

Book and media reviews

The need to vernacularise and action human rights education

Alter, G. T., & Fernekes, W. R. (Eds.) (2022). *The Human Rights Imperative in Teacher Education: Developing Compassion, Understanding, and Advocacy*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 336pp., £30.00 (Paperback) ISBN-13: 978-1538161937; £73.00 (Hardcover) ISBN-13: 978-1538161920; £30.00 (eBook) ISBN: 1538161931.

Here we present two book reviews- two different perspectives on the recent publication *The Human Rights Imperative in Teacher Education*. The first by Kaori Kikuchi, Assistant Professor of Education at one of Japan's leading research universities, and the second by Sera Shortland, a teacher of citizenship education in the UK. Kikuchi is interested in the ways educators can vernacularise human rights education (HRE), contextualising it in different places, so as to make it relevant to the everyday lives of teachers and teacher educators, while Shortland focuses on the volume's call for action in strengthening HRE in schools.

‘Vernacularising’ human rights education and its teacher education

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In the title of this book, *The Human Rights Imperative in Teacher Education: Developing Compassion, Understanding, and Advocacy*, the editors and authors recognise the growing need for human rights education in teacher education. This is something that has often been overlooked. Currently, as xenophobic, racist, and nationalistic discourse and violence become more visible worldwide, there is a pressing demand for critical educational approaches and transformative actions for those marginalised and oppressed by sociopolitical power structures.

Prominent human rights educators and teacher educators—from both the academic world and the field of human rights initiatives—have contributed to this book. It is divided into three sections. Section I introduces the urgent need for human rights education in teacher education, its historical background, core theories and concepts, and essential perspectives. In Section II, the authors apply these principles, focusing on the Rights of the Child (CRC), LGBTQ+ rights, and the rights of migrants. They also suggest possible ways to integrate human rights education into school curricula. Section III offers a summary and synthesis of the chapters and recommends strategies for advancing teacher education in human rights.

Throughout the book, as detailed in the Forward, Introduction, and Chapter 1, the authors share a unified view of the framework for teacher education for human rights, drawing on key documents published by the United Nations. Among these, the United Nations’ Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (UNDHRET) from 2011 is pivotal. It describes human rights education and training in three dimensions: knowledge and understanding (*about*); pedagogy and learning environment (*through*); and social action and advocacy (*for*). In essence, teachers must gain adequate knowledge about human rights, embody its values in their practices, and advocate for the rights of everyone (p. 6). The book’s subtitle, *Understanding, Compassion, and Advocacy*, aligns with these three dimensions. Moreover, three models by Tibbitts (2017) are highlighted to understand various human rights practices: ‘the Values and Awareness/Socialization Model; the Activism/Transformation Model; and the Accountability/Professional Model’ (p. 49). These frameworks illuminate the foundational elements of human rights education and teacher education.

Chapter 2 delves into the historical and theoretical underpinnings of human rights education. Latin American countries were prominent in the human rights education movement during the 1960s and 1970s, with Paulo Freire’s popular education movement being particularly influential. Freire’s philosophy aligns closely with critical pedagogy. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the idea of cosmopolitan citizenship and the necessity of a decolonial perspective.

Referring to the common framework based on UNDHRET, Section II provides tangible examples for educators on how to incorporate human rights teaching in elementary and secondary schools. The examples underscore ‘the importance of applying the universal norms of human rights in specific cultural context, otherwise known as “vernacularization”’ (p. 213). This emphasis provides detailed information on the U.S. context, particularly in the areas of LGBTQ+ rights and migrant rights. Without such knowledge, human rights instruction may remain too abstract, so educators should strive to relate human rights topics to students’ everyday experiences. Readers should note that while the book primarily focuses on the U.S., they should reflect on their own local contexts when considering how to teach human rights in their own schools.

Using the UNDHRET as a foundational framework, the book takes a predominantly deductive approach. However, given its broad scope, the methodology for human rights teacher education is inductive. The authors first analyse the practical necessities and challenges of human rights education and then pinpoint the required knowledge, skills, and dispositions for teachers. As a teacher educator, I anticipated this book could help me to structure and enhance teacher education programmes and increase my confidence in my instruction. Including an analysis of current teacher education programmes in U.S. universities or in other countries might further enrich the discourse on human rights in teacher education. This seems to be a logical next step, given the book’s discussions and suggestions. With its comprehensive coverage of essential knowledge and major developments in human rights and its education, this book encourages readers to base HRE teacher training in each country’s local context— and so ‘vernacularise’ it.

References

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Beyond borders, beyond delay: the urgent need for action on HRE

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The Human Rights Imperative in Teacher Education brings together insights from global practitioners, who encourage deeper thinking around human rights education (HRE) through reflective questioning, thought provoking and practical exercises, and applied scenarios inviting readers to engage and move forward in their practise. The first volume in the Global Teacher Education series outlines a disconnect between human rights and current educational practice, arguing for a more proactive approach, calling for policy makers to embrace human rights and implement them within education programmes.

A diverse range of contributors, providing a range of international perspectives, celebrate the universality of human and interrogate key issues including children rights, decolonisation and LGBTQ+ rights, which transcend borders. This book is a call to action, a framework for further investigation and a rich practical resource, arguably needed, as teachers navigate an educational landscape increasingly shaped by challenges. One key message is that an effective democracy demands an inherent commitment to uphold human rights, as globally the quality and practice of democracy differs significantly (International IDEA, 2024). Looking to 2024's landmark elections, prioritising HRE becomes paramount to ensure a continued defence of human rights in the uncertain political landscape. This volume reminds us that it is the people, navigating geopolitical instability, injustice and hatred, behind the election statistics that matter. There is an imperative to increase the importance of HRE and develop a common agreement in policy to elevate human rights from ethical norms to statutory teacher education guidance (Bouchard & Meyer Bisch, 2016).

Organised across three sections, chapters invite questions for consideration, prompting readers to begin with critical dialogue and suggest resources for further study to take conversations further. They propose ways to navigate issues within teaching and learning in HRE, which the editors have organised around the core principles of teaching 'about' (knowledge, the frameworks that protect human rights), 'for' (standing up for others, developing skills to become changemakers), and 'through' human rights (developing a learning culture, based on the values enshrined within human rights).

Section one considers HRE and global teacher education (GTE). Gloria Alter and William Fernekes (p. 1), provide a context for HRE, outlining the lack of attention given to human rights learning within the United States, with examples stemming from the Cold War, Trump and the murder of George Floyd (p. 5).

Chapter one (Felisa Tibbitts and Sandra Sirota) calls for the inclusion of HRE within teacher education, arguing that teachers cannot successfully communicate the principles of human rights, unless they are educated about and through them (p. 21). These authors argue a need for a relevant and current pedagogy. They cite interesting cross-cultural comparisons which show differences in how students prioritise different rights (p. 19) adding to their argument about making HRE education relevant with a GTE focus.

Nancy Flowers and Abraham Magendzo (Chapter 2) present discussion around structural and conceptual obstacles contributing to an impasse within HRE. They include a useful comparative analysis of HRE in Latin America (utilising Paulo Freire's pedagogy as a central approach), the United States and Europe, which addresses contemporary issues and demonstrates how a human rights perspective can offer a fresh conceptual lens for teachers.

Audrey Osler and Hugh Starkey (Chapter 3) build powerful arguments for an 'education for cosmopolitan citizenship' (p. 62) and make a compelling case for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights being the starting point for the global standard to reference when addressing any potentially challenging or sensitive issue in the classroom (p.60). Osler and Starkey highlight an unequal power balance between adults and young people within democracies, despite a visible and active presence of key individuals and cite the importance of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) in establishing young people's status beyond citizens-in-waiting (p. 65). This chapter has great relevance in reimagining citizenship education through a human rights lens, to foster inclusive classrooms.

Chapter 4, Obiagu paints an evocative scene drawing on a powerful extract establishing the focus of this chapter, urging readers to consider Global South perspectives (p. 74). The author argues for more emphasis on decolonising curricula and a commitment from educators to use local knowledge, culture, and lived experiences to counteract the damaging nature of colonial legacies (p. 89).

Katerine Covell and Brian Howe (Section 2) further discuss the CRC, advocating for children's rights education to be embedded within the school curriculum (pp. 109-111), providing practical examples for classroom application and assessment strategies.

Gloria Alter (Chapter 6) analyses the growing acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights in the U.S. despite ongoing prejudice. She extends the discussion globally, using case studies to make a case for inclusive education, offering objectives for policy development (p. 160).

Kristi Rudelius-Palmer and Page Hersey (Chapter 7) emphasise culturally responsive teaching for human rights education on global migration (p. 182), a contested issue. Case studies (p. 190) and recommendations (p. 192) offer valuable resources for educators.

William Fernekes (Chapter 8) challenges educators to adopt an issues-centred approach to HRE to develop students' social conscience (p. 223). While acknowledging limited teacher preparedness and government support, Fernekes explores teaching models including a community-based 'This is My Home' programme (p. 205), that might support curricula.

Section 3 synthesises all themes. Glen Mitoma and Sandra Sirota (Chapter 9) propose teacher education programmes which cultivate 'global selves' and a collaboration with young people and community organisations (p. 239), an approach which will resonate with UK citizenship teachers who can feel isolated in school communities and must look outside their classroom to bring in experiences for young people, that they may not otherwise get.

Alter concludes (Chapter 10) and presents a 'compendium of ideas' (p. 242) for each chapter, along with professional development resources and appendices, to support educators in making the most of this volume to implement HRE practices.

This book sets the case for human rights education being a relevant part of any education programme. HRE can empower young people (and teachers) with tools to successfully navigate the ongoing challenges that evolving technologies bring, they can provide the context to confront pervasive and ever visible human rights violations. It is now up to policy makers to consider the value and importance of human rights and act.

References

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