

## Editorial

# Exploring the relations between language education and human rights education

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We are writing this editorial at the end of 2023, in the midst of yet another armed conflict following the invasion of Ukraine, this time between Israel and Hamas. Death, destruction, human rights abuse, suffering and above all dehumanization characterize these events. The enemy is a faceless and nameless ‘other’ - evil, inferior, sub-human, an object - to be annihilated (Wolfendale, 2005). Just as the Covid-19 pandemic revealed disturbing inhuman, uncaring and numbed responses to the value of life in some places (Papastephanou et al., 2022), armed conflicts remind us of the precariousness of some lives, but not others, in the face of inequalities and human rights abuse of all kinds. Zembylas ‘wonders whether there can be any viable pedagogical response that would further possibilities for justice in this world’ and makes a call to link ‘pedagogical practices to debates over the purposes of education in a global community haunted by the deaths of hundreds of thousands of precarious lives’ (Papastephanou et al., 2022, p. 1086).

In these dreadful times, we wonder: what does it mean to be ‘human’? What does the ‘human’ and ‘rights’ in human rights education (HRE) mean? If one thing is clear, it is that nations, governments, peoples, organizations, local and global communities, educational institutions and other stakeholders have been unable to create, develop and let alone sustain ethics of care, love, solidarity, empathy. and forgiveness. This ethic appears as a utopia: a world where

we can live together in difference and are able to engage in intercultural dialogue to foster loving and ethical relations with others.

This Special Issue of *Human Rights Education Review* is motivated by our belief that language education, oftentimes with a subsidiary position in the school curriculum in many parts of the world, has nonetheless a role to play, and a significant contribution to make, in opening up new ways of relating to others and new potentialities for life, living, and being. Language education may play an essential role in realizing human rights (education) and protecting languages. The term linguistic human rights (LHR) is frequently used today; nevertheless, there is surprisingly little attention paid to international human rights instruments addressing LHR, compared to other rights such as gender, race, ethnicity, and religion.

Thus, this special issue is at the intersection between language education and HRE. We have particularly been interested in what role language education plays in enabling students to address and challenge the injustices they face in their lives on a daily basis and what role language education plays in contributing to building democratic, peaceful, just, and sustainable societies where rights are respected. We encouraged papers from a range of perspectives and from different international contexts, focusing on education *about, through, and/or for* human rights. By the deadline of the call for abstracts, 15 November 2022, we received 35 submissions. From those, eight were invited to submit a full manuscript. Following peer review processes, we ended up with five articles that we believe will make a small but important contribution to this intersection between language education and HRE.

In the first article, 'Enabling multilingualism or disabling multilinguals? Interrogating linguistic discrimination in Swedish preschool policy', Rebecca Adami and Liz Adams Lyngbäck study preschool educational policy on multilingualism, paying attention to the underlying assumptions behind the dominant discourse on language proficiency in Sweden. They focus on discrimination against children in terms of language rights by addressing the notion of childism as it intersects with racism, ableism and linguicism. They highlight the importance of deconstructing and disrupting these terms and their underlying structures through sustained processes of re-evaluation of language ideologies that support privileged positions and disregard minoritized groups. In this way, deficit perspectives of multilingualism as a disability can begin to be challenged.

The second article by Sue Gollifer, Hermína Gunnþórsdóttir and Renata Emilsson Peskova, entitled "'We can do much more and better": understanding gatekeepers' perspectives on students' linguistic human rights', addresses language diversity as a legal human rights concern in both policy and practice in Iceland. Although Iceland has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and its school system is informed by inclusive education principles, the authors found tensions between stakeholders' understanding of children's rights, school

responses, and state responsibility to language diversity in four municipalities. Their findings suggest that the gap between policy rhetoric and practice allows violations of children's linguistic human rights, creating contexts in which linguicism is made acceptable.

The third article, entitled 'Learning how to speak truth to power – comparing Ukrainian and Swiss foreign language curricula', is authored by Stefanie Rinaldi and Olena Marina. It investigates whether and how foreign language curricula integrate HRE. Rinaldi and Marina demonstrate the presence of both implicit and explicit references to HRE in the curricula, but nonetheless point out the need for a more holistic approach as education *about, through, and for* human rights. The conclusion is that empowering young students 'to speak truth to power' can be facilitated by a bolder approach to HRE in the curricula. Rinaldi and Marina's article makes an invaluable contribution to relating the objectives of foreign language curricula to HRE.

The fourth article, 'Supporting language rights: plurilingual pedagogies as an impetus for linguistic and cultural inclusion' by Rebecca Schmor and Enrica Piccardo, explores the ways in which the notions of plurilingualism and democratic citizenship can ensure linguistic and cultural inclusion in human rights-based language education. This classroom-based research, rich in multimodal artifacts produced by students, shows the feasibility and potential of combining human rights and language education by using plurilingual pedagogies and frameworks of democratic culture and citizenship. The study highlights the inclusive nature of plurilingual paradigms and the contributions of language as a key aspect in valuing cultural identity and promoting pluricultural cooperation, thus reinforcing human rights-based frameworks.

The final article, entitled 'Human rights issues in English language curriculum in China', is authored by Peng Zhang and Enze Guo. It investigates the way English textbooks in Chinese primary and secondary schools handle human rights issues and the extent to which that corresponds to the state's commitments to HRE. The findings show that the textbooks portray an image of a prominent China in HRE, but based on a propaganda strategy for global governance rather than genuine social issues, and by neglecting domestic human rights negotiations such as elections and freedom of speech. The examples of human rights issues in the textbooks are an outcome of the global character of the subject English rather than any proactive strategy on behalf of the state.

In sum, the set of articles contribute to the development of 'a culture of human rights' (Osler & Stokke, 2020, p. 3). We hope this special issue sheds light on an under-researched area, namely the relations between language education and HRE, and inspires others to undertake similar research, preferably more classroom-based in nature. There is a need to bring forth language students' and language teachers' voices – their perceptions of HRE and the ways they enact those perceptions during learning and teaching activities.

We also call for research on discourses where students and teachers engage in languages of hope and advocacy learning and teaching activities where HRE is embedded (Römhild, 2024). As such, the language classroom can be reclaimed as a productive space in which students and teachers can begin to recognize, address, and channel contemporary geopolitical complications producing human rights abuse, suffering, and death. Language learning and teaching can and should deal with such ‘difficult’ issues in the classroom, addressing students’ strong affective investments with suffering and human rights abuse in ways that disrupt the *status quo* instead of reproducing it, in ways that lead to humility and a sense of the limitations of one’s assumptions, beliefs and worldviews. When this is achieved, new futures of hope can be envisioned. The language classroom is well suited to achieve this goal because it confronts students not only with a different linguistic code but also with new ways of seeing the world (Nussbaum, 2010). This can be the basis for action: students become willing, able, and equipped to engage in action-oriented projects leading to collective transformative action. From this standpoint, language education should not go on as usual. Rather, it can and should become a site of ethical and political transformation.

Finally, we wish to thank HRER Managing Editor Marta Stachurska-Kounta, for outstanding assistance with making this special issue possible. Also, Christian Stokke for his editorial support. We also thank all our reviewers. Without you we could not have achieved the high quality of the final five articles in this Special Issue.

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