



Volume 1, No 1 (2018)  
Date of publication: 23-06-2018

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.7577/hrer.2495>  
ISSN 2535-5406

## BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

# Whose Rights Are They? Social Justice, HRE Discourse, and the Politics of Knowledge

Osler, A. (2016). *Human rights and schooling: An ethical framework for teaching for social justice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 177 pp., US\$39.95 (paperback) ISBN-13: 978-0-8077-5676-8; US\$ 88.00 (hardcover) ISBN: 9780807756775; \$40.95 (ebook) ISBN: 9780807773925.

Coysh, J. (2017). *Human rights education and the politics of knowledge*. New York, NY: Routledge. 201 pp., US\$145.00 (Hardback) ISBN-13: 978-1138779112; US\$ 49.46 (ebook) ISBN-10: 978-1315769493.

Reviewed by  
Matthew J. Hayden, Drake University, USA.  
Petra Lange, Valley High School, USA.

**BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS****Whose Rights Are They? Social Justice, HRE Discourse, and the Politics of Knowledge**DOI: <http://doi.org/10.7577/hrer.2495>

ISSN 2535-5406

Osler, A. (2016). *Human rights and schooling: An ethical framework for teaching for social justice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 177 pp., US\$39.95 (paperback) ISBN-13: 978-0-8077-5676-8; US\$ 88.00 (hardcover) ISBN: 9780807756775; \$40.95 (ebook) ISBN: 9780807773925.

Coysh, J. (2017). *Human rights education and the politics of knowledge*. New York, NY: Routledge. 201 pp., US\$145.00 (Hardback) ISBN-13: 978-1138779112; US\$ 49.46 (ebook) ISBN-10: 978-1315769493.

Reviewed by

Matthew J. Hayden

Drake University, USA.

[matthew.hayden@drake.edu](mailto:matthew.hayden@drake.edu)

Petra Lange

Valley High School, USA.

[petra.lange@drake.edu](mailto:petra.lange@drake.edu)

Whether you peg the inception of Human Rights Education (HRE) with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the UNESCO Associated Schools Program in 1953, or the beginning of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education in 1995, as a formalized construct HRE is not very old. It is, however, old enough to have a history and inheritance of ideas that can be transformed or critiqued. Audrey Osler has attempted the former and Joanne Coysh the latter in recent books that offer teachers, teacher-educators, and scholars new ways to think about HRE and its practices. Osler rethinks the practice of HRE for social justice within contemporary conceptions of human rights and cosmopolitan citizenship, while Coysh asks us to critically reexamine what we think we know about HRE and the dominant discourse that produces it. The authors share a concern about the ways in which HRE is conceived and delivered and, although they have different lenses, they share the same ultimate goal: a world in which human rights are realized and distributed globally.

Audrey Osler's *Human rights and schooling: An ethical framework for teaching for social justice* blends human rights education and social justice pedagogy, with the aim of supporting teacher educators and secondary instructors interested in framing their work around equity and inclusion. Osler provides educators with resources, instructional strategies, and reflective tools; these can be used to supplement the curriculum by linking its content to human rights. Alternately, her framework could be used to entirely restructure a course, making it possible for human rights to become the backbone of coursework. Throughout the text, she communicates the urgency of examining human rights as they pertain to education, in an effort to bridge the chasm that often exists when comparing local and global rights issues. By illustrating the connection between civil rights and human rights, using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the

Child (CRC) as her foundations, Osler demonstrates how a cosmopolitan perspective strengthens local social justice work in education.

Osler frequently asserts that schools have a responsibility to educate teachers and students about human rights, using examples from Iraq, Norway, China, England, South Korea, and the United States. The stories from each of these countries demonstrate how marginalized people, even in respectively prosperous nations, still struggle for education rights. Osler explains that a focus on human rights in education is not only a matter of equal access to education for all students. She also emphasizes the importance of teaching about human rights so that students can advocate them for themselves, their communities, and others in countries they have not yet visited. Osler is consistent about the need for HRE to also include education through and for human rights, but HRE about human rights seems to take a more primary role, or at least it is a prerequisite for the others. This emphasis can leave one hoping for more ideas about how to build advocacy skills.

To provide a vision for this work in the classroom, Osler illustrates a pedagogical pathway to connect individual students to local civil rights issues, and then to global human rights issues. For example, she suggests that students connect the analysis of narratives from people who suffer human rights violations in other countries with their own, personal written narratives. This will aid students to identify the significance of the rights they might already enjoy, and also help them to understand how important it is to support the rights of others. Osler claims that writing narratives enables students to make connections between their daily lived experiences and a more idealized vision of human rights. This connection between local and global analyses of rights serves as a lesson in living in an interconnected world and provides the opportunity to uncover rights violations that might exist in local neighborhoods. The juxtaposition of stories originating from different examples of injustice around the world illuminates the vital relationship between education and action and motivates students to examine steps to respond to acts of discrimination and bigotry. While Osler uses several relevant instructional strategies to illustrate the paramount work of human rights education, the instructional approach where students 'examined ethical dilemmas and imperfect solutions faced by historical figures struggling for justice, allowing them to consider the (unintended) consequences of decision making' (p. 47) creates the opportunity to study social justice content while also exploring and evaluating the responsibility to participate in social justice movements. However, this example also raises a problem often cited in research into moral education: on the one hand, classroom dilemmas can help us understand our own thinking and what the stakes are, but, on the other hand, it is not always possible to know when we are actually faced with a dilemma in our lived lives; many of them are just a part of our day. Perhaps a first step would be to help students develop the skills to recognize those dilemmas when they arise.

Osler connects global issues to local problems. This approach opens up opportunities for students, teachers, or administrators to reflect on their own practices, and workshop-ready checklists and appendices are provided. For instance, Osler's inclusion of Tomasevski's 'The 4 As of the Right to Education' provides a lens through which schools can be evaluated on their success in providing adequate opportunities for education. Her survey, 'Does Your School Environment Give Everyone a Chance to Enjoy their Rights?' may help to pinpoint areas that need attention in order to overcome violations of students' and teachers' rights, and directly connects these rights to the articles in the UN Convention on the Rights of

the Child. These resources are not definitively diagnostic, but may help teachers discover points of entry for dialogue with their students in relation to their students' local circumstances.

While this book is useful for educators in the field of social sciences and history, literature and language arts instructors could find her work insightful, too, particularly in the analysis of the power structures that are embedded in human rights accords. These are documents that serve not only the disenfranchised but also nation-states that advance their own agendas. Her emphasis on the analysis of rhetoric to examine the positions of both speaker and audience lends itself to the critical thinking necessary in social justice education. Osler's arguments would have been strengthened had these power structures been examined in more detail, and they could have served as an example for educators of International Baccalaureate Middle Years or Diploma Programmes who might benefit from using this text as a starting place for interdisciplinary work, or even as content in a Theory of Knowledge course. The multifarious applications of this text are what make it a valuable contribution to the field of social justice education. Osler's work situates HRE around local and national social justice movements that can be strengthened with the international support of human rights, but through its cosmopolitan framework such HRE also creates opportunities to empower students to advocate for the rights of friends, family, and strangers.

In Joanne Coysh's critique of human rights education, *Human rights education and the politics of knowledge*, the primary institutions (i.e. the United Nations, UNESCO) and distributors (NGOs) of HRE are accused of producing and distributing a narrowly constructed hegemonic discourse that serves to reproduce its knowledge through predetermined facts of human rights that are then consumed by target populations in a way that preserves the discourse and the knowledge it contains. This narrow construction ensures the survival of HRE knowledge creators and distributors, but does not always benefit the consumers of HRE. Coysh devotes the first half of the text to a survey of contemporary HRE as instantiated by both global institutions and HRE practitioners, focusing primarily on the dominant discourses therein. Coysh then devotes the second half of her book to explicating the role that discourse plays in real-world contexts.

Coysh's critique is decidedly postmodern and follows Foucault's critique that institutions control discourses to regulate and control society, not only through words and text, but in social practice and interaction. As a result, in HRE the focus is on the practices and conditions of HRE instead of institutions and theories that produce it. Additional theoretical support is drawn from Gramsci and Freire (among others) and applied to HRE in relatively familiar ways: international institutions such as the United Nations and human rights NGOs define and determine HRE knowledge and practices and apply them to target populations (usually poor and marginalized) that fit the parameters of funder priorities; these target populations are required to

engage in HRE by utilizing relevant local contexts that can be understood through the use of the institutionally-determined HRE language. The book provides a number of examples of this process; for example, a targeted population's local, contextual knowledge and understandings of human rights will be replaced by the prevailing definitions and knowledge of the dominant HRE discourse.

Coysh highlights three problems with the global model of HRE: human rights are presented as self-evident, relevant, and applicable; institutional knowledge of human rights is positioned as neutral, universal, and non-hegemonic; and HRE is disconnected from history, culture, or community and presented as factual truth. As a result, HRE discourses reproduce social structures and hierarchies instead of reconstructing social relations. For instance, Coysh states that common debates about universalism v. culture are a distraction from dealing with issues of how power produces knowledge and how knowledge produces power.

Coysh then offers a framework by and through which to view the field of HRE. This has four distinct orientations: technical, interpretive, critical, and counter-hegemonic. After describing the characteristics and manifestations of each, Coysh shows how the technical orientation, and the specific discourse it maintains, dominates HRE. The primary characteristics of the technical orientation are not too dissimilar from those of positivist perspectives: knowledge is objective and neutral and thus transcends social realities; knowledge is limited to pre-existing concepts and facts that can be operationalized to retain their meanings in application; and this knowledge is grounded by its universality. A consequence of this orientation is that human rights are understood and presented as facts, facts presumed to be true, and as such, are ready-made for what Coysh calls 'HRE as transmission'. Readers familiar with Freire and the 'banking' model of education, especially educators working from a constructivist perspective, will quickly apprehend Coysh's thrust here and can anticipate the problems to be found in an education of transmission. Coysh argues that local participants in HRE are not able to construct their human rights knowledge, but are instead asked to internalize the definitions and meanings imparted to them, and then they must translate their contexts into that language, thus undermining their own knowledge and narrowly constraining the possibilities of their education for human rights.

Coysh's strongest critique is directed towards the technical orientation, and she analyses this dominant (technical) discourse in HRE, as found in international texts, language, practice, and mechanisms of human rights. All of these flow from the human rights definitions and standards that are articulated in UN documents and communicated through NGOs. HRE is distributed by these NGOs through a process Coysh calls 'cultural translation', wherein HRE is framed through an interpretive set of core ideas of HR, adapted to the local structures in the local context; the target population is redefined in terms of that reconstructed context. While we found this argument persuasive, we were disappointed that the critique was not more consistently extended to the other three orientations. Given the intuitive and familiar forms of the argument against the technical orientation, greater reference to the other orientations would have offered both a better balance and a more robust, comprehensive critique. For instance, we found ourselves paging back to the explanantions of the critical orientation while reading the final chapters, since many of the characteristics of that orientation find expression in Coysh's transformative praxis. More explicit attention to the critical orientation would have better prepared the reader for the key role it plays in her conception of transformative praxis.

Coysh analyzes the production, distribution, and consumption of HRE and concludes that while HRE has been viewed as a means to empowerment, it usually involves bringing people into the HRE context as 'subjects' and framing local contexts in terms of the dominant discourse. This reinforces the technical orientation of HRE, reproducing its 'relevance' in ongoing and future contexts. For example, the populations most frequently targeted for HRE are often poor and rural, lacking access to basic services, and strongly adhering to cultural traditions and beliefs. The assumption is that these people do not know their human rights and need HRE. The knowledge of ordinary local people is discounted 'until...it is translated into the language of human rights' (p. 155). Thus, the language of empowerment through HRE merely becomes a way to relocate disadvantaged persons within the predominant hierarchies and social order in which they live. Coysh argues that a more critical approach to HRE is required in order to engage with the poor and marginalized as equal knowledge-holders instead of as beneficiaries.

Coysh does recognize that for many targeted populations, being able to reference UN documents as sources of legitimacy for specific human rights can offer both a quicker path to justification and a 'validated authority' for it. However, we believe Coysh gives this perspective too little credit as an option for marginalized populations. The extent to which a marginalized population must 'play the game' of the hegemonic power is arguable and it is not clear in Coysh's argument whether such realities 'on the ground' are ever justification enough for co-opting the dominant global HRE discourse in legitimate and substantive service of local concerns.

Coysh concludes the book with suggestions for the future development of HRE; namely, that HRE be conceived as transformative praxis wherein HRE discourse is reframed to involve dialogue without agenda or purpose in order to understand the meaning of what others say, rather than to advance or win an argument. Such a form of discourse would, Coysh argues, allow people to reassert local forms of knowledge and reclaim their right to define their rights.

Coysh's critique finds fertile purchase as a companion text to Osler's. Osler provides a rich, comprehensive, and ambitious plan for social justice through HRE, one thoroughly embedded in and anchored to the dominant HRE discourse that is the concern of Coysh. For example, when Osler connects civil rights and human rights by referring to the UDHR and the CRC, she draws a straight line from those international governing institutions and practices to HRE development and distribution. That Osler uses HRE (and its attendant dominant discourse) to then situate social justice education underscores Coysh's point that local contexts are required to translate themselves into the dominant discourse rather than vice versa. Coysh's postmodern critique and Osler's cosmopolitan philosophical grounding provide an instant and identifiable opposition: their theoretical positions stand in stark contrast, though their aims are similar.

More significantly, Osler's cosmopolitan perspective situates the individual as a cosmopolitan citizen on a planet of nation-states. She outlines the key concepts of the UDHR as she describes the cosmopolitan citizen, and universality plays a significant role. For Osler, a cosmopolitan citizen is a producer, distributor, and consumer of human rights for all, and a shared conception of human rights is required to educate that citizen. Her path is clear: unite all under a shared conception in order for that conception to become the reality that is sought. While it is unclear whether or not Coysh would attempt to block Osler's vision, she would most certainly

problematize the conception of a 'shared conception' as flawed, incomplete, and (probably) irrelevant in many specific locations and contexts. Instead, à la Freire, Coysh would most likely support a global network of rights interlocutors or facilitators, engaging local populations in dialogue with each other, defining and contextualizing their needs and desires in their languages and words vis-à-vis generative themes, and operationalizing them for their contexts.

The primary challenge for the reader of these two books is to decide whose recommendations make the most sense for their purposes or contexts. Both provide a prescription of sorts: Osler through HRE for human rights and Coysh through transformative praxis; and both recognize that this process is political. For example, Osler suggests using contemporary examples of educational disparities or flows of stateless or displaced persons to help students come to understand the role their actions or inactions play in supporting or abridging the rights of others. Coysh envisions a rich, local dialog among freely acting persons deliberating together to propose solutions to problems in their lives that they would then enact. The former uses existing conceptions of human rights and the means and levers to achieve them, while the latter uses local knowledge and experiences to decide which rights are needed and how to achieve them. This difference illuminates each author's preferred mechanisms as well as their (desired) sources of HRE knowledge. In many ways the choice can also come down to one's philosophical position on the possibility of globally-realized human rights for all. Should one use the pre-existing and centralized conceptions of HRE as the dominant discourse in order to effect change, however limited, in the systems we have? Or is it time to reject that dominant discourse, in order to create more organic means to the same end?