of the CRC. Paragraph 15 of the *General Comment* explicitly states that: “Article 29 (1) can also be seen as a foundation stone for the various programmes of human rights education...” Furthermore, Paragraph 16 highlights the importance of human rights education for children living in situations of emergency (non-peaceful contexts). “The values embodied in article 29 (1) are relevant to children living in zones of peace but they are even more important for those living in situations of conflict or emergency. As the *Dakar Framework for Action* notes, it is important in the context of education systems affected by conflict, natural calamities and instability that educational programmes be conducted in ways that promote mutual understanding, peace and tolerance, and that help to prevent violence and conflict. Education about international humanitarian law also constitutes an important, but all too often neglected, dimension of efforts to give effect to article 29 (1).”⁹ The *General Comment* explicitly identifies the ultimate goal of children’s education and clearly points out that Article 29 (1) of the CRC can be used as a normative basis for human rights education for children.

In addition, the 1993 *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action* explicitly addresses human rights education. According to the *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*, the World Conference on Human Rights emphasized the principle of “First Call for Children” and called on

Rights Education: On the Core and Methods of Human Rights Education in Primary and Secondary Schools,” *Rule of Law in Hunan and Local Governance* 4 (2011): 145-148.

⁶ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Art. 26 (2), 1948.

⁷ *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, Art. 13 (1), 1966.

⁸ *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Art. 28, 29 (1), 1989.

⁹ *General Comment No. 1: The Aims of Education*, adopted at the 26th Session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2001), para. 1, 2, 15, and 16, 2001.

States to integrate the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* into their national action plans to prioritize addressing basic education.¹⁰ Part II, Section D of the document specifically outlines provisions related to human rights education, stating that the implementation of human rights education is essential for the promotion and achievement of stable and harmonious relations among communities and for fostering mutual understanding, tolerance and peace. It calls on all States to take measures to include human rights, democracy and rule of law as subjects in the curricula.¹¹ These provisions underscore the necessity and purpose of human rights education and advocate for its inclusion in the curricula of all learning institutions in formal and non-formal settings. In light of the principles of “First Call for Children” and prioritizing basic education, human rights education for children in primary and secondary schools becomes a primary task.

The series of normative documents specifically developed by the United Nations for human rights education serves as the main normative source for constructing United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools. On December 23, 1994, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 49/184, which launched the *United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education*.¹² It emphasized that “each woman, man and child, to realize their full human potential, must be made aware of all their human rights.” In 2004, the *World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005-ongoing)* announced that the programme would be implemented in phases, starting on January 1, 2005. Since then, the United Nations has introduced five phases of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, each targeting different educational sectors and target groups. Notably, the first phase (2005-2009) focused on human rights education within the primary and secondary education system; the fourth phase (2020-2024) targeted human rights education for youth; and the fifth phase (2025-2029) once again highlights human rights education for children and youth, with special emphasis on human rights and digital technologies, the environment and climate change, and gender equality. These three action plans were developed by groups of education and human rights practitioners from all the continents, offering specific strategies and practical approaches for implementing human rights education for primary and secondary school students and youth at the national level.¹³

First, based on the above three phases of action plans, the primary content of human rights education in primary and secondary schools under the United Nations framework includes: (1) policies — collectively developing and adopting human rights-based education strategies, legislation, and policies, including policies to improve curricula and provide training for teachers and other educational personnel; (2) policy implementation — facilitating the participation of stakeholders and taking appropriate measures to ensure the implementation of adopted educational policies; (3) learning environment — creating a school environment that respects and promotes human rights and fundamental freedoms; (4) teaching and learning — all teaching processes and methods for primary and secondary school students should be rights-based, with teaching and learning being the primary means of human rights education within the school system; (5) training and professional development of teachers and other educational personnel — providing school staff and administrators with pre-service and in-service training to equip them with the necessary human rights knowledge, understanding, skills, and competencies, thereby fostering respect for and practice of human rights within schools, as well as ensuring appropriate working conditions for teachers and other school staff.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*, Part II, Section B: Equality, Dignity and Tolerance, Subsection IV: The Rights of the Child, para. 45 and 47, 1993.

¹¹ *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*, Part II, Section D: Human Rights Education, para. 78 and 79, 1993.

¹² United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004), accessed 29 May, 2025, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Education/Training/Pages/Decade.aspx>.

¹³ World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005-ongoing), accessed 29 May, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/resources/educators/human-rights-education-training/world-programme-human-rights-education>.

¹⁴ Plan of Action for the First Phase (2005-2009) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, Part II, para. 18, 2005.

Second, the three phases of action plans detail the phased strategies for national-level implementation, encompassing processes such as planning, execution, and evaluation. Specifically, these include: (1) analyzing the current status of human rights education within the school system; (2) setting priorities and drafting national implementation strategies; (3) implementing and monitoring; and (4) evaluating.¹⁵ Furthermore, the action plans explicitly stipulate the key actors in human rights education in primary and secondary schools, primarily the national education administrative departments responsible for educational policy and management. Other significant participants include schools, teachers' unions, national human rights institutions, NGOs, and the media.¹⁶

Furthermore, regarding the coordination of the implementation of action plans, the first-phase action plan had detailed provisions at both the national and international levels. At the national level, the implementation of the action plan was primarily the responsibility of the Ministry of Education in each country. The Ministry of Education was required to designate or strengthen a relevant department to coordinate the drafting, execution, and monitoring of the national implementation strategy. At the international level, an inter-agency coordination committee within the United Nations was to be established to mobilize resources in support of national-level actions.¹⁷

Finally, all the above three phases of action plans required the evaluation of actions taken during the implementation of the World Programme for Human Rights Education. The "*Final evaluation of the implementation of the 1st phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education*" exercised objective and documentary review of primary and secondary sources on measures taken by countries during the first phase. The evaluation questionnaire was prepared by the coordination committee and distributed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to the 193 member states of the United Nations. A total of 76 responses were received by the OHCHR.¹⁸ The evaluation report assessed national-level actions in five areas, namely policy, policy implementation, learning environment, teaching, and the training and professional development of teachers and other educational personnel,¹⁹ in line with the content of national-level actions outlined in the aforementioned action plans. The evaluation report concluded that the majority of United Nations member states were generally implementing the World Programme for Human Rights Education. Some countries acknowledged that the world programme had contributed to progress at the national level; while others noted that they had not utilized the opportunities provided by this international framework to promote the implementation of human rights education within their school systems, and national actions appeared to be unrelated to the published world programme. Challenges at the national level persisted. Common gaps included the absence of clear policies and specific implementation strategies for human rights education, and a lack of systematic approaches to developing materials, training teachers, and fostering learning environments that promote human rights values. In several countries, decentralized and fragmented political structures for providing education further complicated the implementation of centralized models. The coordination committee made several recommendations for improving human rights education in primary and secondary schools: assess the status quo of implementation within the country; review existing problems; make full use of international

¹⁵ Plan of Action for the First Phase (2005-2009) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, Part III, B. Stages of the implementation strategy, para. 26, 2005.

¹⁶ Plan of Action for the First Phase (2005-2009) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, Part III, D. Actors, para. 28-30, 2005.

¹⁷ Plan of Action for the First Phase (2005-2009) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, Part IV Coordination of the Implementation of the Plan of Action, para. 34-40, 2005.

¹⁸ Final Evaluation of the Implementation of the First Phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, Report of the United Nations Inter-Agency Coordinating Committee on Human Rights Education in the School System, Part I, C. Evaluation methodology, para. 9-11, 2010.

¹⁹ Final Evaluation of the Implementation of the First Phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, Report of the United Nations Inter-Agency Coordinating Committee on Human Rights Education in the School System, Part II. Action at the national level, 2010.

resources; extend the world programme to private education sectors; and join international and regional initiatives.²⁰

B. Content of United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools

Through the review and analysis of the aforementioned international normative documents, the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools primarily include four aspects: educational content, educational methods, reference mechanisms, and human rights concepts. These respectively correspond to the core connotations, practical pathways, institutional protections, and spiritual pursuits of human rights education in primary and secondary schools, systematically and comprehensively constructing a blueprint for human rights education in the schools at the United Nations level.

1. Educational content in United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools

Educational content is a fundamental component of the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools. Its design directly impacts the effectiveness of the implementation of human rights education in the schools. The OHCHR, in its publication *ABC — Teaching Human Rights: Practical Activities for Primary and Secondary Schools* (hereinafter *ABC — Teaching Human Rights*), emphasizes the importance of adopting a gradual approach in guiding children to learn about human rights. Human rights education for children of different ages should involve tailored teaching objectives and content. Specific classifications and content are detailed in Table 1 below.²¹

Table 1: Overview of United Nations Human Rights Education Content for Youth

	Age Group	Goals	Key Concepts	Specific Human Rights Problems
Early Childhood	Ages 3-7, Pre-school and lower primary school	Respect for self; Respect for parents and teachers; Respect for others	Self; Community; Personal responsibility; Obligations	Racism; Sexism; Unfairness; Hurting people (feelings, physically)
Later Childhood	Ages 8-11, Upper primary school	Social responsibility; Citizenship; Distinguishing wants from needs, from rights	Individual rights; Group rights; Freedom; Equality; Justice; Rule of law; Government; Security	Discrimination/prejudice; Poverty/hunger; Injustice; Ethnocentrism; Egocentrism; Passivity
Adolescence	Ages 12-14, Lower secondary school	Knowledge of specific human rights	International law; World peace; World development; World political economy; World ecology	Ignorance; Apathy; Cynicism; Political repression; Colonialism/imperialism; Economic globalization; Environmental degradation
Youth	Ages 15-17, Upper	Knowledge of human rights as universal	Moral inclusion/exclusion;	Genocide; War crimes;

²⁰ Final Evaluation of the Implementation of the First Phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, Report of the United Nations Inter-Agency Coordinating Committee on Human Rights Education in the School System, Part III, Conclusions and Recommendations, para. 63-66, 2010.

²¹ OHCHR, “ABC — Teaching Human Rights: Practical Activities for Primary and Secondary Schools,” 17.

	Age Group	Goals	Key Concepts	Specific Human Rights Problems
	secondary school	standards; Integration of human rights into personal awareness and behavior	Moral responsibility/ literacy	Torture

The characteristics of the educational content are as follows. First, step by step. Human rights education for children is divided according to their different developmental stages, taking into account their physical and psychological development patterns. The focus of human rights education content varies for each age group, adhering to the principle of gradual progression. Second, comprehensiveness. For each developmental stage from early childhood to adolescence, the United Nations establishes specific human rights knowledge content. The educational target covers the entire primary and secondary school student population, with a wide range of educational content. Third, fundamentality. Although the content broadly covers human rights knowledge, the focus remains on fundamental aspects such as rights, obligations, responsibilities, freedom, equality, fairness, justice, rule of law, government, and international human rights law. Lastly, systematization. Different human rights education goals and content are set for children at different stages: those for early childhood focus on cultivating self-awareness; those for later childhood emphasize fundamental issues within the human rights knowledge system, forming basic human rights values; those for adolescence elevate the focus to the international level, emphasizing the global environment and world peace; those for youth are to study the universal standards of the human rights system and integrate them into their behavior for practice. From early childhood to youth, the goals of human rights education are progressively elevated, with the content design demonstrating systematization.

2. Educational methods in United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools

The educational methods outlined in the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools consist of two parts. The first part concerns the methods for integrating human rights education into the primary and secondary education system, either by establishing human rights education as a standalone course within the curriculum or by incorporating human rights education content across multiple disciplines without creating a specific human rights education course. The United Nations does not impose mandatory requirements on the specific method but recommends prioritizing the standalone course approach. The interdisciplinary approach can serve as a secondary option or be implemented along with the first approach, for jointly promoting the implementation of human rights education across countries. Regarding the nature of the course (elective or compulsory), the United Nations suggests that, if conditions permit, human rights education courses should be set as compulsory courses.

The second part concerns the specific teaching methods for implementing human rights education in primary and secondary schools, that is, the specific approaches for teachers to impart human rights-related knowledge. Specifically, there are nine options. First, brainstorming. This method is used to address theoretical and practical issues, and requires a problem to be analyzed and solutions to be developed. At first, the problem is presented, and all related ideas and responses are recorded (without judgment, explanation, or rejection). Then, the teacher categorizes, analyzes, merges, adopts, or rejects the responses. Finally, the group makes a final decision on the problem. This method encourages high levels of participation and stimulates maximum creativity among participants. Second, case studies. Students are divided into groups to analyze real or hypothetical cases using human rights standards. The cases should be on two or three main topics and based on credible and realistic scenarios, which can be presented to students either in full or in stages. They should be able to encourage students to analyze and solve problems, plan, collaborate, and engage in team building, and can be used for debates, discussions, and in-depth studies. Third, creative expression. The forms may include stories and poetry, drawings, sculptures, dramas, songs, and

dances. Teachers can set tasks to provide students with a platform for sharing and exchanging their creative works. Fourth, discussion. Students can establish their own rules for discussions. Various ways can be used, including formal discussions, open discussion groups, or the “fishbowl model” (with one group engaging in discussion while others listening, before commenting and asking questions); “discussion circle model” (with students seating face-to-face in two circles for pairs discussing, then inner-circle students rotating to the right to discuss with new partners); “round-robin discussion model” (with the teacher posing an open-ended question, and each student answering in turn); and “discussion web model” (with students seating in a circle, and each time someone speaking, he/she passing a ball of yarn to the next speaker, holding onto the yarn themselves, finally creating a web that visually reflects the exchange of ideas). Fifth, field visits and community engagement. Students may visit places where human rights issues occur (e.g., courts or prisons) or locations where human rights are protected and victims are assisted (e.g., public welfare organizations or free clinics) for first-hand observation. Students should be informed in advance of the purpose of visit, guided to critically observe and record their experiences, and submit written reports afterward. Sixth, interviews. Interviewees can include community members, social activists, leaders, or witnesses of human rights events. Seventh, research projects. This method involves systematic and scientific exploration of human rights issues, helping students develop independent thinking and data analysis skills while deepening their understanding of the complexities of human rights topics. Eighth, role-playing and scenario simulations. Role-playing involves short, improvised performances resembling small plays or scenarios. It allows students to experience the feelings and perspectives of other groups and better understand the significance of specific issues. The activity should be brief, leaving ample time for follow-up discussions. After the activity, students should express their understanding and feelings to maximize learning results and eliminate potential negative impacts. Teachers should caution students not to become those like the negative characters and ensure participants return to reality after the activity. All students can provide feedback or ask questions. Other complex methods include mock trials, hypothetical interviews, simulation games, and hearings. Ninth, audiovisual aids. Information can be presented using slides, posters, or short videos. The materials should be concise and presented in outlines or tables whenever possible. This method should not replace discussions or direct student engagement.²²

The characteristics of these teaching methods are threefold. First, the United Nations emphasizes human rights education in primary and secondary schools, advocating its inclusion as a standalone and compulsory course within the education system whenever conditions permit. Second, the teaching methods are diverse, with innovative approaches such as role-playing, field visits, and community engagement playing a prominent role. Third, all the specific teaching methods emphasize and reflect student participation, collectively referred to as the participatory method. This approach is learner-centered, emphasizes experience and actions, encourages independent thinking, enhances student engagement, and advocates for critically viewing and analyzing issues.²³

3. Reference mechanisms in United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools

The reference mechanisms in the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools are mainly a series of normative and representative institutional mechanisms proposed by the United Nations for the education. These include:

First, the national-level implementation strategy mechanism for human rights education in primary and secondary schools. According to the first-phase action plan of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, it consists of four stages. Stage 1 involves analyzing the current situation of human rights education in the school system, namely addressing the question of “where are we.” Stage 2 focuses on setting priorities and developing a national implementation strategy, namely addressing the question of “where do we want to go and how.” Stage 3 involves implementing and monitoring activities, which means initiating the implementation of the planned

²² OHCHR, “ABC Teaching Human Rights: Practical Activities for Primary and Secondary Schools,” 25-29.

²³ Plan of Action for the Fifth Phase (2025-2029) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, Part V: Components, C. Training of educators, para. 26(e), 2024.

activities and monitoring the implementation using fixed milestones. Stage 4 is evaluating, namely addressing the question of “did we get there and with what success.” The evaluation results serve as a method of accountability and a means to learn and to improve a possible next phase of activities.²⁴ The national-level implementation strategy mechanism for human rights education in primary and secondary schools provides a reference framework for countries to execute human rights education at the national level, characterized by its macro and holistic nature.

Second, the initial status analysis mechanism for human rights education in primary and secondary schools. It can be regarded as the first step of the national-level implementation strategy mechanism and can provide a rapid and effective macro perspective to understand the current state of human rights education in primary and secondary schools within a country, including progress made, existing problems, and achievements. The responsibility for it lies with education administrative agencies, which may establish a dedicated working group to coordinate tasks such as data collection and analysis, report preparation, drafting and dissemination, and feedback gathering. The specific analysis can be conducted with reference to the five elements outlined in the World Programme for Human Rights Education, including policy, policy implementation, learning environment, teaching processes and tools, and the training and professional development of school staff. Each of these five elements is linked to a series of questions, and responses to them help ascertain the initial status of human rights education in primary and secondary schools. Based on this initial status, education policymakers can set action priorities as needed and, in light of identified needs, available resources, and existing challenges and opportunities, determine which goals are feasible. Using the results of the initial status analysis as a foundation, a practical and feasible national implementation strategy for human rights education in primary and secondary schools can be developed to align with the country’s specific circumstances.

Third, the self-evaluation mechanism for the implementation of human rights education strategies in primary and secondary schools. This mechanism applies to countries that have already formulated and implemented such strategies. The evaluation focuses on the specific progress of implementing human rights education at the national level, the execution of established goals, identifying which goals have been achieved and which remain unfulfilled, as well as the underlying reasons. This mechanism assists national education policymakers in setting future goals and priorities for human rights education in primary and secondary schools.

4. Human rights concepts in United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools

The human rights concepts in the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools reflect the underlying principles embedded in the series of relevant normative documents issued by and actions taken by the United Nations. These concepts highlight the kind of perspective on human rights that the United Nations aims to shape in primary and secondary school students and help explore the value pursuit and ultimate goal of human rights education under the United Nations framework. These concepts can be summarized into three main ideas, namely universal human rights, the best interests of the child, and the emphasis on holistic personal development.

First, the concept of universal human rights. This concept is reflected in three aspects. (1) The universality of the target groups for human rights education. The United Nations advocates for the implementation of human rights education in primary and secondary schools worldwide, to ensure that every primary and secondary school student, regardless of nationality, race, skin color, religion, or gender, receives human rights education. (2) The universality of educational content. The content of human rights education in primary and secondary schools, as proposed by the United Nations, includes fundamental human rights. The United Nations suggests that countries incorporate fundamental human rights as a key focus in implementing human rights education in primary and secondary schools. With the development of a series of international normative human rights documents, the United Nations’ definition of fundamental human rights has evolved from initially

²⁴ Plan of Action for the First Phase (2005-2009) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, Part III, B. Stages of the implementation strategy, para. 26, 2005.

focusing on the right to freedom to encompassing economic, social and cultural rights while centering on the right to freedom, and finally to a comprehensive emphasis on and treatment of all fundamental human rights and freedoms in terms of textual meaning. (3) The universality of educational value. The United Nations emphasizes that the value pursuit of human rights education in primary and secondary schools is to build a culture of human rights. The first-phase action plan of the World Programme for Human Rights Education defines the purpose of human rights education as “building a universal culture of human rights.” The *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training* explicitly states that human rights education and training can contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights. Building a universal culture of human rights represents the fundamental value pursuit of human rights education in primary and secondary schools at the United Nations level.

Second, the concept of the best interests of the child. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* explicitly states that “the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.”²⁵ This provision directly reflects the concept of the best interests of the child. The emphasis on children’s rights in human rights education under the United Nations framework is evident from the advocacy for human rights education in primary and secondary schools. Human rights education under the United Nations framework targets primary and secondary school students, imparting to them relevant knowledge of human rights, including children’s rights, in a manner that respects and protects children’s rights. Schools are required to create a student-friendly learning environment to enable children to develop a rational and comprehensive understanding of human rights, laying the foundation for building a universal culture of human rights. The proposal and implementation of human rights education in primary and secondary schools under the United Nations framework fully embody the human rights concept of “the best interests of the child.”

Third, the concept of emphasizing holistic personal development. A review of human rights education in primary and secondary schools under the United Nations framework, from educational content and methods to educational objectives, reveals that the ultimate focus is on the “individual.” The educational content emphasizes the cultivation of self-awareness and personal rights, the educational methods stress the participation of every individual, and the educational objectives focus on and pursue the holistic development of children’s physical and mental well-being, all of which reflect the United Nations framework’s human rights concept of “emphasizing holistic personal development” in primary and secondary education. *General Comment No. 1* adopted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child states that the purpose of children’s education is to “strengthen the child’s capacity to enjoy the full range of human rights;” the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* specifies that the purpose of children’s education is “the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;” the *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training* indicates that education shall be directed to “the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity.” These normative documents collectively demonstrate that the ultimate goal of education is centered on the “individual,” making the ultimate objective of human rights education in primary and secondary schools centered on each individual student. Emphasizing holistic personal development is the most fundamental human rights concept in the United Nations’ standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools.

C. Critical reflection on United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools

1. Reflection on educational content

The content of human rights education in primary and secondary schools depends on the educational objectives. Fundamentally, the purpose of human rights education for primary and secondary school students is to disseminate human rights knowledge and concepts, to enable students to learn and grow in an environment that respects human rights while fostering a correct perspective on human rights. Therefore, the determination of human rights education content should closely relate to the students’ social and cultural contexts, align with their physical, mental, and

²⁵ *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Art. 3, para. 1, 1989.

intellectual development, and be feasible in practice. Accordingly, for primary and secondary school students from different regions and cultural backgrounds, the content of human rights education should be tailored to local realities and formulated with reference to United Nations standards to create a specific human rights education syllabus.

Regarding educational content, the United Nations advocates a step-by-step approach, setting different human rights education content and objectives for children of various age groups to progressively achieve the goals. This gradual approach aligns with the physical and psychological development of children and is worth learning from. Moreover, the United Nations standards feature rich educational content, diverse objectives, and a strong problem-oriented focus. In each stage, specific human rights issues are addressed with corresponding educational content and objectives, demonstrating a strong problem-solving orientation. The aim is to cultivate students with self-respect, respect for others, social responsibility, citizenship and rights awareness, a systematic knowledge of human rights, and integration of human rights into their awareness and behavior, to lay a solid foundation for their future as well-rounded individuals. Compared to the educational content in the United Nations standards, China's current human rights education in primary and secondary schools remains in its infancy, and the educational content primarily focuses on responsibilities, obligations, and some rights, with a single educational objective that emphasizes cultivating a sense of responsibility and obligation. According to the *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China*, the goal of compulsory education is to lay the foundation for cultivating well-educated and self-disciplined builders of socialism with high ideals and moral integrity. In terms of setting educational content and objectives, China needs to make efforts to align more closely with United Nations standards. Particularly in areas such as fostering rights awareness, disseminating human rights knowledge, and integrating human rights into personal awareness and behavior, United Nations standards have much to offer.

However, there are also issues in the specific arrangements of educational content under the United Nations standards that require attention. For example, regarding the specific human rights knowledge content assigned to each age group, the United Nations standards emphasize cultivating self-awareness during early childhood, focusing on numerous fundamental issues within the human rights knowledge system during later childhood to form basic human rights values, elevating to international perspectives during adolescence with a focus on the global environment and world peace, and understanding the universal human rights framework during youth. These arrangements for human rights knowledge at each stage face the problems of excessively dense content and arguably too fast overall learning progress. In promoting and implementing human rights education in primary and secondary schools, each country must consider the physical and mental development of its children while taking into account its economic, political, cultural, and social contexts, as well as religious beliefs, and historical traditions, and then develops a comprehensive and feasible human rights education syllabus. Only in this way can primary and secondary human rights education be effectively implemented at the national level.

2. Reflection on educational methods

Regarding educational methods in the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools, the standards advocate incorporating human rights education as a separate subject into the primary and secondary education system and making it a compulsory course whenever possible. However, how human rights education is integrated and implemented in the primary and secondary education system of different countries largely depends on the actual circumstances of their education system.

Taking China as an example, currently, human rights education in primary and secondary schools is not launched separately but is incorporated into the cultivation of core socialist values. In primary and lower secondary schools, it is integrated through morality and rule of law courses, while in regular upper secondary schools, it is included in ideological and political courses. This situation is attributable to various factors including politics, economics, culture, society, and history in China. Due to the relative lack of educational resources, there is still a certain emphasis on exam-oriented education in China's primary and secondary education, leading to a relatively heavy and

tightly structured education system. Directly establishing human rights education as a separate and compulsory course in the education system in China is currently not feasible. However, incorporating human rights education as a part of shaping core socialist values is undoubtedly important, as the core socialist values are significant guiding principle of China. The connotations of human rights education aimed at shaping a correct perspective on human rights among primary and secondary school students, overlaps significantly with the core socialist values. Thus, integrating human rights education in primary and secondary school into the process of shaping core socialist values is pragmatically feasible and can save costs. However, it is important to note that human rights education should not be completely overshadowed by the shaping of core socialist values, as it has its own uniqueness. The shaping of core socialist values, due to its multi-layered nature, diverse purposes, and government-driven characteristics, cannot completely merge with human rights education. Therefore, in designing teaching materials for morality and rule of law courses and ideological and political courses in Chinese primary and secondary schools, while closely focusing on shaping core socialist values, human rights education should be considered as a relatively independent whole, with attention paid to its uniqueness and systematic nature.

As for the specific teaching methods for human rights education in primary and secondary schools promoted at the United Nations level, they can generally be summarized as the participatory method. This approach is learner-centered, emphasizes experience and actions, and encourages students to genuinely engage in the learning process, to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. An overview of the teaching methods specifically listed in the United Nations standards shows that most are innovative teaching methods. For teachers in primary and secondary schools who are accustomed to traditional teaching methods in various countries, training will be necessary to proficiently and comfortably apply these innovative teaching methods. Additionally, the implementation of innovative teaching methods incurs higher costs, which should also be considered in the planning and implementation of specific human rights education strategies in primary and secondary schools.

3. Reflection on reference mechanisms

Regarding the reference mechanisms in the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools, this paper proposes three specific mechanisms: the national-level implementation strategy mechanism, the initial status analysis mechanism, and the self-evaluation mechanism. These three reference mechanisms provide a reference framework for countries to specifically formulate and implement national strategies for human rights education in primary and secondary schools. However, the problem is that when applied to specific countries, the situations are complex and variable. These three mechanisms only serve as general technical framework guidelines and cannot provide countries with specific and clear institutional strategies. When implementing human rights education in primary and secondary schools, countries should base their approaches on their actual conditions, refer to the relevant mechanisms mentioned in the United Nations standards, and formulate specific policies, to effectively promote human rights education in primary and secondary schools within their national contexts.

In addition, when comparing China's practices with the United Nations standards, it is important to note the attitude toward the government in the reference mechanisms for human rights education in primary and secondary schools. The three reference mechanisms mentioned in the United Nations standards all require the government to play an important role in the development, implementation, supervision, and evaluation of human rights education in primary and secondary schools. At the same time, they emphasize the role of non-governmental entities such as NGOs and focus on guarding against and monitoring the government, such as reviewing policy consistency and assessing the legality of actions taken by educational authorities. In contrast, in China, the obligated entities for human rights education in primary and secondary schools are primarily represented by the government, with non-governmental entities such as NGOs playing a minimal role. In China, the government is seen as the main force, and arguably the only force, in promoting human rights education in primary and secondary schools. At the international level, however, there is an emphasis on guarding against the government. This clear difference is related to China's

cultural, historical, and political systems, among other reasons. Nevertheless, in practice, as the representative of the state, the government controls vast public power. Therefore, in the implementation of human rights education in primary and secondary schools, it is necessary to guard against abuses of power, and negligence. Multi-entity participation should be encouraged, to actively leverage the roles of schools, communities, families, NGOs, and other non-governmental entities, while paying attention to the supervision on the government.

4. Reflection on human rights concepts

Regarding the human rights concepts in the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools, firstly, the concept of the best interests of the child emphasizing the protection of children's rights is in line with the spirit and ultimate goals of implementing human rights education in primary and secondary schools, in its emphasis on being legal, reasonable, and justified. China's *Constitution*, the *Law on the Protection of Minors*, and the *Compulsory Education Law* also stipulate and emphasize the protection of children's rights. Notably, countries should pursue the protection of children's rights to the best of their ability, given their domestic circumstances.

Second, the universality of target groups (i.e., every primary and secondary school student has the right to receive human rights education) and the universality of value pursuit (i.e., constructing a universal culture of human rights) corresponding to the concept of universal human rights are commendable. However, caution is needed regarding the universality of educational content. From a historical perspective, the emergence and development of human rights concepts have been guided by Europe and the United States, with a tendency towards freedom-centered ideology intertwined with individualism deeply rooted in their "gene." From a normative perspective, the evolution of international documents concerning human rights show a shift from focusing on the freedom-centered ideology dominated by the West to encompassing economic, social and cultural rights while centering on the right to freedom, and further expanding to a comprehensive integrated development of the right to freedom, economic, social and cultural rights, and the right to development. In practice, due to the strong dominance of Western countries, the freedom-centered ideology still prevails in the international society; however, at least in terms of normative texts, the United Nations shows a comprehensive approach to all types of human rights, emphasizing their universal nature. This aspect of universality in content is commendable. Nevertheless, from a practical dimension, the international practice presents characteristics of freedom-centered ideology and cultural dominance from Europe and the United States, with an excessive focus on the "individual," and human rights can easily be exploited as a means to achieve political aims. An examination of evaluations of human rights by some internationally influential human rights-related NGOs²⁶ reveals that during evaluations of human rights conditions, there is still a tendency to prioritize a freedom-centered perspective on human rights, often neglecting or disregarding economic, social and cultural rights, and the right to development. The concrete practice of international human rights protection and remedies indicates that when serious human rights violations occur in a country, international intervention and remedies can be meaningful and effective; however, this process can easily be manipulated, becoming a means for powerful nations to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries to achieve political purposes. Therefore, vigilance is required regarding the concept of universal human rights, as human rights issues are closely linked to the specific cultural traditions and development conditions of a nation or ethnicity in terms of ideology, systems, and practices. Universal human rights should not be pushed to extremes.²⁷ Human rights education in primary and secondary schools should respect the universality of human rights while also acknowledging their particularities as manifested in

²⁶ The Amnesty International Report 2022; Human Rights Watch World Report 2022; Freedom House: Freedom in the World 2022. The benchmarks, subjects, sources of information, and procedures for human rights evaluation reflect, from a practical perspective, the prevailing human rights concepts currently influential at the international level.

²⁷ Qi Yanping, *Human Rights and Rule of Law* (Jinan: Shandong People's Publishing House, 2003), 37.

different cultures and regions; it should maintain a reasonable distance between human rights and politics.

Third, the concept of emphasizing holistic personal development of “individuals” is reasonable and justifiable to some extent, but caution must be exercised not to overemphasize the “individual” while neglecting “the collective.” This tendency originates from Western individualism and liberalism, while socialist countries such as China stress collectivism and the public interests of the state and society. In human rights education in primary and secondary schools, it is necessary to consider both “individuals” and “the collective,” teaching students to correctly recognize the relationship between individuals and collectives. Collective human rights safeguard individual human rights, while individual human rights serve as the foundation and ultimate goal of collective human rights; human rights exist for the holistic development of everyone and for a better life for humanity.

D. Legal effectiveness of United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools

Documents such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training*, *United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education*, *World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005-ongoing)*, *Plan of Action for the First Phase (2005-2009) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education*, *Plan of Action for the Fourth Phase (2020-2024) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education*, *Plan of Action for the Fifth Phase (2025-2029) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education*, and *ABC – Teaching Human Rights* serve as the basis and sources for constructing the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools. Although the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* have legally binding force, they only stipulate the necessity of implementing human rights education in primary and secondary schools, without specifying how. The four aspects of the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools are mainly derived from documents adopted by United Nations General Assembly resolutions and brochures issued by the OHCHR. These texts do not possess legally binding force but instead have general reference and advisory value. Therefore, the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools do not have legal force but are advisory in nature, serving as a reference standard for countries to develop and implement human rights education within their own domestic contexts.

III. The “Chinese Approach” to Human Rights Education in Primary and Secondary Schools

Given China’s unique characteristics, the United Nations standards for human rights education in primary and secondary schools cannot be directly and fully applied to China. This paper aims to propose a scientifically sound and reasonable “Chinese Approach” to human rights education in primary and secondary schools, based on China’s current situation and with reference to the United Nations standards.

A. Legislation: providing a clear legal basis for human rights education in primary and secondary schools

The *Plan of Action for the Fifth Phase (2025-2029) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education* first emphasizes in the section on policies and related implementation measures that “States should develop, adopt, implement and monitor policies fostering human rights education for children and young people... With regard to formal education, develop policies and legislation in line with the national contexts, to ensure the inclusion of human rights and human rights education.”²⁸ Currently, China lacks clear legal provisions specifically targeting human rights education in primary and secondary schools. Using a purposive interpretation approach, the following provisions can be extended and linked to human rights education in primary and

²⁸ Plan of Action for the Fifth Phase (2025-2029) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, Part V. Components, A. Policies and related implementation measures, para. 20(a), 2024.

secondary schools: Articles 33, 46 and 24 of the *Constitution*; Articles 5, 6, 7 and 9 of the *Education Law*; and Articles 3 and 34 of the *Compulsory Education Law*. In addition, the regulations on legal publicity and education and social science promotion formulated by various regions in China explicitly require the dissemination of knowledge about the *Constitution*, laws, and regulations through various forms. However, objectively speaking, China currently lacks clear legal provisions specifically addressing human rights education in primary and secondary schools. Clear legal provisions are a mandatory guarantee for the smooth implementation of human rights education in primary and secondary schools nationwide, and they are important and indispensable.

The recommendations are as follows. First, at the constitutional level, the phrase “conduct human rights education” could be incorporated into China’s *Constitution* through amendments. The provisions should not be overly detailed — it is sufficient to mention that measures should be taken to gradually promote human rights education in various fields nationwide according to specific circumstances. The content including specific areas, types, and requirements of human rights education can be detailed in laws, administrative regulations, government rules, and other normative documents. Human rights education in primary and secondary schools is naturally included within the scope of human rights education. Second, at the legal level, the *Education Law* could explicitly mention the requirement to conduct human rights education in all education systems nationwide. Provisions for implementing human rights education in primary and secondary schools could be incorporated into the *Compulsory Education Law*; or, separate legislation could be enacted specifically. Currently, the former option is more feasible. Third, at the level of administrative regulations and departmental rules, the State Council of China could formulate specialized administrative regulations for human rights education in primary and secondary schools, clearly stipulating the objectives for implementing it nationwide and developing supporting implementation rules. The Ministry of Education of China, as the national administrative body for education, could, based on the *Constitution*, the *Education Law*, the *Compulsory Education Law*, and relevant administrative regulations, formulate departmental rules for human rights education in primary and secondary schools, which should explicitly require the inclusion of human rights education content in the national education system, mandate that all primary and secondary schools take action to incorporate human rights education into their teaching syllabuses and tasks, and use the implementation of human rights education in primary and secondary schools as an important indicator for school performance evaluation and assessment. Finally, at the level of local regulations and local government rules, it is recommended that local governments and education administrative departments, based on their actual local conditions and in accordance with the *Constitution*, the *Education Law*, the *Compulsory Education Law*, and relevant administrative regulations and departmental rules, formulate local regulations and local government rules that suit their local circumstances to specifically regulate human rights education in primary and secondary schools.

In April 2025, the *2025 Legislative Work Plan of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress* explicitly proposed focusing on the efforts to turn China into a country with a strong socialist culture by enacting the *Law on the Publicity and Education Regarding the Rule of Law*. This presents an opportunity to initially incorporate human rights education into the *Law on the Publicity and Education Regarding the Rule of Law*. However, it is important to note that rule of law education and human rights education are not entirely the same. While they overlap in content, their objectives are not completely aligned. When conditions are ripe, further clarification and specification regarding the implementation of human rights education in primary and secondary schools should be achieved through administrative regulations, departmental rules, or local regulations. Once the legislative timing is appropriate, the aforementioned systematic legislative plan — spanning from constitutional amendments, the *Education Law*, the *Compulsory Education Law*, relevant administrative regulations, departmental rules, local regulations, and local government rules — can be gradually realized.

B. Administration: setting clear goals and providing action guidelines for human rights education in primary and secondary schools

In addition to normative legal documents such as the *Constitution*, laws, regulations, and rules, which have mandatory legal force, national action plans, action guidelines, education policies, and compulsory education curriculum standards also play a crucial role in the implementation of human rights education in primary and secondary schools in China. Since 2009, the State Council Information Office of China has issued four national human rights action plans. While human rights education is in a separate chapter, its content is brief. Human rights education in primary and secondary schools only constitutes a small portion of human rights education, and the content is general and abstract. Despite their certain guiding significance, the action plans lack practical reference value. In 2016, the Ministry of Education issued the *Outline of Rule of Law Education for Youth* to implement the requirements of the fourth plenary session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) that “the rule of law education is incorporated into the national education system, starting from young people, and the rule of law knowledge courses are set up in primary and secondary schools.” The goal is to systematically plan and scientifically integrate the rule of law education for youth into the national education system. The rule of law education and human rights education are closely related, but the two are not identical. In addition, the Ministry of Education has also formulated the *Morality and Rule of Law Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)*, which stipulates the nature, philosophy, objectives, content, and implementation of the “morality and rule of law” curriculum in compulsory education. Currently, human rights education in primary and secondary schools in China is conducted primarily through morality and rule of law courses and ideological and political courses, which tend to be fragmented, unscientific planning, and unsystematic.

This thesis thus puts forth the following recommendations. First, in light of the current situation in which human rights education in primary and secondary schools in China is primarily implemented through “morality and rule of law” courses and ideological and political courses, the standards for these courses should be revised and human rights education should be consciously and systematically incorporated via scientific planning and systematic setting, to ensure that primary and secondary school students learn about human rights and develop a correct perspective on them in an environment that respects and protects human rights. Second, the State Council could issue a national action plan specifically for human rights education in primary and secondary schools, to clearly define the objectives of human rights education. The State Council or its education administrative departments could also formulate national action guidelines based on relevant laws and the national action plan, taking into account China’s actual circumstances, to provide concrete and feasible action guidelines for the implementation of the national action plan for human rights education in primary and secondary schools. (1) The development of the action plan and action guidelines must be grounded in China’s current situation. Therefore, prior to formulation, a nationwide benchmark survey should be conducted to clarify the current status of human rights education in primary and secondary schools in China and the problems it faces. Based on the status quo of human rights education in primary and secondary schools and the urgency of these problems, priorities for action should be determined, and a scientific action plan should be formulated. (2) The action guidelines should be centered around the action plan, focusing on the goals set out therein. It should expand upon and detail the steps and strategies outlined in the phased and cycled sections of the action plan, to ensure their feasibility and practicality for reference by all stakeholders. (3) Due to the uneven development of primary and secondary education system in China, it is impossible to implement human rights education in primary and secondary schools uniformly and simultaneously across all regions. Instead, by dividing different regions based on their economic development and the results of the national benchmark survey on human rights education in primary and secondary schools, trial programs should be conducted in pilot areas first before gradually rolling them out nationwide.

C. Resource guarantee: providing sufficient resources support for human rights education in primary and secondary schools

First, the government or education administrative departments should collaborate with relevant agencies to establish a human rights education resource website for primary and secondary schools,

to collect and produce related materials and information, integrate them, and make them available to the public and educators through the resource website for use by schools, teachers, and students. For example, the education department of the Taiwan region (China) established a human rights education information website in 2001, with different versions targeting different audiences, including children, youth, and adults. Furthermore, since 2003, it has regularly published a human rights education e-newsletter. In 2003, the Human Rights Education Information and Resource Center website was established, to provide diverse resources related to human rights education, including human rights information, human rights lesson plans designed by human rights teachers, and case-based teaching.²⁹ There is currently no such website in the Chinese mainland. It is recommended that a temporary human rights education resource center be established under the Ministry of Education to oversee the development and construction of the website. Once the website is fully developed and operationally standardized, management could be transferred to a specialized human rights organization, such as the China Society for Human Rights Studies. The human rights education website should have different sections based on specific areas. The human rights education in primary and secondary school should be one of several basic categories and it should include the following information: United Nations-level, international, and domestic laws, regulations, policies, guidelines, and documents related to human rights education in primary and secondary school; teaching materials and courseware developed and produced by specialized human rights education experts; training information on human rights education for primary and secondary school teachers and other staff, such as training arrangements, curriculum content and assessment schedules; and extracurricular activities and reading pamphlets for primary and secondary school students. While providing information and resources, the website may also serve as a platform for sharing experiences. Primary and secondary school teachers and other staff can register an account, log in, and post their own human rights education teaching experiences and questions on it for discussion. It is recommended that the human rights education in primary and secondary schools also be divided into different versions: student version, faculty version, and education administrator version. Each version may adopt a different design style and focus on relevant content tailored to its target groups.

Second, the Ministry of Education should provide relevant textbooks and teaching assistance materials on human rights education in primary and secondary schools. At first, it should organize human rights experts and education specialists to review the current textbooks in primary and secondary school curricula to identify any content that contradicts the principle of respecting and protecting human rights. If so, revisions should be made to ensure consistency. Then, it should also organize human rights education experts to develop and compile new textbooks and teaching assistance materials that systematically incorporate human rights education content, taking into account the physical and mental development and learning abilities of primary and secondary school students of different ages. These new materials will serve as model textbooks for pilot programs nationwide and, through continuous revision and improvement, gradually rolled out nationwide.

Third, resources should be provided for teachers to support human rights education in primary and secondary schools. Human rights education should not only be integrated into the school curriculum but also permeate the teaching of all school subjects and all aspects of school life. To ensure the effective implementation of human rights education, teacher training and appropriate facilities are necessary.³⁰ The faculty shortage is a major obstacle to the development of human rights education in primary and secondary schools in China. Currently, teachers in primary and secondary schools generally lack training in human rights education. Therefore, the following measures are recommended. Firstly, education administrative departments should conduct surveys and statistics on the current student-teacher ratio in primary and secondary schools across the country. In areas with faculty shortage, appropriate teaching positions should be allocated to ensure

²⁹ Zhang Xuelian, *Research on Human Rights Education in China* (Nanjing: Southeast University Press, 2012), 139-140.

³⁰ Peter Leuprecht, "The Case of Human Rights Education," *Forum (Strasbourg: Council of Europe)* 2 (1986): 4.

that the student-teacher ratio is within a reasonable range, ultimately achieving sufficient teacher resources in the general sense. Secondly, pre-service and in-service training on human rights education should be provided for primary and secondary school teachers. Participants must pass relevant assessments before they can be employed or continue teaching. Third, once teacher training in human rights education is formally standardized, it can be made a prerequisite for obtaining a teacher certification to ensure the human rights literacy of primary and secondary school teachers. Finally, teachers of morality and rule of law courses and ideological and political courses should be given specialized and in-depth training in human rights education, and a regular training and assessment system for human rights education in primary and secondary school should be established to ensure the eligibility and level of the main educators.

Fourth, the government should provide sufficient financial support for human rights education in primary and secondary schools. Expenditure on human rights education should be included in the national government budget, with the recipients, projects, and funding criteria clearly specified in regulatory documents. In financial support efforts, attention should be paid to ensuring fairness and equality across the country, while also providing appropriate support for underdeveloped regions. Furthermore, the division of financial support responsibilities for human rights education in primary and secondary schools should be clarified between the central and local governments to prevent buck-passing between the central and local governments, or resistance or protectionism of local governments.

D. Curriculum design: human rights education courses suitable for Chinese primary and secondary school students

The curriculum design for human rights education in primary and secondary schools includes multiple aspects, such as course type, course nature, educational content, and teaching methods. First, regarding course type, instead of establishing a separate course on human rights education, human rights education is primarily integrated into the morality and rule of law courses and ideological and political courses for primary and secondary school students. At the same time, it is necessary to emphasize that all courses should follow the principle of respecting and protecting human rights. Given the current complex educational objectives, limited educational resources, and intense pressure from entrance exams and school selection, the primary and secondary education in China is predominantly exam-oriented. This context is unlikely to be fundamentally changed in the near run. Chinese primary and secondary school students are already faced with heavy academic burdens, and their course schedules are tightly packed, making the establishment of a separate human rights education course impractical. In China's curriculum system, the courses most closely related to human rights education are morality and rule of law courses and ideological and political courses. Currently, the morality and rule of law textbooks used in primary and lower secondary schools include content related to human rights education, such as fraternity, freedom, equality, respect, non-discrimination, and specific rights. However, there is no scientific and systematic planning. Similarly, the ideological and political courses in regular upper secondary schools include textbooks such as *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, Economics and Society, Politics and Rule of Law, Contemporary International Politics and Economy, and Law and Life*, which cover topics such as China's human rights development history, social security systems, the CPC's concept of exercising governance for the people, China's cooperation with the United Nations on human rights issues, human rights conventions adopted by China, and civil legal rights. However, they also suffer from issues such as a lack of clear systematic planning, repetitive content, and the omission of important topics. By scientifically and rationally planning and designing the content of human rights education in primary and secondary schools, taking consideration of children's physical and mental development patterns, and systematically integrating it into morality and rule of law courses and ideological and political courses, the human rights education in Chinese primary and secondary schools can be effectively implemented.

Second, regarding course nature, currently, morality and rule of law courses and ideological and political courses are compulsory courses in China's primary and secondary school curriculum system, with exams generally conducted in an open-book format. It is recommended to incorporate

human rights education content into these courses while maintaining their current status as compulsory courses.

Finally, regarding course content, drawing on the United Nations standards for a “step-by-step approach,” specific course content should be designed for each grade level, taking into account the physical and mental development patterns of students and the educational objectives of Chinese primary and secondary schools. Based on the four-stage theory of child educational psychology³¹, combined with China’s practices and in view of the United Nations standards, the following suggestions are made for specific grade-level human rights education content and teaching methods:

Table 2: Overview of Human Rights Education Content in Primary and Secondary Schools in China

Grade and Age Group	Educational Objectives	Educational Content	Teaching Methods
Pre-school and Lower Primary Grades (Ages 3-8)	Respect for self; Respect for others; Equality; Fraternity; Non-discrimination; Rule-following	Self-respect and self-love, respect for others; Equality and non-discrimination (based on gender, race, ethnicity, family background, etc.); Solidarity and friendship; Avoiding harming others (physically and emotionally)	Discussion of issues; Role-playing/scenario simulations; Audiovisual aids; Teacher-led instruction
Upper Primary Grades (Ages 9-11)	Citizenship; Specific rights and obligations; Freedom; Fairness; Justice; Environmental protection	Content on certain children’s rights (right to education, right to rest, right to privacy, freedom of speech, right to life and health); Human rights violations in daily life; Freedom; Fairness and justice; Government; Rule of law; Obligations and responsibilities; Education on environment and climate change	Discussion of issues; Role-playing; Field visits/community engagement; Case studies; Role-playing/scenario simulations; Audiovisual aids; Teacher-led instruction

³¹ According to the theory of child educational psychology, children’s cognitive and intellectual development can be divided into four stages, namely the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage, and the formal operational stage. The characteristics of children’s cognitive development is stage-specific, with each stage having their unique structure; the emergence of stages follows a sequence from lower to higher levels. Cultural factors may accelerate or delay the cognitive development but cannot alter the developmental sequence. See Jean Piaget, *Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child*, translated by Fu Tongxian (Wuhan: Changjiang Juvenile and Children’s Publishing House, 2014), 15.

Grade and Age Group	Educational Objectives	Educational Content	Teaching Methods
Lower Secondary School (Ages 12-14)	Gender equality; Legal system; Civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights, and the right to development; Peace; History of human rights (elementary)	Sexuality education; Civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights, and the right to development; International human rights conventions or declarations; Domestic legal systems regarding the rights of minors (such as the <i>Law on the Protection of Minors</i>); United Nations, government and non-governmental human rights organizations; History and stories about human rights;	Brainstorming; Discussion of issues; Case studies; Role playing/scenario simulations; Field visits/community engagement; Interviews; Audiovisual aids; Teacher-led instruction
Upper Secondary School (Ages 15-17)	Socialist human rights concepts; History of human rights (advanced); Digital human rights; Integration of human rights into personal awareness and behavior	Content and principles of socialist human rights with Chinese characteristics; History and evolution of human rights; Digital technology and human rights protection	Brainstorming; Discussion of issues; Case studies; Role-playing/scenario simulations; Field visits/community engagement; Interviews; Speeches; Audiovisual aids; Teacher-led instruction

E. Evaluation mechanism: constructing a variety of evaluation mechanisms for human rights education in primary and secondary schools

Currently, China lacks a dedicated evaluation mechanism for human rights education in primary and secondary schools. It is recommended to establish a variety of evaluation mechanisms through legislation, with clear procedural requirements and output specifications for each type of evaluation. Evaluation reports should be widely disseminated through publications, websites, and other channels. The results could be used as a critical basis for rewarding or penalizing education administrative departments and schools.

First, baseline evaluation of human rights education in primary and secondary schools. The evaluation timing is before the formal implementation of human rights education. The purpose is to understand the status of human rights education in primary and secondary schools in its spontaneous state. Specifically, the evaluation should include relevant laws, regulations, and policies issued by the state; learning environments and atmospheres in schools; content and practical effectiveness of human rights education in the curriculum systems; human rights literacy among teachers; rights awareness among students; respect for and protection of students' human rights during teaching, including any violations and their severity. The evaluation results should form the basis for formulating China's national action plan for human rights education in primary and secondary schools.

Second, periodic evaluation of human rights education implementation in primary and secondary schools. The evaluation timing is after the formal implementation of human rights

education strategies. Conducted every five years, it aims to regularly measure progress, monitor the achievement of policy goals, and assist the government and education administrative departments in setting future priorities and specific objectives. This evaluation enables effective monitoring of implementation, timely identification of issues, and prompt corrective measures. It can draw on the United Nations' self-evaluation framework for human rights education strategies, covering the following five areas: policy evaluation for human rights education; evaluation of policy implementation; learning environment assessment in schools; evaluation of teaching processes and tools; evaluation of training and professional development for school staff.

Third, ad hoc evaluation of human rights education implementation in primary and secondary schools. This evaluation applies to situations where the state has already taken measures to implement human rights education. The purpose is to enable real-time monitoring and supervision of the status of human rights education. The method is flexible and unannounced, including random sampling of schools in certain regions and selective evaluation of specific factors. The unpredictability of evaluation timing, targets, and content helps prevent "preparation bias" often accompanying periodic evaluations, thereby providing a more accurate reflection of actual conditions.

IV. Conclusion

Human rights education for youth is increasingly recognized as a strategic tool to prevent and address global challenges. Against the backdrop of rising juvenile delinquency and crimes against minors in China, the significance of human rights education in primary and secondary schools has become more prominent. Systematic, comprehensive, and scientific human rights education for primary and secondary students is essential to foster their healthy and happy growth in an environment that respects and protects human rights, equipping them with knowledge of their rights, obligations and responsibilities, and a correct perspective on human rights. Guided by the principle of *parens patriae*, the state, as the guardian of minors, should assume primary responsibility for promoting and guiding human rights education in primary and secondary schools. It can adopt diverse means, including legislative, administrative, judicial, social, and digital approaches, to ensure the effective implementation and advancement of human rights education in primary and secondary schools.

(Translated by *QIAN Chuijun*)