

Research articles

Developing political compassion through narrative imagination in human rights education

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Abstract

This paper argues that political compassion is a necessary disposition for engaging with human rights principles and combatting social injustices such as racial discrimination. Drawing from Martha Nussbaum's theory of political emotions, the paper concentrates on the need to understand compassion as connected to cognition and practical reasoning. Moreover, the paper offers suggestions of how to educate towards political compassion in human rights education (HRE) through Nussbaum's notion of narrative imagination. To capture the multiperspectival and partial dimensions of HRE, the paper further employs the work of critical HRE scholars and emphasises the importance of counter-narratives and reflective interpretation of narratives. Refined by critical considerations, Nussbaum's work on compassion and narrative imagination provides a new and important perspective for understanding the relation between human rights, emotions and social justice in the context of contemporary HRE theory and practice.

Keywords

Human rights education, Nussbaum, compassion, narrative imagination, political emotions

'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—'

'Sir?'

'—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.'

(Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960/1997, p. 33)

Introduction

Narrative imagination, as Martha Nussbaum (1996) calls it, refers to the ability to be an intelligent reader of another person's story, striving to understand the lives, emotions and wishes of others (pp. 10-11). Narrative imagination requires not only logical reasoning and knowledge but also compassion and love – the two emotions that in their political form, Nussbaum (2013) argues, are crucial to democracy. I have a reason for beginning this article with an extract from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This widely debated novel, set in the Deep South of the United States in the early 1930s, addresses blatant human rights violations such as rape and racial discrimination, and how they are handled in the criminal justice system. It also hints at more subtle, intertwined issues of class, gender, and stigma. The extract is from a conversation between the first-person narrator, 'Scout' Finch, a confident and hot-headed wild child, and her father, who is discouraging Scout from judging her new teacher and encouraging her to always imagine the individual perspectives of others. Young Scout's journey towards becoming a more empathetic interpreter of other characters' stories becomes a recurring theme in the novel, and it is accentuated by her reactions during the Tom Robinson trial. Tom is a virtuous character, a black man wrongfully convicted of rape and later lynched while trying to escape prison. In my view, the book is concerned with compassion as much as the loss of innocence, and is essentially about the main character practising narrative imagination. What is more, the book urges its reader to join in the practice.

Compassion, human rights and justice across social categories are still called for today. The *Black Lives Matter* movement aims to solve the very human rights problems *To Kill a Mockingbird* addressed in 1960. At the same time, the political culture is characterised by an ever-increasing polarisation in which compassion and the willingness to imagine the realities of people different from oneself are sometimes difficult to find. As educators there are questions we should ask: Which capabilities should education develop to address human rights issues such as racial discrimination? How can these capabilities be taught in schools? Although these matters cannot be fully addressed in one paper, I want to take on a small part of the task. My aim is to contribute to human rights education (HRE) theorising by focusing on the role of political compassion in pursuing social justice through Nussbaum's concept of narrative imagination. At the same time, I need to be mindful of criticisms of this approach.

Nussbaum's political philosophy, particularly her theory of political emotions, has not been adequately examined in the context of HRE. As a theoretical lens, it provides an interesting perspective to HRE in terms of understanding the relation between human rights, emotions and social justice. My point of departure is that political compassion—defined as active fellow-feeling—provides the motivational force needed for our struggle for human rights. Accordingly, HRE will benefit from a pedagogical approach that promotes a compassionate disposition. Although prior HRE literature has extensively discussed compassion, the nature of compassion as a particularly moral emotion, associated with a substantive understanding of justice, has not been comprehensively addressed. Furthermore, this discussion has also lacked suggestions for how to educate towards political compassion. These suggestions will be my central focus in employing Nussbaum's notion of narrative imagination.

To contextualise this paper and the premises of my arguments, it should be noted that my understanding of HRE involves the normative principles of universal human rights, yet is relational and transformational in nature. Put differently, even though I hold that human rights can have a universal foundation in the equal moral worth of persons, the interpretation and implementation of these rights need to be constantly re-negotiated in particular contexts, with all voices heard. In order to highlight the role of power and politics in HRE, and to draw attention to the multiperspectival, historical, and partial dimensions of it (Keet & Zembylas, 2019), I employ critical HRE research (Zembylas, 2013), and especially the concepts of counter-narratives (Andrews & Bamberg, 2004; Osler 2015; Scahffer & Smith, 2004) and relationality (Adami, 2014), to bring to light the aspects of HRE that are not fully captured by Nussbaum's theory. One of the central aims of this paper is to suggest that Nussbaum's views are not necessary incompatible with the critical approaches; both are needed for correcting current injustices. With Nussbaum, I argue that critical examination is integral to narrative imagination to ensure collective responses to injustice rather than generating empathy for individual and isolated cases.

By transformational HRE, I refer to HRE's potential for furthering justice through education, with its aim to 'empower persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others' (Art 2. 2.C., United Nations General Assembly, 2011). Further, it should be noted that racial discrimination is considered only one example of human rights issues that might be addressed in schools. When I refer to HRE practice, I am primarily concerned with the formal learning that takes place in K12 schools as part of traditional school subjects or cross-curricular projects, although I am not neglecting the potentiality of cultivating compassion through narrative imagination in non-formal and informal HRE. Moreover, I discuss HRE generally as opposed to, for instance, focusing on a specific national context.

This paper is structured as follows. First, I briefly introduce some of the earlier discussions on

the role of emotions and compassion in HRE. I then present Nussbaum's theory of political emotions as the central theoretical framework of the article, concentrating especially on the need to understand emotional dispositions such as compassion as connected to cognition and practical reasoning. The subsequent section discusses Nussbaum's concept of narrative imagination as a potential method for awakening compassion, and introduces contested considerations of this method. I then draw from these considerations, when I offer my suggestions on how HRE could be informed by Nussbaum's work. In the discussion, I revisit *To Kill a Mockingbird* to conclude my reflection on political compassion and narrative imagination, proposing that these concepts provide an interesting and important perspective on contemporary HRE theory and practice.

The role of political emotions and compassion in HRE

Western philosophy has traditionally seen emotions as inferior to rationality (Boler, 1997). However, paying attention to moral sentiments and mobilising these passions for democratic designs has been proposed throughout history by a vast number of scholars, including Aristotle, Smith, Hume, Rousseau, Mill, Adorno, and Horkheimer. There has been increased discussion on the role of emotions in the political sphere in recent decades (Ahmed, 2014; Mouffe 2005; Westen, 2007). In the context of education, David Carr (2005) and Nussbaum (1997, 2010) have highlighted the importance of emotions, as have scholars representing more critical (Zembylas, 2013) or agonistic (Ruitenbergh, 2009; Tryggvason, 2017) perspectives.

In HRE, Richard Rorty (1998) was one of the first scholars to argue for the relevance of emotions and the outdatedness of rationality in human rights discourses, proposing 'sentimental education' as a strategy to cultivate a human rights culture and moral sentiments during the time of postmodernity and contemporary battles for human rights. Rorty's approach is not without its critics, as it is questionable whether 'sentimental education' can address structural injustices and circumstances that lead to human hardship and suffering. For instance, in the context of using narratives, Troy Jollimore and Sharon Barrios (2006) have questioned the use of excessively sentimental texts advocated by the 'sentimentalists' that follow Rorty. Following Nussbaum, they have argued for the pedagogical use of narrative art that presents the world in its complexities and considers divergent viewpoints. This pedagogy aims for a genuine understanding of the other, as opposed to advocating sentimental, 'unthinking goodwill' (Jollimore & Barrios, 2006, p. 381). However, José Manuel Barreto (2006) has attempted to bring Rorty's pragmatistic ideas into discussions on Adorno's and Horkheimer's more critical ones in formulating human rights ethics. He has stressed that the language of suffering should be included in the theory of human rights (Barreto 2006, 2011) and that emotions should form the basis of the human rights ethos (2011, p. 13). Both reason and emotion have been seen to play a key role in the processes of rights assertion and

recognition, and in the experiences of those who perceive, mobilise or claim rights (Abrams, 2011, p. 552). Viewing emotion and reason—compassion and critical reflection—together is relevant also for understanding Nussbaum’s work and for the argument of this paper.

Numerous studies from diverse disciplines and epistemological interests have explored emotional elements of suffering and the nature of compassion. In the field of education, scholars from varied theoretical backgrounds have stressed the value of teaching with and for compassion (Barton & Ho, 2020; Noddings, 2005; Zembylas, 2012). Recently, in the context of HRE, Yuka Kitayama and Yoriko Hashizaki (2018) have discussed the difference between pity and compassion, drawing from Nel Noddings’ (1984) conception of the ethics of care. Nevertheless, more theoretical work is required to consider how particular political dispositions, such as solidarity, can be taught so that they will lead to compassionate action (Zembylas, 2013, p. 505). Zembylas (2012) has strongly advocated a more critical engagement with compassion, proposing ‘strategic empathy’ in critical pedagogy for HRE. I engage with some of the critical considerations in terms of Nussbaum’s work in the hope of elucidating how we might teach compassion reflectively.

Conceptualising compassion in the light of Nussbaum’s theory of political emotions

I wish to review Nussbaum’s theorisation of political emotions (1990/1992, 1996, 2001, 2013, 2018) since I consider it beneficial for examining both the tensions and possibilities involved in education for compassion in order to strengthen democracy and human rights. Appropriately adapted, Nussbaum’s work could offer a theoretical perspective on the global principles of justice that underlie the declarations and conventions of HRE.

Although a political liberalist (Nussbaum 2013, p. 6), Nussbaum has criticised the tradition for not adequately recognising the epistemological value of emotions in democratic politics (p. 4). Her argument is that collaboration and attachment—basic human wants—have to be put into political practice and that this can be achieved through nurturing certain emotions in democratic societies (p.4). For Nussbaum, emotions are closely associated with cognitive judgements: they tell us something about what is valuable to us. Emotions reflect the experiencing person’s notion of a worthwhile life and, thus, guide political arguments and judgments. Mere rational arguments or abstract principles are rarely enough to mobilise people politically (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 11, 2001, p. 31).

Nussbaum (2013) argues that political emotions need to be informed by a vision of a good life that, albeit partial and redefinable, has to be founded in a shared ‘set of normative goals’ with a ‘definite moral content’ (p. 6). This contains a guarantee of equal respect, liberties of speech, association, and conscience, and a set of fundamental social and economic rights (p. 16). I

understand this as a further development of Nussbaum's theory of global justice, the Capabilities Approach (CA), which serves as a backdrop for the theory of political emotions. CA is a partial and minimal account of social justice that perceives well-being in terms of capabilities—people's actual opportunities to achieve important 'functionings' (Nussbaum, 2006, pp. 69-71). Nussbaum regards CA as a 'species of a human rights approach' (2007, p. 21) belonging to the family of liberal political conceptions of justice (2013, p. 118). However, CA is less centred on negative liberty and more concerned with states' and other institutions' responsibilities. To put the ideas presented in this paper in the context of Nussbaum's (2011) famous list of ten central capabilities, I am concerned with the capabilities listed as 4, 5 and 6: related to senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; and practical reasoning (pp. 33-34).

For Nussbaum (2013), the expression of certain public emotions (e.g., compassion) obtain their justification from the above-mentioned normative vision and can be considered worthwhile, whereas the expressions of others (e.g., disgust) do not (p. 2). Nussbaum (2013) urges that we should acknowledge the potentially harmful and beneficial effects that emotions can have in political life (p. 256), and that emotions are not static but shaped by social norms and context, which is why we ought to enhance the formation of political emotions that can reinforce justice (Nussbaum, 2013, pp. 201-202, 2018, pp. 12-13).

Nussbaum (1996, 2001, 2013) has examined compassion as both a personal emotion and a social and political construct. According to her, compassion is 'a painful emotion directed at the serious suffering of another creature or creatures' (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 142). It contains a strong cognitive element and is thus a moral emotion. Consistent with Aristotle, she suggests that compassion involves the judgement of (1) the seriousness of another's suffering, (2) the undeserved nature of the suffering, and (3) a perception that one could be in the same position as the suffering person. She equates this last feature with the recognition of one's own vulnerability (Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 305-316).

Nussbaum (1996) views compassion as a central 'bridge to justice' (p. 37) which connects the community and the individual. It should be practised in public life and politics, as it motivates a collective endeavour to move closer to a 'good life' and the sacrifices ultimately required for public welfare. It enables us to at least imagine the individuality, circumstances, and motives of other people, in order to be 'less inclined to demonise the person, to think of him or her as purely evil and alien' (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 97). If we accept this, then compassion becomes highly relevant for our work against stigmatisation, cultural essentialism, and hate speech; the detrimental phenomena often fuelled by fear, disgust and anger. To use Sarah Ahmed's (2014) words, compassion, like other emotions, is crucial in education as it can 'open up lines of communication' (pp. 181-182).

Importantly, we should not view compassion merely as a private sensation, but as a collective emotion. Nussbaum (2013) is aware of the danger of partiality (p. 157) and hence differentiates between ‘extended’ and ‘limited’ compassion (p. 317). The former refers to civic compassion, which I have decided to refer to as ‘political compassion’ in this paper. Limited compassion is generally awakened by an individual narrative of distress. Although compassion that relies on encounters and everyday experiences of empathising with others’ distress is potentially powerful too, I recognise Nussbaum’s caution that compassion provoked by individual stories can become narrow and misleading if it draws attention away from the generally recognised normative principles of justice. Keith Barton (2020) has made a similar remark about the insufficiency of empathising with individual cases in the context of HRE. To overcome this pitfall of partiality, it is imperative that we widen our ‘circle of concern’ through education (Nussbaum, 2013 p. 124; 1996, p. 50).

Further, compassion should be distinguished from pity and empathy. Pity, for Nussbaum (2001), creates a hierarchy between the subject and the object of pity (p. 301) whereas compassion does not. Although closely related to empathy, compassion extends from it. Nussbaum (2001) sees empathy as merely referring to understanding someone’s experience: this can occur without compassion for the other person’s troubles (pp. 301-302, pp. 327–329). The Aristotelian notions that compassion stems from the recognition that the suffering is undeserved and that the same bad thing could happen to oneself are central to Nussbaum’s conception of compassion. I, however, propose that this ought not to be taken too literally: a white person might be able to feel compassion towards the black community after the killing of George Floyd, although there is little doubt that the same brutal thing could not have happened to them in the United States in 2020. Perhaps this is what Nussbaum (1996) means when she urges us to widen our circle of concern and to ask, ‘which creatures am I to count as my fellow-creatures, sharing possibilities with me?’ (p. 92). A white person can think: ‘that same thing could have happened to me, because where I was born, who my parents are, and the colour of my skin is nothing but an accident. The fact that anyone may be mistreated in this way is wrong.’

Therefore, political compassion always has to be mindful of structural injustice, privilege and power. It also needs to be aware of human vulnerability (Butler, 2004; Zembylas 2013). Both Nussbaum and Judith Butler have urged that what we fear or find disgusting in the other is partly a projection of our own humanity, and that the acknowledgment of one’s own vulnerability may establish an effective starting point for developing compassion for the other’s vulnerability (Butler 2004, Nussbaum, 2013, 2018). Zembylas (2013) has proposed that for developing political applications of compassion, there should be an epistemological shift of emphasis from suffering to vulnerability, since the idea of common human vulnerability highlights all of us as vulnerable, not just the suffering other who needs our compassion (pp.

512-513). I propose that the widening of one's sphere of compassion (relevant to HRE as well) could be viewed in four steps: 1) realising one's own vulnerability, which leads to 2) the recognition of common human fragility, which leads to 3) awareness of privilege and power asymmetries, which can then 4) spark solidarity and provide motivation to take substantial action for social justice. Echoing Zembylas (2013), I hold that 'the critical awareness that others are vulnerable, too, is important in the struggle for action-oriented solidarity and the avoidance of egocentricity and cultural narcissism' (pp. 513-514).

However, the idea of cultivating compassion as a political emotion has also been contested. Despite Nussbaum's deliberate attempt to avoid hierarchisation in her discussion of compassion, some critics question whether it can exist without pity and patronisation. Compassion has been viewed as selective and unreliable (Arendt, 1963/2016) and too passive an affect to create persistent commitment and to motivate protest against injustice (Berlant, 2004; Pedwell, 2014; Weber, 2018), whereas negative emotions with a sense of outrage often function as crucial mobilising forces, especially in minority struggles (Adkins, 2020; Bell 2009; Cherry 2019; Srinivasan, 2018). Ann-Kathrin Weber (2018), following Hannah Arendt's political theory, warns us of the self-deceptive magic of feeling compassion (p. 57). Nussbaum acknowledges this possible, passivising outcome of people thinking that they have done something morally good simply by virtue of feeling compassion. However, it does not follow from this that compassion itself is bad (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 399). Nussbaum (2013) also reminds us that cultivating compassion does not mean we need not strengthen societal institutions, as they should always be the backbone of democratic politics.

Some critics have associated compassion with unwanted responses such as anxiety, hopelessness or 'compassion fatigue' (Moeller, 1999); an emotional overdose resulting in observer alienation, apathy or disinterest. Indeed, research indicates that an excessive amount of information on suffering detaches spectators, and that anxiety can cause paralysis, leading to unproductive self-pity, or even a backlash against the problems (Zembylas, 2013, pp. 509-510). This implies that an overload of narratives of human rights violations could lead to results in the classroom that are the opposite to those hoped for. Weber (2018) has expressed her concern that, in the worst case, compassion might be 'regarded as inflicted "from above" and thus fuel resentment of "the establishment"' (p. 56). Weber (2018) further questions whether Nussbaum's normative view of democracy leaves enough space for the expression of pluralistic views. Nussbaum (2013), however, holds that 'a culture of sympathy and imagination is fully compatible with, and indeed can reinforce, a liberal culture of experimentation and dissent' (p. 105). To me it seems that some scholars (such as Weber, 2018 and Zembylas, 2013) who understand Nussbaum's conceptualisation of compassion as a passive mode of the spectator 'feeling bad' for the sufferer, overlook the distinction Nussbaum (2001) has made between compassion and pity (p. 301). I view compassion as a

collective and active emotion that need not be marked by condescension. In light of this reading, the aptness of many of the aforementioned critiques can be questioned.

Nevertheless, what remains to be done is to develop suggestions as to how compassion can be made socially productive while recognising its obscurities. Nussbaum herself has explicitly turned to education, stating that ‘Public education at every level should cultivate the ability to imagine the experiences of others and to participate in their sufferings’ (1996, p. 50). I next discuss this capacity, also known as narrative imagination, as a possible method for developing political compassion. Bringing these two concepts into the context of HRE will hopefully move us towards reflective, affective education that advances human rights without falling into the trap of ‘empty sentimentality’ (Kaplan, 2005).

The role of narrative imagination in developing political compassion

Narration is one of the most frequent modes of communication and humans have been called innate storytellers (Flanagan, 1992, p. 198). Recently, our societies have witnessed an expansion of instrumental storytelling prompted by civil rights movements, identity politics, and the narrative turn in the humanities and social sciences. At the same time, social media has been drastically altering our narrative environments (Mäkelä, 2018, pp. 175-184). Narratives can allegedly powerfully circulate knowledge, enforce co-operation, produce and spread new ideas, spark change, and present information in a favoured, accessible form (Osler, 2016, p. 53). Education can also be viewed as a narrative practice that constructs and reconstructs personal as well as social stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). A vast amount of literature on narratives in HRE exists (some of which I shall introduce shortly), as narratives persist as ways in which to evoke feelings and share information about human rights successes and violations.

I understand narrativity in its widest sense as the practice, art and subsequent interpretation of shared fictional, semi-fictional or nonfictional stories. It is found in all forms of human creativity, such as writing, art, drama, and the spoken word. I acknowledge that in her work, Nussbaum has focused particularly on the role of literature (and the realistic novel as a specific genre) in developing narrative imagination. The interest of this paper lies less in the format of narratives and more in the way they are discussed to develop political compassion. Although I widen my scope to include other forms of art, I focus on narrative *art*'s role in cultivating political compassion, as opposed to the personal storytelling of ‘life narratives’ (Schaffer & Smith, 2004, pp.1-8). Narratives rooted in real-world experiential history have been discussed in the context of HRE before (Osler, 2015; Adami 2014; Schaffer & Smith, 2004), and contributing to this would require a study in its own right. However, the pedagogical suggestions presented in this paper could be of use in discussing real-life personal

storytelling as well.

A reader might wonder why narrative art is required for people to encounter each another in a pluralistic society. Is it not enough for students to encounter ‘the other’ in schools? Although I acknowledge that art is often curated, polished, and commercialised, I would argue that it has special benefits for the development of imaginative understanding. Here I draw from Nussbaum (1997), who views narrative imagination as an indispensable preparation for moral interaction (p. 90). Her argument is that through narrative art we can live more than one life and understand groups that the media or other forces might portray as alien, since ‘Differences of class, race, ethnicity, gender and national origin all shape people’s possibilities, and their psychology with them’ (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 959).

Nussbaum (1997, 2010) is not alone in defending the role of the arts and humanities in supporting democracy (Carr, 2005), as the nexus between literature and ‘pro-social behaviour’ is eminent in philosophy, psychology and discourses in higher education and popular culture (Hammond & Sue, 2014, p. 8). Importantly, arguing that we need art to understand one another better is not to say that everyday encounters with others have no moral significance: it is more a question of our lives being limited. Nussbaum (1990/1992) proposes that literature, for instance, expands our experience and moral imagination and operates as an ‘extension of life’ (p. 48). Following Aristotle, Nussbaum (1990/1992) suggests that ‘we have never lived enough’, that our experience is ‘too confined and too parochial’ (p. 47). It can be difficult to attain an insight into the experience of another in daily life, particularly when ‘our world has constructed sharp separations between groups, and suspicions that make any encounter difficult’ (Nussbaum 2010, p. 107).

This is to say that there are various limitations to everyday encounters, even in pluralistic societies. I am tempted by the idea that via narrative art it might be possible for us to move beyond our identity positionings and our historic, socio-cultural, or local/national contexts. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, narrated from a white, privileged perspective, might not be the best choice for teaching anti-racism in today’s classrooms. However, Scout’s first-person narration takes me, a modern-day adult reader, into a child’s mind and to a different society and age. Encountering difference in the fictional world can teach me something about my own world, something that a mere conversation with a colleague might not be able to do. Scout becoming more compassionate towards other people’s challenges enables readers to reflect on their own prejudices.

Narrative art is also limitless in that it does not present us with something that is or has been, but with everything imaginable: we are able to indirectly observe endless instances of someone else’s practical reasoning. Nussbaum (1990/1992) suggests that one of the key aims

of literature is to introduce us to moments in which ‘habit is cut through by the unexpected’ (p. 43), and she argues that this tests our ambition to live virtuously even when affected by uncontrolled events (p. 43). As spectators, we engage in a gradual process of moral education, discovering what happens in a story, reflecting, imagining, and seeking similarities in real-life stories and phenomena. Furthermore, narrative art ‘explores both similarity and difference’ (Nussbaum, 1997 p. 94). By engaging with stories, one can gain a position from which to examine situations profoundly yet from afar, one which is ‘both like and unlike the position we occupy in life’ (Nussbaum 1990/1992, p. 48). This is especially the case with difficult topics in HRE, where the goal is to become emotionally involved, but not too involved. As Goldschmidt-Gjerløw (2019) suggests, in the context of sexual abuse, ‘The great advantage of this approach is that young students learn through a story and characters that are not them, but with whom some might identify. It creates a common platform for discussing the content, which can form the basis of a democratic dialogue between teacher and pupils’ (p. 40).

However, one cannot advocate narrative imagination in HRE without addressing certain concerns. Storytelling is an influential, yet disputable form of cultural production when it comes to human rights and social change, due to various possible interpretations (Schaffer & Smith, 2004, pp. 28-32). Several scholars have called for critical re-evaluation of the risks associated with the use of narratives, regardless of how noble the intentions might be (Mäkelä 2018; Schuman 2005; Presser 2018). One of these dangers is ‘radical storification – the focusing on individual experience instead of macro-level or complex phenomena’ (Mäkelä 2018, p. 175). Bearing this in mind, I would argue that as powerful as individual narratives can be in HRE, it is important they transcend mere personal meaning.

Furthermore, I admit that Nussbaum’s language (‘to be in the shoes of a person’ 1997, p. 11) almost implies that one has access to another person’s viewpoint and inner life, a troubling notion from radically local, feminist, or anti-racist perspectives, for instance. Can one truly be in someone else’s shoes, or to quote Scout’s father’s disturbing words, ‘climb into his skin and walk around in it’? I believe these critical questions also concern the underlying premises of the Aristotelian-Nussbaumian view of compassion: the ethos of shared vulnerability and common humanity appears too simple or universalistic for some scholars. These concerns quickly lead to predicaments of liberalism and to profound ontological questions regarding whether we can assume that there is (at least some level of) a universal, common humanity and experience that we can imagine. In HRE, it is vital to critically and cautiously consider what it means to utilise other people’s stories (see Schuman, 2005) and who has ‘the right to narrate’ (Bhabha, 2003). Do the stories we share—be they fictional or non-fictional—construct or re-construct harmful, dominant narratives (Adami, 2014), master narratives (Andrews & Bamberg, 2004), or grand ones (Linde & Arthur, 2015)? And what is the role of historical and persisting power-relations in all of this? I come back to these contested

considerations in the next section.

Practicing political compassion and narrative imagination in HRE

I next present my preliminary suggestions on what may be learned from Nussbaum's work. How can we enforce a human rights culture, rooted in political compassion, through narrative imagination in schools? I structure my suggestions so as to draw from the critical considerations presented in the previous sections, and stress these three imperatives: a safe learning environment including a capable pedagogue; critical reflection and humility in feeling compassion; and diversity of narratives. This is to ensure that we understand the locality and contextuality of HRE, and that compassion teaching does not become dominated by a single perspective, articulated from a relative position of power.

Prerequisite: a safe learning environment

Firstly, educators should not recoil from even the most difficult human rights topics and their related emotions. It is imperative that we give space for the recognition and discussion of students' values that underlie various emotional reactions (Ojala, 2016, pp. 51-52). This strengthens students' rights to participation, as by discussing values and emotions we are creating opportunities for cognitive and emotional voicing. Furthermore, Nussbaum's theory of emotions provides tools for pondering where emotions come from, and for critically discussing students' reactions.

However, specific caution is required when turning to narrative imagination as a method in particular contexts (such as the pernicious issue of child sexual abuse). Many human rights issues are fairly safe to discuss in schools using storification, but I strongly stress that human rights concepts need to be translated so that they become relevant for learners and that we consistently practise a pedagogy that is ethical and sensitive to the diversity of beliefs, values and backgrounds of students (Flowers, 2017, p.321). If narrative imagination is practised in HRE, it is crucial we adjust the model to meet age-specific capabilities; all the material and content, including the narratives, should be adapted to students' development. With simple nursery rhymes, children can start learning to become more understanding of other beings from an early age, and as they develop, the social and moral features of the narratives should become progressively complex (Nussbaum, 1997 pp. 89-90).

It cannot be overemphasised that teachers must know their students and the classroom needs to be a safe space with a supportive atmosphere. Classrooms exist in specific historical and global locations, as do the pupils entering the classrooms with positionings in terms of various privilege that the teacher ought to be *au fait* with. It is no surprise that educational research is primarily concerned with how to make learning environments safer, more inclusive and stimulating - this is the prerequisite for any educational endeavour. Students' psychological

safety is also the reason I am somewhat wary of students sharing their own stories of suffering and recognising them as human rights issues in the classroom. The ethics of this method are questionable, and students in all classrooms may not have even experienced suffering. As I argued earlier, practising narrative imagination with the help of fictional or semi-fictional stories can be useful and a safer place to start developing political compassion. Zembylas, Charalambous, Charalambous and Lesta (2017) found similar concerns regarding students' psychological safety in their research on teachers' attitudes towards HRE in conflict-driven societies. Some teachers mentioned the sensitivities associated with exploring human rights violations that students might experience in their everyday lives and worried about 'exposing these students, stigmatizing them, damaging them emotionally, or invoking the pity of other students in the class' (Zembylas et al., 2017. p. 510). As researchers, we need to be mindful of the diverse classroom realities and the difficulties teachers might face in implementing HRE approaches.

Reading the 'other's' stories: a critical, reflective, compassionate approach

In her educational account, Nussbaum (1997, 2010) has focused on three interrelated capabilities: a mixture of 1) narrative imagination and 2) critical thinking is viewed essential for the cultivation of 3) mindful, democratic, world citizenship. The recognition of the synergy of compassion and criticality is present in Nussbaum's (1997) work, as 'sympathetic reading and critical reading should go hand in hand, when we ask how our sympathy is being distributed and focused. One learns something about the text when one asks these critical questions' (p. 101). Critical thinking involves the ambitious work of self-examination and the search for diverse, serious arguments (Nussbaum 2018, pp. 213-215). In practice, exercising critical self-examination involves students and teachers stepping out of their comfort zones and learning to recognise asymmetries of suffering, their possible privileges, and the limitations to participating in others' suffering.

Zembylas (2013) has built on this; accepting Nussbaum's starting point that students should develop compassion towards other people's lives and situations, he has noted that since this would entail exploring narratives of asylum-seeking, hunger, slavery, and abuse, it is imperative that students acknowledge the problem in claiming that they truly feel the pain of someone who has actually encountered these sufferings in their life (p. 517). He proposes a type of compassion that 'requires a simultaneous identification and disidentification with the suffering of the other' as it 'removes the arrogance of claiming that we know and feel their pain' (Zembylas, 2013, p. 513). In this quest, utilising narrative art can be helpful. I suggest that without claiming that we can take the other's position and truly know their pain, we can still feel compassion and highlight the shared nature of human suffering and human dignity. Eventually, shifting the classroom discussion towards the gravity of human rights violations to a society as a whole is of crucial importance in order to move from the level of the personal

and individual to the level of the societal and structural.

Critical reflection, however, does not emerge automatically. In this endeavour the role of the HRE teacher is to guide students in their practice of narrative imagination and critical reflection and to make connections between narrative art and life. Depending on the aforementioned context, group, and individual students' safety, there are a number of questions that can be discussed in class, in small groups, or reflected on individually after engaging with a narrative: Do you understand/sympathise with the narrator? Can you claim to understand the narrator exactly? What does it mean that one can be compassionate without fully taking the other's position? Can the students think of an example of this? Can the teacher give one? Has it ever happened that someone said they understood you, but you felt that they could/did not? How? How can we move closer to understanding without fully understanding? The goal here is that pupils will get an experience of engaging in a dialogical encounter that involves listening, learning, identifying and disidentifying. An intellectually humble, open-ended approach is key in this endeavour.

Minding the power: counter-narratives and the relational approach to HRE

What narrative art is presented in the classroom? Whose stories are we hearing, who has historically had the 'right to narrate' (Bhabha, 2003)? For too long the subject and the narrator has arguably been the white, non-disabled, heterosexual male, and this has also been the case when it comes to citizenship discourses (Lister, 1997). Counter-narratives refer to stories emerging from the outlook of the historically marginalised, where 'counter-' itself indicates resistance to traditional domination (Andrews & Bamberg, 2004). This is not merely about representation or telling stories located in the margins, but about the people who are not in positions of relative power owning their stories and claiming back their right to narrate them. Schaffer and Smith (2004) assert that counter-narratives from particular localities and differing cultures of moral understanding elaborate the language of human rights. In HRE, solely learning the dominant narratives (in terms of nation-building and nationality, for instance) can overshadow alternative implications for identity shaping for the learners (Adami, 2014) or, at worst, erase stories of past struggles from the public memory (Osler, 2015, p.255).

Adami (2014) provides an important insight when she points out it is not merely about what stories are being told and how (albeit this is important), but also how we listen, read, interpret, and respond. Narratives should not be seen as 'representing a social myth of sameness', and we should highlight the uniqueness of each tale and every person (p. 303). Cautioning that Nussbaum's approach risks viewing 'particularity as a collective identity of the other' (p. 294), Adami (2014) visions HRE and classrooms as relational spaces where plurality and uniqueness can be expressed. She writes:

We must ask ourselves if we, as educators, in our good intentions, reify relations of a plural 'us' and 'others' in pedagogical relations, or if we allow for students to bring in the new and unexpected that come with the open question of 'who are you?'. (pp. 301)

This is an excellent remark, and an attitude that can and should also be present when encountering the 'other' in a fictional world, and especially when these experiences are discussed in the classroom. Learners need opportunities to engage with multifarious narratives, and they need a safe space to discuss their interpretations and the emotions the stories have provoked. Although I understand why some scholars view Nussbaum's work as being in conflict with these considerations, I hold the usage of counter-narratives compatible with and, indeed, crucial for the practice of narrative imagination. I claim that it is possible to defend a shared humanity that respects difference without losing the sense of uniqueness of each person. For me, Nussbaum's work does not suggest that the narratives of the subaltern should be read as representing the total reality of 'the collective other', obfuscating the individuality of a human being. I believe she urges that individual narratives, at their best, can help us grasp parts of systemic injustice. The connection between the individual and the collective could in itself constitute an important topic of reflective discussion among students and allow them to consider each other as individuals as opposed to mere representatives of collective identities.

When unpacking narratives in HRE, the following questions could be raised in teaching discussions: What do you think this story is about, what is it trying to say? Who is telling the story, who is not? Imagine if one of the other characters told it, how might it change? What if the context of the story was different? Who usually narrates; whose stories do we read, hear, see? Do people who are 'marginalised' in some way or another always end up in certain roles, or if they are the narrators, what types of stories are they usually 'allowed' to narrate? A dialogical approach would be important here.

If teachers consider it necessary to further highlight the uniqueness of each person's narration and interpretation, they could ask the students to write about an event (e.g., a field trip) that the whole class has recently experienced together, and then compare their stories. This exercise can also be conducted so that two students, without hearing one another's accounts, give a short narration of the same event or a story they have just heard, and the rest of the group reflects on the differences in the narratives. Another way to underline the uniqueness of interpretation and narration would be an exercise where the teacher reads a story, and in small groups, students negotiate, write a script, direct, and perform their version of the story to the rest of the class. The various emphases and interpretations can then be reflected upon in plenum.

Discussion

Finally, I wish to return to *Mockingbird*. While for one reader it is a story about Scout becoming more understanding of other people's perspectives and actions, for another it is an uncomfortable portrayal of black people from a white perspective. Due to the topics of sex and rape, and the use of profanity and racial slurs, *Mockingbird* is one of the most frequently contested books in the United States, and has again been banned from certain libraries and curricula. Simultaneously, the novel is regarded as a pivotal fictional work of social justice. It is argued that the book can still inspire and challenge people today, since it addresses the painful history of systemic racism. Schools should keep teaching it.

I consider *Mockingbird* in many ways too problematic a book to be discussed before upper secondary school or university. For anti-racist education, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, as Nussbaum (2018) suggests, or Angie Thomas' or Toni Morrison's works might be more suitable. *Mockingbird* should certainly not be taught for any nostalgic reasons, but, if suitably used with appropriate groups of students, it can produce classroom discussions on human rights issues or on dominant narratives. If anything, it can open up the discussion of compassion and narrative imagination, and the questions raised in the previous section: Can we ever truly understand another person? Who is telling the story and who is not?

I believe the solution is to introduce all narratives, including works such as *Mockingbird*, in a nuanced manner, mindful of their context(s) and of the debates they have inspired. Reading and teaching that oversimplifies life is not proper reading or teaching at all. The same need for critical reflection should apply to the utilisation of narratives, and to HRE in general. Compassion, too, can be examined, conceptualised and discussed as it is being taught – after all, how else do teachers know whether or not they are evoking pity, limited compassion, or compassion fatigue?

I maintain that political compassion is required for our work for social justice, and that education plays a crucial role in its cultivation. Building solidarity with others also requires certain emotional dynamics in a classroom (Zembylas, 2013, pp. 508-509) and needs to be practised while addressing structural inequalities (p. 505). Certainly, oppression is more than emotions (no matter how eminent these might be in the [re]formation of political culture), and structures that lead to suffering need to be recognised and addressed. What I am proposing is a curious, reflective stance that nevertheless remains optimistic about the matters presented in this paper.

I conclude that Nussbaum's work on political compassion and narrative imagination provides an important perspective for understanding the relation between human rights, emotions and social justice in the context of contemporary HRE theory and practice. Since emotions are

deeply connected to our values and motivations, and compassion has consistently been seen as vital to democracy and pro-social behaviour, we should seek to cultivate it in HRE. I propose that by practising the capability of narrative imagination, young learners can develop political compassion. However, in HRE practice this would require 1) a safe learning environment, including a capable pedagogue, 2) critical reflection and humility when reading and trying to understand other people's stories, and 3) counter-narratives and a relational approach mindful of the individuality/collectivity of the narratives presented. In Nussbaum's educational account, critical thinking and imaginative understanding are reconciled for a reason. Together, emotion and examination should also inform our striving for social justice in HRE.

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