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Book Review

*Teaching Human Rights in Primary Schools:
Overcoming the Barriers to Effective Practice*

by Alison E.C. Struthers

Routledge Press, 2020, 244 pages.

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Alison Struthers' *Teaching Human Rights in Primary Schools: Overcoming the Barriers to Effective Practice* (2020) offers a fundamental argument for the urgency of introducing human rights education (HRE) to young learners. Her quantitative and qualitative empirical data from teachers in England lead us to a deeper understanding of the current disconnect between the national and international requirements of human rights education. Presenting an overview of relevant international obligations and agreements, this book shows how and why primary schools in England currently struggle to meet these requirements in both policy and practice. This work is of particular interest to readers who wish to understand how

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human rights policy from the top affects HRE approaches in primary schools, especially in the English context.

The seven-chapter book begins by introducing human rights as recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and its interpretations of international law. This first section emphasizes how human rights have been extended more as a legal domain than as an educational approach. Using the tripartite framework of “about, through, and for human rights” from the 2011 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training (UNDHRET), Struthers explores the effectiveness and barriers of implementing HRE in the context of English primary schools. In light of rising extremism from different factions (e.g., Brexit, Islamophobia, etc.), the author argues that international commitments to HRE in England have become increasingly significant for counteracting divisive narratives and building a universal culture in which human rights values and principles are central.

Chapter 2 offers a deep dive into the historical events regarding the creation of human rights laws, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and UNESCO initiatives. Using the tripartite framework helps explore its effect on one’s identity along three dimensions: individual, group, and universal. By creating this in-depth analysis, the author presents a model to be used as a measuring device for evaluating compliance with international legal requirements. Chapter 3 concisely summarizes HRE’s history in English primary education, noting the gap between international frameworks and actual implementation.

Grounded in Struthers’ empirical research with teachers, utilizing surveys and interviews, Chapters 4 through 6 center on the tripartite framework of about, through, and for human rights by dedicating a chapter to each one of these aspects. Through selected vignettes, the teachers in principle express support for taking action against the status quo, thinking critically, and encouraging critical curiosity in their classrooms. Yet these same teachers are reluctant to implement HRE due to their concerns about potentially losing control in a rights-respecting learning environment, handling

controversial topics, and integrating human rights language into everyday values and lessons.

Addressing these concerns, Struthers makes recommendations in Chapter 7 for ways to overcome barriers to HRE. Firstly, she suggests addressing the lack of political will to introduce HRE along with other curriculum changes. Secondly, Struthers proposes providing teachers with comprehensive training and resources that cover the fundamental legal components and pedagogical approaches to HRE to ensure holistic value-based elements. Thirdly, teachers need fully-funded, age-appropriate, easy-to-follow, and accessible resources to prepare HRE activities. Lastly, changes to existing assessment practices would encourage teachers to cover the HRE curriculum. Prioritizing standardized testing seems to be at odds with the main objective of HRE. Simply incorporating an obligatory exam component to HRE would defeat its original purpose altogether. After all, the purpose of HRE, as explained by the author, is to equip learners to reflect critically on the world and engage in issues of social justice, transformation, and empowerment.

Scholars looking for an HRE genealogy will find this work fruitful as it traces the multiple relationships between legal implementation and development of human rights law and how it is continuously modified according to the political context and historical demands. The qualitative data sprinkled throughout Chapters 4-6 using vignettes of teacher testimony allow the reader to understand the reasoning behind the data from primary sources rather than leaving it up to interpretation from the author.

Noting these strengths, I would highly recommend a follow-up piece using this book's findings to address a broader audience and connect universal themes, subjects, and dilemmas of HRE, such as contextualizing human rights to young students as one example. As a scholar of education with primary school experience in the United States, Spain, and South Korea, I would find comparative research on HRE in primary schools across different countries and cultural settings to be extremely helpful.

Secondly, while laying the foundation for a legal premise of HRE is important, these findings could be further enriched with a focus on pedagogy. For instance, Struthers expertly indicates that teachers adjusting

human rights content to students can become problematic if the messaging becomes diluted. However, this could leave readers with the wrong impression. Many educators recognize that adapting curriculum to be age/context-appropriate is a valuable tool rather than a barrier to effective teaching. Educational scholars such as Ladson-Billings (2021) and Paris and Alim (2017), among others, have demonstrated the importance of teachers in creating a learning environment that reflects the students' own worldviews and lived experiences. While adjusting HRE to younger learners may involve simplifying abstract topics, the real barrier seems to be less about educators accommodating their students and more about the underdevelopment of HRE as a field, resulting in fewer resources being available to teachers.

As Sirota and Mitoma (2022) have illustrated, interdisciplinary future work in HRE requires a critical lens that considers how race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, legal status, class, and history play a role in how HRE is developed, whom it serves and benefits, who it is made by, and how it is regarded. A critical lens has helped many educators, researchers, and scholars, especially those championing social justice, to center their research in possibilities for greater agency and transformation (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Struthers already tips her hat in reverence to critical pedagogy in Chapter 2, calling for fundamental change that requires a critical voice to further illuminate barriers overlooked by traditional scholars.

In conclusion, Struthers' book mainly addresses past and current HRE implementation as a school subject within the U.K. National Curriculum in England and identifies obstacles to effective teaching. This empirical study should be seen as an important addition to the growing literature in HRE for researchers, scholars, and policymakers to build upon in the future.

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