

Editorial

Exploring the intersections between human rights education and religious education

Geir Skeie

University of Stavanger, Norway, geir.skeie@uis.no

Christian Stokke

University of South-Eastern Norway, Norway

We are happy to present this special issue of *Human Rights Education Review*, which explores the intersections between human rights education (HRE) and religious education (RE). For the first time, the journal devotes an entire issue to bringing together two distinct fields of research, each with its own scholarly literature, in the hope of expanding HRE research. Most contributors to this issue are religious education scholars. RE researchers have for a long time engaged with human rights issues, and here they break new interdisciplinary ground by engaging explicitly with HRE in new ways. For HRE scholars, RE in public schools should be a highly interesting and relevant field of enquiry, one that raises a wide range of human rights-related questions in an educational setting.

The background for launching this issue springs from the debates about RE caused by globalisation, secularisation, cultural diversity and religious plurality, including the challenges and opportunities that come when religious education and human rights education intersect. RE in public schools takes a variety of forms in different national contexts, ranging from countries where public schools provide no distinct religious education (USA, France) to those where public schools only educate young people in the country's official faith, as in many Muslim-majority nations. In between, we find systems that aim to include knowledge about religious diversity; either in joint classes for all students (UK, Scandinavia), or in separate

classes based on students' religious faith (Germany, Finland). In some countries, RE is the responsibility of the state, in others it is a collaboration between state and religious organisations. The framework of RE as part of state-run and private education raises human rights' issues in itself. Research into the practice of RE raises questions about the right to education and freedom of speech, as well as issues about how children's rights and parents' rights can be balanced. RE raises questions regarding freedom of religion and belief, non-discrimination, minority rights, the right to identity, and the rights to intercultural education as well as to moral and spiritual development.

In various school systems, RE may provide education *about*, *for*, and *through* human rights. The UK and Scandinavian approach of having one RE subject for all students aims to encompass plurality and includes ethics, moral education, intercultural education, and education *about* human rights. In terms of education *for* and *through* human rights, the practice of RE may support empowering young people to think critically about issues of religion and belief and equip them with knowledge that can help them shape their own worldviews. At times, RE may even be the object of criticism, as when the European Court of Human Rights (2007) ruled against Norway for discrimination because RE only supported the development of Christian students' identities.

Against this backdrop of issues in the interface between HRE and RE, we offer readers a series of informative and thought-provoking articles. First, we have three empirical articles from the Nordic countries that respectively focus on children's rights in public religious education in Denmark, Norway, and Finland. These are followed by three conceptual articles that discuss didactical approaches for HRE in Danish RE, mutual learning potentials between HRE and RE in Switzerland, and the teaching of competences for democracy and human rights in Greek RE. The final article discusses indigenous people's rights in the Norwegian RE curriculum.

The first article, about RE in Denmark, is written by Eva Lindhardt. She analyses the present curriculum, showing that it puts the Church of Denmark in a privileged position. It links the Christian cultural heritage to Danish national identity and this, given that Denmark is a culturally diverse country, is problematic. Lindhardt draws on Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' and Gert Biesta's terminology about the aims of education. Her main criticism of Danish RE is, however, the tension between the RE curriculum and human rights principles. She argues that teaching about, through and for human rights could improve both the RE curriculum and classroom practice.

Next, Ole Henrik Borchgrevink Hansen and Audun Toft from Norway discuss tensions between children's rights and parents' freedom of religion that emerge from an educational public service television series on religion much used in Norwegian public schools. Children's rights

is a complex field, which requires a balance between children's freedom of religion and parents' liberty to raise their children according to their convictions. The TV series' didactic design emphasises children's options to 'pick and choose', with little focus on parental rights. This seems to be in line with both the public broadcaster's policy for their children's channel and the accompanying teaching materials made by *Save the Children*. From the perspectives of both human rights and religious education, Hansen and Toft problematise the neglecting of parental perspectives and argue that this undermines the community aspect of freedom of religion.

In the third empirical study, from Finland, Salmenkivi, Kasa, Putkonen and Kallioniemi find that human rights and children rights hold the position of an 'overarching ethics in the curriculum' in both RE and its secular alternative. However, there remain issues about contents and practices, and the relationship between rights and responsibilities. Drawing on Michael Young's theory of 'powerful knowledge', they problematise the neglect of specialist knowledge in school curricula which allows postmodern constructionist approaches to dominate. This may lead to shortcomings with regard to human rights education. On the other hand, the Finnish system of offering 'parallel' state-constructed curricula for different religious and worldview groups secures the rights of families and children, especially those with minority backgrounds.

In the first of three conceptual articles, Sigurdsson and Andersen discuss didactical approaches for HRE in Danish RE, with a focus on teacher education. They argue that human rights need to be given more attention in Denmark, also in RE. The authors draw on a concept-oriented approach inspired by Lenz, and on theory from Benner and Arendt. Among the concepts they consider are conscience and consciousness. The article also launches an approach to teaching about, through and for human rights, where dialogue, diversity and narratives are key elements, using Arendt's idea about the perplexities of the rights of man.

Next, Jasmine Suhner from Switzerland assesses the mutual impacts and learning potentials between transdisciplinary HRE and RE in public schools. While Germany and Austria have denominational school subjects informed by theology, Switzerland now has a secular and pluralistic RE subject. This recognises all students' faiths and confirms the public relevance of religion but does not foster personal religiosity. Suhner proposes a matrix for human rights awareness that serves as a framework to categorise various HRE approaches and models of public RE and assess their potentials for HRE. The dimensions of the matrix allow for a nuanced comparison of different RE models.

In the last conceptual article, Koukounaras Liagkis, Skordoulis, and Geronikou seek to measure how RE teachers promote competences for democratic citizenship and HRE. From a Greek

context, where RE is still primarily mono-religious but also includes some knowledge of world religions, the authors discuss how HRE and citizenship education can be taught through RE. They develop a scale to measure competences for democratic culture, which they define as values, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding. This article focuses on how to measure the teaching of democratic competences, rather than assessing how Greek religious education teachers promote these competences.

Finally, Renate Eggen addresses the situation for the indigenous Sámi people, living mainly in Norway, Finland, Sweden and Russia. The discussion focuses on the new Norwegian curricula, particularly the RE one. Eggen problematises the inclusion of indigenous peoples' issues under a general framework of 'diversity'. This neglects the special status of indigenous peoples and the colonial relationship with Norwegian majority society. They discuss historical perspectives on diversity and indigeneity, drawing on examples from other parts of the world and making a discourse analysis of Norwegian policy. The authors conclude that the formulations in the RE curriculum risk categorising the Sámi as just one among many minorities, thus failing to recognise the Sami's rights to express and develop their own cultural identity as an indigenous people.

Taken together, these articles show the importance and potential of studying the relationship of HRE with RE. The issues raised display a complex dynamic between formal curricula and teaching practices as well as the many ways in which history, politics and classroom practices are interlinked. We hope these important and interesting research texts will inspire other researchers to continue moving forward the study of human rights in religious education.

References

European Court of Human Rights. (2007). Case of Folgerø and others v. Norway. Retrieved from <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-81356>