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## EDITORIAL

# Human rights education, Covid19 and the politics of hope

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This volume of *Human Rights Education Review* has been edited while living under lockdown, with Europe for many weeks at the epicentre of the Coronavirus pandemic. As members of the editorial team responded to the new challenges we (and many of our readers) faced, such as balancing home working with home schooling, indefinite separation from friends and family members, and having to search for basic foodstuffs, we have had time to reflect on many of the rights and freedoms we often take for granted. Our editorial meetings have been more frequent, and topics of conversation have extended beyond the journal to include discussion of the ways various governments have responded to the crisis, and, in some cases, taken advantage of the emergency to strengthen their own powers. This is an important moment to reflect on the aims and approaches in educating for human rights.

As we put this volume together, the *Black Lives Matter* protests are catching the attention of the world's media. Protests were sparked by video footage of the death of George Floyd, an African American, who was arrested and handcuffed, before being held to the ground by a White police officer kneeling on his neck. Floyd's death in Minneapolis, Minnesota on 25 May 2020 has led to protests across the US and the rest of the world against police brutality and structural racism. These protests, in large part by young people, not only express solidarity with African American citizens but are also part of a wider call for racial justice across nations and for concrete steps to overcome centuries-old inequalities that persist into the present.

These inequalities have been exacerbated and illustrated by racial disparities in the death toll of the pandemic: the coronavirus has killed Black and Latino people in New York at twice the rate of White people (Mays & Newman, 2020), and Black and Asian people in Britain at twice the rate of Whites (Mueller, 2020). The pandemic is having a disproportionate economic impact on the poorest people in rich nations. More than 40 million people in the United States (one in four workers) have registered for unemployment benefits since the pandemic took hold in mid-March (Cohen, 2020). At the same time, it threatens the lives and livelihoods of those in lower income countries that lack adequate health services.

In the UK, where there is long-standing evidence of health inequalities by ethnicity (Nazroo, 2011), and where health workers of colour have faced an especially heavy death toll in the pandemic<sup>1</sup>, there have been angry but largely peaceful protests across the country. In what many see as a symbolic step in the anti-racist struggle, *Black Lives Matter* protestors in Bristol tore down a statue of 17th century slave trader Edward Colston<sup>2</sup>, and threw it into the harbour (BBC News, 2020).

Despite past and present injustices, what is perhaps surprising about the *Black Lives Matter* protests is that despite the deep hurt, anger and awareness of past struggles, there is a sense of hope shared by many protesters and their supporters that this time their efforts will be effective. This sense of hope has been powerfully expressed by many young people (New York Times, 2020). While hope alone, in the face of injustice, is insufficient to enable change, it may go a long way to sustain those who are struggling for justice. As US activist and filmmaker Bree Newsome Bass<sup>3</sup> eloquently argues, there are key moments in human history when people effect change through protest:

There are times when the law itself is unjust and we cannot wait on the elected officials, on the very people who are perpetuating the injustice and that's why we resort to civil disobedience and protest to challenge what we consider to be unjust law.

Symbolic actions carry great power, but they need to be matched by the hard and continuous work of what Newsome Bass calls 'making it real'. She concludes: 'I'm hoping it will end in transformation... that we really set about the work of making a human rights-based democracy a reality' (Channel 4 News, 2020). A key part of this ongoing yet urgent work is education.

Human rights education (HRE) is a long-term and continuous work of 'making it real' and realising justice in our neighbourhoods, nations and world. HRE can contribute to a politics of hope. Educators and activists seek to inspire hope by increasing knowledge and awareness of human rights. Educators can also promote hope by equipping their students with the experiences, skills and attitudes to stand up for their rights and the rights of our fellow humanity. They can prepare them to be effective citizens, prepared to show solidarity with those whose rights are denied and to engage in struggles for justice. In this sense, HRE is not neutral but concerned with enabling citizens to adhere to a 'principle [that] recognizes our responsibilities to others *across difference*, at local national and global scales' (Osler, 2016, p. 29). So, what is required is not a lesson on *Black Lives Matter*, but a curriculum and a school that clearly demonstrates this, consistently and continually. Only then will schools be fulfilling their obligation, under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), to guarantee students' right to an intercultural education (Grover, 2007; Osler & Pandur, 2019).

The four articles in this volume illustrate ways in which individuals and school systems, governments and cultural organisations are contributing to a culture of human rights, and ways in which they need to change to enable that culture. They address diverse settings in Europe and Brazil. Carole Hahn opens with 'Human rights teaching: snapshots from four countries', a comparative, qualitative study of practices in selected schools and classrooms in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. The research confirms research elsewhere in Europe, and reported in this journal (e.g. Vesterdal, 2019), of a tendency to teach about violations of rights in the Global South but to emphasise constitutional guarantees of rights at home. She found that opportunities to practice skills to defend rights at various scales from the local to the global were more limited. Interestingly, given that Hahn sought to include students from migrant backgrounds, there did not appear to be significant opportunities to explore how, regardless of legal or constitutional guarantees, certain groups of citizens may encounter challenges in realising equality under the

law, or ways of securing justice for all. Hahn observed that students appeared to experience respect for their human rights within the community of the school, through decision-making processes and classroom practices.

In his paper, 'Learning to belong: an analysis of Germany's migrant orientation programme from an HRE perspective', Nicholas Stone critically analyses whether this programme for refugees is consistent with human rights education principles. Stone considers the possible intended and unintended messages the German migrant orientation programme may convey. He analyses potential tensions between the integration programme's explicit aim to teach national values to immigrants, and the role of human rights education in empowering migrants to challenge discrimination and majority bias. He further considers how State-run orientation programmes might in future be made more empowering to participants.

In the third article addressing a European context, Stefan Kucharczyk and Helen Hanna turn to much younger learners. Their paper, 'Balancing teacher power and children's rights: rethinking the use of picturebooks in multicultural primary schools in England', adopts an auto-ethnographic approach, to investigate their own teaching practices and the ways in which children empathise and identify with characters in picture books. They discuss the professional responsibilities of the teacher in giving direction to learning processes and the tensions between these responsibilities and those of respecting children's freedom of thought and freedom of expression. In their analysis, Kucharczyk and Hanna draw connections between children's rights, multicultural education and concepts from critical literacy theory.

In the fourth and final article in this volume, 'Art, human rights activism and a pedagogy of sensibility: the São Paulo Human Rights Short Films Festival-*Entretodos*', Eduardo Bittar explores the intersection between art and human rights community awareness. Bittar presents an empirical study of human rights film festivals in São Paulo, Brazil, where there has been political resistance to advances in human rights culture. From this empirical context, he moves to a philosophical exploration of the relationship between art, emancipation, citizenship and human rights education. He concludes that what he terms a pedagogy of sensibility can contribute to public education in human rights education, as part of municipal policy.

We trust this volume will generate debate about human rights education in its various forms and about the relationship between education, art and activism.

Finally, we wish to take this opportunity to thank our colleague Managing Editor Dr Marta Stachurska-Kounta who has played a key role in the development of HRER over the past two years. Not only has Marta proved to be an outstanding Managing Editor but she has also taken on a range of other roles, including standing in as Editor and, more recently, as Book and Media Reviews Editor, when colleagues have been on leave. Although Marta is leaving the University of South-Eastern Norway this month, we are pleased to report that HRER is not losing her expertise. We are pleased to welcome her to the International Editorial Advisory Board.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Of 106 cases of health and social care worker deaths from coronavirus, traced by clinicians up until 22 April 2020, 63 per cent were from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds. People from these backgrounds form just 21 per cent of the workforce (Cook, Kursumovic & Lennane, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> The statue had become highly controversial in recent decades but a petition to remove it had been disregarded.

<sup>3</sup> In 2015 Bree Newsome engaged in an act of civil disobedience by scaling the 30 foot flagpole in the grounds of the South Carolina State House to bring down the Confederate flag (a symbol of division and racism), an act for which she was arrested and imprisoned.

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