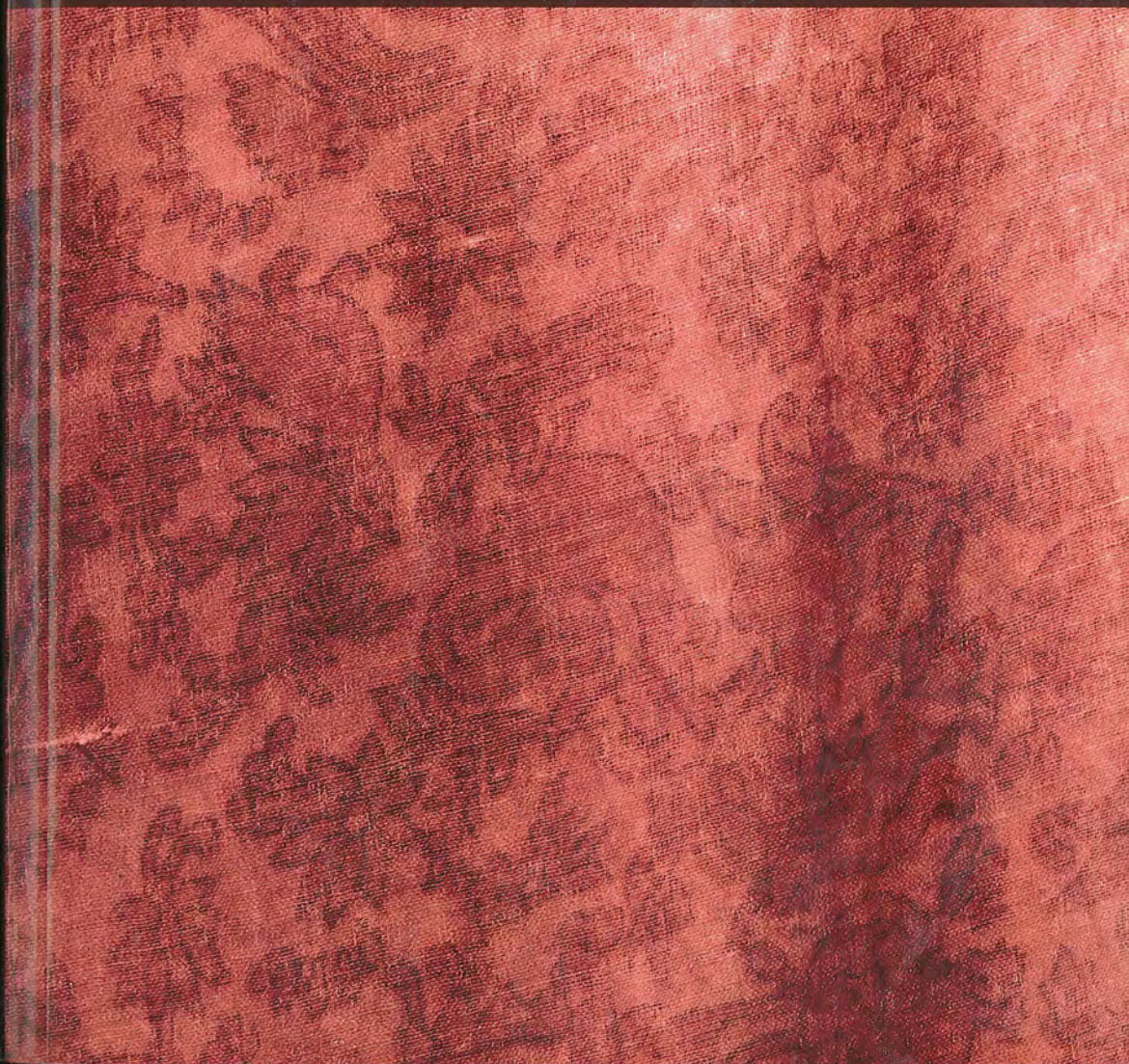


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Sarah Joseph is Professor of Law and Director of Human Rights Law at Monash University and Lecturer and Deputy Director of the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

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Thus, the term HRE, although widely used, lacks a clear definition that is universally accepted. The relative newness of HRE as a discipline may be a contributing factor to the lack of consensus regarding what it means, and over time a more harmonious approach to what HRE entails may emerge. But, until that happens, one must ask: what are the consequences of this wide disparity in understanding of what HRE is? There are several effects. First, it provides greater freedom for those working in the field; with no widely endorsed mandate about what HRE is, organisations and individuals have extreme latitude to teach whatever they want and call it HRE. They are not constrained by some prescriptive definition.

The second consequence of the lack of a single definition of HRE is that it makes evaluation problematic. With so many different understandings of HRE it is difficult for a researcher to assess what genuine human rights education activities are taking place. Some teachers may not identify their work as HRE, and therefore choose not to participate in a study of HRE, while others may consider their work to be HRE when it does not actually fit within the definition employed by the researcher.

Finally, this lack of a common understanding of what HRE is should be of concern to the UN, which for the last ten years has made HRE one of its priorities, as evidenced by the proclamation of the Decade for Human Rights Education and the World Programme for Human Rights Education. It has devoted considerable resources to advocating HRE, and yet there remains significant confusion and misunderstanding about what HRE entails. The absence of a common understanding should also be of concern to governments, if only because their inactivity in this area is creating opportunities for NGOs to fill the void with their own more radical definitions of HRE.

This chapter has demonstrated that the term 'human rights education' is more complex than one might initially think, and open to numerous different interpretations. While the UN has repeatedly provided consistent definitions of HRE (in Article 29(1) CROC, and as part of the Decade for HRE and the World Programme for HRE), these definitions do not reflect how HRE is understood by others including governments, NGOs and teachers, who all have varied opinions about what constitutes HRE. Until such time as the UN is able to garner more widespread support for its definition of HRE, human rights education will remain a slogan in search of a definition.

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