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EDITORIAL

Addressing the ‘why’, ‘what’ and ‘how’ of human rights education

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As Human Rights Education Review progresses into its second year, we publish four diverse empirical studies, with two papers examining the key question: why teach for human rights? Most commonly, initial answers to this question include ‘because we wish to prevent human rights violations’; ‘because we want to work towards a just and peaceful world’; and ‘we need to protect the vulnerable’. In the first paper in this volume, Knut Vesterdal takes the case of Norway and invites his readers to consider the question from the perspective of the state. By implication, he is encouraging them to reflect more broadly on why nation-states elect to promote education and awareness of human rights, and to consider which rights they emphasise and which they neglect. This focus on the underlying purposes of state-led, human rights education (HRE) is important for several reasons. First and foremost, the nation-state is a duty-bearer, responsible for guaranteeing our rights. This is a fundamental aspect of the international human rights framework. The nation-state, both through the creation of a rights-supporting socio-political climate, and through the development of agencies and system of laws and law enforcement, has an obligation to guarantee and uphold the rights of all who reside within its borders. The nation-state, through its various agencies, acts as duty-bearer, responsible for guaranteeing our rights. Yet, at the same time, it is frequently the nation-state that denies or violates these same rights. This creates tensions for the nation-state, with dissenting citizens making the task of governance more complex, even while they may be strengthening democratic practices. Human rights educators need to consider: what encourages a nation-state to engage in human rights education, other than the expectation it will uphold both its moral and its binding obligations? Are there other drivers or incentives when a state engages in, or promotes, HRE? And how does state-led HRE differ from that of non-governmental actors?

In his paper, Vesterdal suggests that ‘HRE is an essential component in constructing the image of a human rights-friendly Norwegian identity ... intended not only to develop human rights-friendly communities, but also to produce national identity, as well as to gain access to negotiating tables in international relations’. Through his analysis of Norwegian education policy documents, he makes the case that HRE is an element of ‘state branding’ in the international arena.

Continuing the exploration of HRE in Norway, Beate Goldschmidt-Gjerløw looks at the ‘why’ of child rights education from a different angle, that of enabling students to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour and thereby reduce the risk of child sexual abuse, including both adult sexual exploitation of children and rape among peers. Despite the official emphasis given to tackling

child sexual abuse through education, Gjerløw's study finds that social science teachers, who are tasked with implementing policy, avoid the topic of sexual abuse - in part because they fear re-traumatising victims of abuse, but more particularly because of a strong cultural taboo. This taboo serves as an obstacle for talking about the sexual abuse that has taken place and is thus an obstacle to child rights education. Arguing that 'silence does no-one any favours' and recognising that teachers need support in addressing this aspect of the curriculum, Gjerløw proposes strategies for teachers in challenging the cultural taboo, moving beyond the use of textbooks to draw on literary fiction. She concludes that knowledge about rights and about what constitutes abuse is important but insufficient. A cultural change requires a pedagogical approach that promotes empathy. Effectively, the paper recognises that teachers need to reconsider both the 'why' and the 'how' of child rights education, in order to fulfil their responsibilities to students. Human rights education from this perspective is about challenging and addressing injustice, including sexual injustice. As Gjerløw argues: 'Sexual injustice cannot be silenced in educational institutions if we are to foster healthy, respectful, and democratic citizens who protect not only their own human worth and human rights, but also those of others'.

Lotta Brantefors, in her study of teaching and learning in two Swedish classrooms, focuses on the 'what' of HRE, drawing on the theoretical lens of the Didaktik tradition. She is interested in how the teachers in her study interpret official curriculum guidelines and select specific curriculum knowledge or content. Equally, she is interested in students' understandings of what they are learning. She finds that while teaching content and students' learning outcomes are generally well-aligned, there is a conflation of HRE with democracy education, and an emphasis on participation rights. She observes that while 'there is a strong connection between human rights and fundamental democratic values, the relationship between the two is not clear to the teachers or the pupils'. This impacts on the 'what' of HRE and on curriculum content. A conceptual conflation between human rights and democracy, impacting on education, has also been observed in Norway (Osler, 2016b) where children's participation rights may be prioritized over other elements of HRE. The teachers in Brantefors' study see HRE as being about learning to live together, acting or interacting. Rights denials or violations are largely portrayed, by teachers and students, as happening to other people elsewhere. Students are taught about the disadvantaged life conditions of others. Contextualising her findings, Brantefors observes that: 'transformative and critical ideas about human rights education are practically absent in Sweden'.

The final paper in this volume, authored by Fiona McGaughey, Lisa Hartley, Susan Banki, Paul Duffil, Matthew Stubbs, Phil Orchard, Simon Rice, Laurie Berg and Paghona Peggy Kerdo, is concerned with pedagogy, the 'how' of HRE. The research team examines how simulations in vocationally-focused courses in higher education may enhance human rights skills development. The team developed 'a range of social justice simulations across seven Australian universities and surveyed students to ascertain whether they perceived that specific skill development had been achieved'. The aim of the study was to develop experiential learning processes that enable both deep learning and enhanced skills, bridging the 'learning-doing' gap. Students report on their growing awareness of a complex nature of human rights cases, and the wide range of actors involved, with a number reporting a greater understanding of how to engage with such actors through using lobbying, negotiation and other communication skills. Several recognised the benefits of learning from each other,

and some were inspired to look to a career in social justice, while others learned to look more critically at the human rights situation in Australia. Students also valued the confidence they gained in practising previously acquired skills, recognising that the skills were applicable in a wide range of contexts. It would seem that participating in this research project, which required considerable reflexivity on the part of students, may itself have enhanced student learning.

In Volume 1(1) of *HRER*, Walter Parker (2018, p.5) argued that ‘the HRE curriculum remains scattered, ill-defined, and too variable to be robust’ and that ‘curriculum development is what HRE requires right now if it is to move forward to institutional stability in schools’. Parker is concerned primarily with the ‘what’ of HRE and, while he acknowledges political barriers to its successful implementation in the United States, he is also concerned about what he perceives as a broader lack of consensus among HRE advocates as to its meaning.

In the Nordic region the politics of HRE is somewhat different from that in the United States, as Vesterdal makes clear in this volume. Nevertheless, while respect for human rights is closely linked to national identity, HRE may still, in many cases, have a weak status in schools (Decara, 2013; Osler, 2016a; Vesterdal 2016). This suggests that the relationship between the ‘why’ of HRE and curriculum knowledge, what is taught or not taught in schools, may be more complex than is sometimes acknowledged.

Perhaps a key learning outcome or ‘why’ of HRE is students’ development of a critical understanding of their own (local or national) context, as illustrated by McGaughey and her colleagues in this volume. While the programme developed by McGaughey’s team was for students in tertiary/higher education, such a critical understanding is equally important for younger students or they risk developing a sense of superiority or complacency over others.

These papers highlight a variety of meanings and purposes attached to HRE. Nevertheless, the ‘why’, ‘what’ and ‘how’ of HRE are closely interconnected, and by bringing these four papers together in this volume, I hope that *HRER* may offer fresh insights into their relationship, thereby strengthening HRE scholarship.

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