

BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Realising effective human rights education and safeguarding the young

Struthers, A. E. C. (2020). *Teaching human rights in primary schools: Overcoming the barriers to effective practice*. Routledge, London & New York. 244 pp., US\$112.98-125.18 (hardcover) ISBN-13: 978-1138706606; US\$ 9.21-48.95 (Kindle) ISBN-10:1138706604

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Teaching human rights in primary schools, written by Alison Struthers, is in many ways a comprehensive introduction to the field of Human Rights Education (HRE) and its tripartite components; education *about*, *through* and *for* human rights. Struthers starts off by providing an extensive and holistic understanding of the urgency of such education through a detailed overview of the international legal framework and commitments, as well as international and regional soft law initiatives that together make up the theoretical foundation for HRE. The author proceeds to contextualise these international obligations by using the case study of one country, systematically analysing England's past and present developments of formulated education policies in light of the international commitments the country has signed up to. Struthers does this in order to detect whether HRE features in policy documents related to education. Thereafter, she introduces her own research on primary school teachers in England, presenting her findings in the terms of HRE's tripartite structure. Through three consecutive chapters, Struthers presents teachers' perspectives on their teaching *about*, *through* and *for* human rights education, and identifies in each chapter the specific barriers to effective practice of HRE. Finally, the author provides concrete recommendations for improving HRE practice in primary schools, as well as pointing out the systemic and structural premises which need to be in place for a transformation of the education system.

Thus, the book offers a unique overview of the true purpose of human rights education in relation to children and young people, and provides compelling theoretical and empirical evidence for a transformation of primary education. The thorough presentation of the tripartite structure of HRE, and how it should be implemented, offers teachers a solid and bold rationale for a executing a more critical education which can empower learners with the knowledge, attitudes and competence to actively take part in shaping their schools, and societies. As pointed out by Struthers' informants, teachers need to be supported by systemic structures that give legitimacy to a more learner-focused classroom for change to take place. This book will contribute to this legitimacy by offering teachers support and inspiration in creating a more socially just classroom practice. Effective HRE can also play an important part in safeguarding children and young people.

Struthers makes the point that teachers often avoid teaching controversial topics because they are afraid of exposing children to harsh realities, and that they often use developmental theories when arguing that children are not mature enough to discuss abstract and complex issues. This type of rationale is sometimes also used as an explanation for not teaching young children about violence and abuse. A similar pattern is detected with teachers' convictions about participation and pupil voice, and the degree to which it is practiced - Struthers reveals that teachers are afraid of losing control and of dissent. The author notes that teachers' understandings of human rights are often influenced by the media and popular culture's polarising portrayals and not by proper sources. As a consequence, their reservations prevent them from teaching about human rights and taking a stand against injustice. These are indeed serious revelations that ought to be a concern for governing bodies and policy makers who are responsible for the actual direction and mandate of education, both in England and elsewhere.

As noted by Struthers, the findings from England may not be unique for that country and may have transfer value to other European nations. Recent accounts from a country like Norway certainly indicates similar worrying patterns with regard to the actual realisation of human rights education (Lile, 2019). When it comes to teachers' fears of exposing pupils to the harsh reality outside, children are in fact often more exposed to it than adults like to envision. For example, a recent report from young people in Norway (Berggrav, 2020), revealed that children and adolescents are easily exposed to pornography and other disturbing images via technology. The young informants also reported that trusted adults who can give them knowledge, as well as helping them navigate online, are usually missing in action. Similarly, in another report (Hafstad & Augusti, 2020) many children and young people reveal that they grow up in abusive family contexts and/or are exposed to violence and abuse. These childhood contexts and experiences are prevalent in all countries across the world, and the rise of sexual abuse against children and young people has therefore been defined by the World Health Organization (2017) as a major public health problem and a grave violation of human rights. In this perspective, schools are the most important social arenas to counteract the magnitude of this problem, and HRE offers an approach that embodies the safeguarding of pupils through its focus on human rights. The importance of empowerment and human dignity are underlined as key components of HRE, and Struthers emphasises that teachers are crucial role models in creating a classroom where *all* pupils can be empowered to act against lived injustice. Such an education includes safeguarding children from harm, and at the same time equipping them with the voice to speak up about violations. As the book maintains, children are indeed capable of discussing quite complex and controversial issues, and need to be exposed to this practice from an early age.

In my work as a teacher and researcher in Norway I often meet teachers and other professionals who express the necessity of holistic philosophies and theoretical frameworks that promote a more child-centred approach. A sound theoretical frame of reference can function as a validation of the practice in question, especially when the practice is perceived by some as controversial. This book offers such rigorous support through a comprehensive framework of a child-centred approach with theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence, and can therefore be an important contribution to a potential paradigm shift in the education system. *Teaching human*

rights in primary schools is, in other words, a book I recommend to any professional who is working with children and young people.

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