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The Underdeveloped Transformative Potential of Human Rights Education: English primary education as a case study

Abstract

In order for learners to become empowered human rights activists, they must be equipped with relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes. Learner empowerment therefore forms a central element of international Human Rights Education provisions. This article draws upon empirical research to gauge the nature and extent of empowerment in English primary schools, and seeks to better understand the reasons for any deficiencies in its practice. It argues that whilst empowerment-related concepts may be encouraged to a certain extent, learners are unlikely to be emerging from formal schooling with the means to contribute significantly to transformation of the broader human rights culture. Two important barriers are identified: (i) teacher attitudes towards empowerment; and (ii) current government curriculum policy. The article argues on the first of these points that teachers are only likely to become comfortable and confident about such teaching if they are equipped with human rights knowledge, skills and experience in their own training. And on the second, that there needs to be a shift in government policy towards greater learner engagement with empowerment-related skills and relevant community engagement if the current trend towards didactic rote learning is to be reversed.

1. Introduction

In order for young learners to become empowered human rights activists, they must be equipped with the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes for recognising and acting upon injustice, inequality and situations where human dignity is not being respected. Learner empowerment therefore forms a central element of international Human Rights Education (HRE) provisions. HRE refers broadly to education and training that aims to contribute to the building of a universal culture of human rights through teaching about human rights and fundamental freedoms. It is important not only for allowing people to recognise rights violations in their own lives, but also for empowering them to stand up for their own rights and the rights of others.

Under the international human rights framework, the provision of HRE requires three overlapping and complementary strands: education *about*, *through* and *for* human rights.¹ This tripartite formulation has been refined and developed internationally since 1978 and has been included most recently within the UN Declaration on HRE and Training (2011) (UNDHRET). The first element covers the provision of contextually and culturally relevant human rights knowledge and the second addresses the practice of rights in the learning environment. This article focuses on the third, and some might say the most significant, element. At a fundamental level, education *for* human rights aims to foster awareness of the ways 'by which human rights can be translated into social and political reality' (UNESCO, 1978: para 3(iii)) through equipping learners with the skills for promoting and defending rights more broadly.

¹ UN Declaration on HRE and Training, Article 2(2).

The article draws upon empirical research conducted by the author in 43 English primary schools to interrogate national practice concerning education *for* human rights. It suggests that whilst components are present within formal primary schooling, such practice is unlikely to equip learners with the empowerment-related skills and experience to enable them to promote and defend human rights. Current educational practice is, therefore, unlikely to be contributing to the building of a broader human rights culture. The empirical research with teachers is analysed to suggest the reasons *why* practice may not be meeting the standards recommended by the international framework and, through better understanding the reasons for the absence of certain empowerment-related skills and experiences from primary education, suggestions for reform can be offered. As these implementation problems are not unique to England, further research could assess whether the proposed recommendations are relevant and applicable beyond the national context.

The research from which the empirical observations are drawn consisted of a mixed methods study. A self-completion survey was designed with the aim of ascertaining what is currently happening regarding the teaching of HRE in English primary schools. This received 378 responses, with respondents having the opportunity to leave contact details if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were then carried out with 44 teachers from 43 schools across 18 counties in England.² Eight teachers were male,³ and the interviewees represented the full spectrum of primary year groups from Early Years

² At one school, a classroom teacher and the head teacher were both interviewed. As these teachers self-selected for interview, it is arguable that they may represent only those with an interest in HRE and not reflect majority opinion. I therefore make no claim to the sample being representative. If these interviewees are particularly interested in the subject, however, it is likely that other teachers would have greater concerns with its inclusion in primary schooling and would be incorporating HRE to a lesser extent.

³ This is 8% lower than the most recent available national statistics for gender balance in the profession at the time of my research: Department for Education, Statistical First Release, *School Workforce in England: November 2012* (30 April 2013) (SFR 15/2013) at 3.

Foundation Stage (EYFS) to Year 6. Eleven head teachers, two deputies and one Higher Level Teaching Assistant were also interviewed. The interviews sought to probe more deeply into teachers' opinions about human rights and the provision of HRE at primary level. Included were questions exploring: (i) the nature and extent of empowerment-related concepts in the learning environment; and (ii) any reservations that teachers had about facilitating these practices.

The article is divided into five sections. Section two draws upon legal and educational literature to offer an interpretation of the requirements of education *for* human rights, including through drawing parallels with critical pedagogical theory. Two key elements are identified: (i) equipping learners with the skills required to enable them to recognise and act upon injustice, inequality and human indignity, and (ii) encouraging learners to participate in community activities that expose them to human rights values. Section three then draws upon the author's survey data to suggest that whilst there are positive examples of these practices in English primary schools, deficiencies are identifiable. These deficiencies are explored in section four by interrogating the reasons provided by teachers in the qualitative interviews for being wary of empowerment-related concepts, and by considering relevant curriculum policy. Section five concludes by offering suggestion for changes that would need to be made, both in England and beyond, if the transformative potential of HRE is to be recognised at this stage of formal schooling.

2. Unpacking the Requirements of Education *For* Human Rights

Education *for* human rights seeks to imbue learners with the skills required for translating knowledge and values into wider action that will contribute to the building of a culture

that is respectful of human rights. The concept of empowerment is thus central to its effective provision (Lohrenscheit, 2002: 176), and though not an explicit part of the human rights framework, empowerment is considered to be an important strategic accompaniment both to its key texts and to the fundamental efficacy of the movement.

Such ideas might seem idealistic, yet they are arguably not beyond the scope of teaching at primary level. Whilst some theorists, most notably Ivan Illich, refute the suggestion that formal education provides an appropriate forum for addressing empowerment-related issues (Illich, 1971: 66-67), others consider that a contextually appropriate interpretation of empowerment is possible: namely, education that strengthens learners' capacity to recognise and address injustice, inequality or situations in which human dignity is not being respected (Lohrenscheit, 2006: 126).

Education *for* human rights should, therefore, encourage learners to 'develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves,' (Freire, 2000: 83) and enable them to modify these frameworks where they are inadequate (Singh, 1988: 104). If learners are equipped with the skills necessary for relevant action, and can be empowered to put these into practice, then this is a small step towards the bigger picture of promoting and defending human rights.

These conceptions of empowerment share much in common with critical pedagogical theories in the discipline of education. In order to offer a reasonable interpretation of education *for* human rights, therefore, it is instructive to explore the scholarship on critical education. This literature is particularly useful for showing how broad critical concepts of empowerment are relevant for all stages of formal education.

Parallels with Critical Pedagogical Theory

Theories of critical pedagogy have roots in Marxist critiques of education that came to the fore in the sixties and seventies. Recognising that curricula had a tendency to be fragmented and confusing, Marxists claimed that ‘by denying students the opportunity to understand society as a ‘totality’, educational regimes effectively act as agents of social control’ (Young, 1971: 22). Arguably the most prominent scholar in the realm of critical education is Paulo Freire and, whilst writing predominantly about adult education in Latin America, his seminal literature has been applied to other contexts, including to formal education in developed societies (see e.g. Kirkwood and Kirkwood 1989; and Meintjes, 1997).

For Freire, education constitutes a social action with the capacity to either empower or domesticate learners. He identifies that in any society there are multiple constructions of power and authority, and considers that educational practices largely serve only to perpetuate inequality and injustice by maintaining existing power imbalances. In order to recognise and challenge this, learners must be empowered to become ‘active participants in shaping the economic, social, cultural, and subjective formations that affect their lives and the lives of others’ (Freire, 1993: xii). Critical education thus engages learners in issues of social difference, social justice and social transformation (Mayo, 1999: 58).

Whilst Ira Shor advises that ‘Freire has opened a frontier of liberating education which we will have to develop in our own places...’ (1993: 35), caution is required when applying Freire’s theories to contexts that differ from those of his original works. Some scholars criticise the tendency for his complex analysis to be reduced to a mere methodological process. Stanley Aronowitz, for example, highlights that in the USA, Freire’s work has been interpreted ‘not in the broader connotation of a pedagogy for life, but as a series of tools of effective teaching’ (1993: 11). Those who domesticate his

work in this way ‘strip him of the essence of his radical pedagogical proposals that go beyond the classroom boundaries and effect significant changes in the society as well’ (Macedo, 2000: 17).

The author hopes, therefore, to avoid this indictment. It is recognised that the context in which Freire was writing vastly differs from English primary schooling and it thus seems tenuous to suggest that these learners may be an ‘oppressed’ group in the sense of his original theory.⁴ When framed differently, however, it becomes apparent that learners are controlled to a great extent within formal education. In the context of schooling, the opportunity to challenge control is present to a minimal extent, as it is assumed that children are controlled for reasons ultimately in their own interests. For example, schools may justify control on the basis that its absence is disruptive or can lead to safeguarding issues.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed introduces terminology that seems relevant to control in the formal school context. For Freire, the significance of critical education stems from the fact that human beings have an ontological vocation to become more fully human (2000: 43-44); in other words, that they seek to become a fuller version of what they already are. They live humanly only to the extent that they are ‘humanised’ through reflection, action and transformation of the world. Where education does not foster humanisation, therefore, it ‘serves only as an instrument of domestication’ (Lankshear, 1993: 101) and any situation in which learners are ‘dehumanised’ is one that can be improved through the critical engagement and conscientization of learners.⁵

⁴ Some scholars thus dispute that primary schools are an appropriate environment for Freire’s radical skills and ethics-based autonomous learning at all (see Standish, 2012: particularly at chapters 4 and 5).

⁵ Freire used the term ‘conscientization’ to denote learners gaining a critical knowledge and understanding of the world, thus enabling them to expose the social, political and economic contradictions at play.

Within formal schooling, there is a danger that education will function as ‘an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it’ (Shaull, 2000: 34). This is usually achieved through ‘banking’ education, where learners are viewed as subordinate receptacles awaiting the transmission of knowledge, and teachers are deemed to ‘fill’ the students with information (Freire, 2000: 71). Learners are expected to retain knowledge without perceiving its true meaning or significance.

Freire considers banking education to foster a ‘culture of silence’, serving only to obviate thinking and ensure that learners are susceptible to the ideas imposed by those in dominant positions (Mayo, 1999: 59). The greater the extent to which learners attempt to retain the information transmitted to them, ‘the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world’ (Shor, 1993: 29). After years in passive classrooms, therefore, they ‘do not see themselves as people who can transform knowledge and society’ (Shor, 1993: 28).

Against this background, a reasonable interpretation of education *for* human rights is that it seeks to address this control and dehumanisation in formal education. And here, the notion of praxis becomes relevant: denoting the need for relevant action informed by reflection. According to Jack Mezirow, learners do not make transformative changes in their own learning if teaching material remains within their existing frame of reference (1997). For Mezirow, therefore, learners’ perspectives will only shift if they experience new things and gain fresh insights into the world around them (1991). Through praxis, therefore, learners can detach themselves from their immediate experiences and reflect critically upon the world around them. They then draw upon this reflection to recognise and act upon issues in that world.

The overlap between critical education and education *for* human rights is clear, for a central component of the latter is that learners are able to not only recognise injustice, inequality or situations of human indignity, but are also empowered to take action to promote and defend these, and other, human rights issues.

How These Requirements Translate into Formal Primary Education

In the context of primary schooling, it may be difficult to envisage the ways in which these facets of education *for* human rights could be exercised relevantly. At a fundamental level, however, this may simply comprise taking a more active approach to teaching human rights values. By encouraging learners to participate in, for example, community activities relating to issues of injustice, inequality or human indignity, they are experiencing rights in a setting that is likely to foster empowerment. Examples of such activities may include: supporting local initiatives, such as foodbanks and homeless shelters; schools links, for example with schools abroad or local schools for children with physical or learning disabilities; or activities around anti-bullying and age-discrimination.

Such engagement has the potential to enable learners to recognise and act upon rights issues in their own lives and in the wider community. As Roger Hart identifies, through community participation ‘young people develop the skills of critical reflection and comparison of perspectives which are essential to the self-determination of political beliefs’ (1992: 36). The inculcation of empowerment-related skills therefore enables learners to engage more effectively with the community, which in turn further enhances the development of these fundamental skills. Providing learners with opportunities for community engagement involving human rights values will thus enable them to better

understand these issues in their own lives, and lay the foundation for their future action in addressing their causes.

This aspect of education *for* human rights nevertheless seems often to be overlooked in practice, with the failure of schools to ‘provide teachings of salience in and relevance to the child’s daily experiences’ (Howe and Covell, 2005: 17). It is important, however, that learners engage their own values by examining real life events, such as bullying, racism or stereotyping, ‘through a ‘human rights lens’ (Flowers and Shiman, 1997: 170), with Garth Meintjes advising that ‘abstract or general ideas and concepts are important, but only to the extent that they can meaningfully be integrated into the...personal experiences of students’ (1997: 77).

The World Programme (UN General Assembly, 2004: para 4(a)), Vienna Declaration (UN General Assembly, 1993: Part I, para 33) and Amnesty International (2010: 7) all recognise that for this to happen, however, learners must first acquire the skills to ‘promote, defend and apply’ human rights (UNESCO and OHCHR, 2006: 1). These skills range from basic abilities, such as confidence, expression and empathy, to more complex proficiencies in conflict resolution, advocacy, critical reflection, activism, and analysing situations in moral terms (Ramey, 2012: 58; Tibbitts, 2002: 163; Jennings, 2006: 290). According to Katerina K. Frantzi, HRE ought to ‘engage people at a deeper level than mere knowledge, to the level of critical reflection and action that is required for social change’ (2004: 3), and Meintjes emphasises that it should enable learners to acquire ‘the knowledge and critical awareness...need[ed] to understand and question oppressive patterns of social, political and economic organization’ (1997: 66).

It will be suggested in the next section that teachers often struggle with or take exception to a number of aspects of education *for* human rights, yet their provision does not necessarily entail a fundamental undermining of authority or loss of control. If

learners are (i) equipped with skills in critical reflection and analysing situations in moral terms to be able to recognise injustice, inequality and human indignity, and (ii) empowered through skills such as confidence, expression, advocacy and activism to take action to promote and defend human rights, then this represents a small step towards broader change in the human rights culture. Are these aspects of education *for* human rights therefore currently being supported in primary schools in England?

3. Education *For* Human Rights in English Primary Schools: Current Practice

This section explores whether current practice in England is likely to accord with the international recommendations for education *for* human rights outlined above. It provides an overview of the author's survey data to present a picture of practice regarding: (i) the extent to which a number of empowerment-related skills are promoted; and (ii) the opportunities provided for participation in community activities that aim to improve learners' understandings of human rights values. Section 4 then analyses the qualitative interview data to better understand the scope and nature of such practice, including investigating reservations raised by teachers and considering current government policy in this area.

Survey Results: Skills Relevant to Empowerment

One survey question sought to glean from respondents the extent to which a number of empowerment-related skills are developed. It asked: 'based upon your own understanding of their meanings, to what extent would you say that you actively foster the following skills in pupils within the classroom environment?' These skills were:

confidence, expression, empathy, conflict resolution, advocacy, critical reflection, activism and the ability to analyse situations in moral terms.

A rating scale was used to determine the degree to which each skill was recognised, with some being included to a great extent in classroom teaching, including confidence (97%), empathy (89%), conflict resolution (83%) and expression (82%).⁶ Most respondents also said they encouraged critical reflection to a great extent, though there was a more even split across two of the categories for this skill, with 54% including it to a great extent and 44% to some extent.

The percentages for advocacy, activism and analysing situations in moral terms showed a different pattern. Most respondents said they encouraged these skills only to some extent (63%, 58% and 49% respectively) and a far greater number reported that they do not develop them at all. Activism was not attended to by 27% of respondents and advocacy similarly on 21%. Whilst fewer teachers reported that they did not foster the ability to analyse situations in moral terms, 5% said that this was the case.

The data was analysed to determine whether there were any notable variations across the spectrum of year groups. This revealed a degree of consistency for a number of the skills, including confidence,⁷ expression⁸ and analysing situations in moral terms.⁹ For the other skills listed, however, variations were identifiable. The instilling of empathy, for example, was more prevalent with younger learners: 92% of EYFS and year 1 teachers said that they devote attention to this skill to a great extent, compared with 84% of year 5 and 83% of year 6 teachers.¹⁰ Conflict resolution showed a similar

⁶ The rating scale contained the options 'fostered to a great extent', 'fostered to some extent' and 'not fostered at all'.

⁷ An average of 98% of teachers across the year groups fostered this to a great extent.

⁸ An average of 82% of teachers across the year groups fostered this to a great extent.

⁹ An average of 45% of teachers fostered this to a great extent; 51% to some extent; and 4% not at all.

¹⁰ Additionally, whilst only 8% of EYFS and year 1 teachers fostered empathy only to some extent, 16% of year 5 and 17% of year 6 teachers did so.

pattern, with 91% of EYFS teachers agreeing that they develop this, in comparison with 77% of year 6 teachers.

Critical reflection is a term without a fixed or agreed meaning. Richard Paul argues that it prepares ‘the way for new ideas by rooting out old ones, by breaking down remnants from popular, if incoherent, illogical and insupportable ideologies and prejudices’ (1993: ii). And in the context of adult education, Mezirow recognises critical reflection as learners engaging ‘in some sort of power analysis of the situation or context in which the learning is happening’ (2000: 126). The term was deliberately not defined in the survey, in order to better glean how teachers themselves interpret this skill. In contrast to empathy and conflict resolution, critical reflection was more prevalent for older learners, with 64% of year 6 teachers reporting that it was developed to a great extent in contrast with 33% of EYFS teachers.

Whilst skills like advocacy and activism showed a degree of consistency across year groups concerning how many teachers attended to them to a great extent, variations were apparent in the number of teachers who were not addressing them. Regarding advocacy for example, 23% of EYFS and 21% of year 1 teachers said they did not develop this skill, compared with only 11% of year 5 and 9% of year 6 teachers. Activism, too, was reportedly not being addressed in the classrooms of 33% of EYFS and 31% of year 1 teachers, in contrast with 25% of year 5 and 24% of year 6 teachers.

This data is revealing. Advocacy, activism and the ability to analyse situations in moral terms are important skills for the practice of empowerment that is central to effective education *for* human rights, yet these skills are applied to a notably lesser extent in primary classrooms, particularly with younger learners. In order to recognise injustice, inequality or human indignity, however, one must possess the skills to analyse situations

in moral terms, and in order to address these situations, one must be able to engage in transformative action through advocacy and activism.

Survey Results: Participation in Relevant Community Activities

A further aspect of education *for* human rights was explored in the survey, with a question querying the extent to which 'learners are afforded the opportunity to actively participate in broader community activities that aim to improve their understanding of values such as equality and justice'. Although 'very accurate' was the highest scoring category, this represented only 50% of respondents. It was followed by 43% of respondents who reported that the statement was 'somewhat accurate'.

When this data was analysed for variations across the year groups, it became apparent that younger learners are more likely to participate in such community activities. 66% of EYFS and 60% of year 1 teachers said it was very accurate that such participation occurs, in comparison to only 39% of year 5 and 48% of year 6 teachers, suggesting that learners' opportunities for empowerment diminish as they approach the end of formal schooling.

4. Analysis of Interview Data: Teachers' Reflections on Education *For* Human Rights

For all the claims made by teachers in their survey responses that empowerment-related skills are being developed, it remains unclear the extent to which, and efficacy with which, they are addressed. This section examines this further by analysing in detail the comments made by teachers in the qualitative interviews, and demonstrates a general

antipathy towards, or at least caution about, the value of developing such skills and encouraging learners to engage with community activities that further them.

Developing Empowerment-Related Skills

Whilst the scoping survey had not referred explicitly to empowerment, a number of the subsequent interviewees emphasised the importance of this concept. One said, for example, that if learners are not empowered at this age, then it is ‘dangerous to let them do it when they’re older and they haven’t had the skills and the guidance’.¹¹ Another suggested that empowerment should involve not only instilling in learners a sense of justice and fairness, for themselves, their peers and their locality, but also ensuring ‘that they have a sense of social justice to the world’.¹²

This conception of empowerment as relating to learners effecting change in the broader world was apparent in a number of interviewee comments:

[Y]ou should get involved and say if something’s not right and stand up for it. And I...think in this country people just can’t be bothered, and the younger the better if they get involved.¹³

[I]t’s important to...alert them to the fact that they’re not passive in this world and they have a right to...stand up for what they believe is right...¹⁴

¹¹ Interview 12.

¹² Interview 14.

¹³ Interview 17.

¹⁴ Interview 22.

These comments correlate with the above interpretation of education *for* human rights as relating to empowering learners to transform human rights into social and political reality.

It is important to note, however, that some interviewees expressed general hesitancy over the idea of empowerment as an end result of their teaching practice. Whilst only three viewed it negatively, predominantly because of its political connotations, others identified specific issues relevant to the school context. For example, one interviewee implied that it is prioritised simply because it is the current political buzzword:

I don't know how much of it is that we're doing it because it's the trendy politically correct thing to do. Are we doing it because of that?
Or...because it's a really good idea?¹⁵

Two teachers felt uncomfortable about developing empowerment skills when they do not believe that learners can truly make a difference:

They don't have any power to do anything at this age..., so you don't want to face them with problems that they don't feel they can do anything about...¹⁶

For some, this would be a stance to take based on a realist appreciation of the world, but for others it might suggest a cynicism that should have no place in a primary learning

¹⁵ Interview 39.

¹⁶ Interview 1.

environment, regardless of whether we are dealing with human rights-related matters or not.

Other interviewees did not necessarily voice concern regarding the nature of empowerment, but nevertheless interpreted it narrowly. They predominantly related the concept to empowering learners in the immediate learning environment, as opposed to viewing it as a broader concept relating to transforming the status quo.

Whilst these findings indicate that some teachers have general reservations – or indeed misunderstandings – about empowering primary learners, most of the interviewees’ concerns in this area became apparent through their discussions around developing the skills listed in the survey. It has been suggested that at primary level, ‘education should be concerned mainly with the pupil’s development of skills and processes, rather than with content’ (Harwood, 1985: 13).

Some interviewees did recognise the importance of learners being able to question and challenge what they are taught. Many identified parents and the media as liable to influence learners’ opinions, observing that they often pick up prejudiced views beyond the classroom. Some therefore emphasised the role that formal education should play in providing learners with the capacity to challenge moral views from other sources. One interviewee said, for example, that if negative things ‘come up in politics or in the news...we jump on it and think how can we turn this into a positive for our children’,¹⁷ and another considered that encouraging learners to challenge particular views is the means through which stereotypes can be dispelled:

Not everyone in Tanzania is starving and dying of leprosy...but within
the media there is one portrayal...and you’re trying to counterbalance

¹⁷ Interview 35.

that and say...‘this is an issue in [local town]: that people haven’t got enough to eat...and is that fair?’¹⁸

One teacher encouraged learners to challenge her by making controversial statements:

I...say...‘but surely if they’re black and have got a backpack on, they’re just going to blow us up’, and they’ll go ‘no, that’s not right’, and I’ll go, ‘right, tell me what’s wrong. Tell me what I’m saying is wrong’...¹⁹

A number of interviewees therefore considered it to be important that learners are able to reflect upon both what they are taught and the broader world. As has been suggested above, however, some empowerment-related skills are seemingly not being developed to a great extent, and the qualitative data provides some indication as to why.

Whilst some interviewees simply felt that they did not have time to develop these skills, others revealed personal apprehension about their inculcation. Both the quantitative and qualitative data showed, for example, that teachers are less likely to touch upon skills such as critical reflection, analysing situations in moral terms, advocacy and activism than softer skills, including confidence, expression, empathy and conflict resolution. The reasons provided by teachers for this related principally to varying interpretations of the meanings of these terms, and to concerns with the nature of the skills themselves. These deeper reflections will be explored under two sub-headings: (i) critical reflection and analysing situations in moral terms; and (ii) advocacy and activism.

Critical Reflection and Analysing Situations in Moral Terms

¹⁸ Interview 22.

¹⁹ Interview 16.

At the upper stages of primary schooling, skills deemed to relate to learners being successful, either academically or behaviourally, in the school context were emphasised to a greater extent. As indicated by the survey findings, critical reflection was more prevalent at key stage 2 (KS2),²⁰ and the interview data suggested that teachers often consider younger learners unable to engage with this skill:

To go from the concrete to the abstract is harder with young children...and you have to do it quite quickly, because otherwise...[it's] forgotten...²¹

However, whilst critical reflection in the context of empowerment implies learners reflecting not only upon what they are being taught, but also upon injustice, inequality and human indignity more broadly (Frantzi, 2004: 3), the skill was interpreted by most interviewees as relating only to reflection about behaviour or the quality of academic work. The skill was therefore being interpreted narrowly, with only a few teachers betraying a broader understanding:

[W]e get children to feed back about what they've learnt about peace or fairness or trust...²²

Critical reflection was thus not being utilised in a broader sense for encouraging learners to reflect upon human rights issues, or to question the knowledge being transmitted to

²⁰ Key stage 2 denotes years 3-6 of English primary education. It follows key stage 1 which covers years 1-2.

²¹ Interview 6.

²² Interview 16.

them. This position is not consistent with the views of commentators who recognise the importance of broader critical reflection skills. Frantzi, for example, emphasises that ‘modern society needs reflective citizens and intelligent inquirers, who promote social understanding, cooperation and peace’ (2004: 2), and Málfrid Flekkøy and Natalie Kaufman reiterate that critical thinking is necessary for developing democratic citizens who will challenge power within society (1997: 5).

Interviewees interpreted the skill of analysing situations in moral terms as concerning learners’ immediate circumstances. Many interpreted it as relating to learners dealing with situations in the playground, rather than viewing the skill more broadly as concerning the creation of a moral conscience, or to ‘an assessment of what’s right and wrong, or what is just or unjust’.²³ Some also considered the skill too difficult for primary learners. Interviewees suggested, for example, that teaching moral foundations must precede the inculcation of skills in analysing moral situations, and that such analysis is beyond the capability of many learners.

Advocacy and Activism

Advocacy and activism were viewed as particularly problematic for the primary learning environment. Whilst some interviewees did engage with these skills, this was again predominantly at KS2. Only these learners were considered to possess the requisite maturity and mental capabilities to deal with these complex skills.

Interviewees interpreted advocacy in different ways. One viewed the skill as more political than activism. Some saw it as the means through which learners come to understand that they can express an opinion and make choices, whereas others viewed it

²³ Interview 3.

as imbuing learners with the ability to accept differences of opinion. Two interviewees understood advocacy as referring to learners speaking on behalf of others.

Many indicated, however, that they view advocacy as problematic for primary schooling. Some saw it as political, antagonistic and potentially disruptive, with one teacher commenting that:

Is there something...about standing up for what you believe in but actually...it might bring you into conflict...with organisations?
[B]ecause then you start to move into the world of politics...and that's outside the remit of primary schools...²⁴

Activism was similarly interpreted in different ways. Some saw advocacy as appropriate to issues where there are legitimate differences of opinion and activism relating to issues where people are essentially in agreement. One teacher assigned activism a different interpretation in the context of schooling, saying she would not encourage learners to 'go out and take a stand against something' but would urge them to voice an opposing opinion.²⁵ Others viewed an activist as 'somebody who goes looking for a way of putting their point across',²⁶ and activism as getting together with others who share your opinion and taking action.

Six interviewees did not view activism as political, equating it instead with recycling, fundraising or charitable giving. For one teacher, activism simply denoted

²⁴ Interview 38.

²⁵ Interview 12.

²⁶ Interview 39.

learners being 'actively involved' in the learning environment,²⁷ and another viewed it as an all-encompassing skill that covered a number of the other survey skills:

[I]f you could display empathy towards other children...if you can help conflict resolution with peers...if you can critically reflect on what you're doing, that is activism.²⁸

By contrast, eight interviewees engaged directly with the political nature of activism, reporting that their learners are involved in activities such as lobbying MPs, or campaigning. They considered the inculcation of activism skills to be important enough to overcome concerns about its political nature, and they tended to be the teachers that viewed the skill as relating to learners understanding that they 'are not passive in this world'.²⁹

Twenty-seven teachers expressed reservations about activism, however. Some simply did not know how to develop this skill. Others had more fundamental issues with its nature, for example viewing it as unnecessary or too complex for primary learners. One teacher saw the role of the primary school as being to develop a foundation for understanding issues associated with activism, but not to encourage the skill itself, and another emphasised that 'you direct the children to try and think on their own...rather than 'well if you believe in it too, then let's get together''.³⁰

Ten teachers said that they saw activism as political or implying trouble. Some expressed apprehension not only about parental objection, but also about the prospect of influencing learners:

²⁷ Interview 16.

²⁸ Interview 28.

²⁹ Interview 22.

³⁰ Interview 30.

[T]here's a fine line between what would be my values for change and whether it would be appropriate to bring it into the classroom...I've got my personal opinion and I try not to impose it on the children.³¹

A further perception of activism was that it could lead to a loss of control. One teacher identified that discussions would instead be around 'being a community and working together',³² and another said that:

[T]o me, activism is a bit like what you see on Waterloo Road, where they were all going on about animal rights and causing issues...You know, going against what we are trying to do ethically in schools...³³

This comment raises important issues regarding what it is that schools are actually 'trying to do'. As outlined above, Freire considered education to be the means through which those in positions of power maintain the status quo, and thus not a neutral endeavour (Shaull, 2000: 34). And whilst the author has argued elsewhere that teachers are wary of influencing learners with their own opinions (Struthers, 2016: 151-158), this quote suggests that, for some teachers at least, the aim of primary education is more likely to be the curbing of dissent than the challenging of injustice.

A number of interviewees clearly had reservations about the appropriateness of certain empowerment-related skills. Some, including critical reflection, analysing situations in moral terms, advocacy and activism, are treated with caution to the extent

³¹ Interview 41.

³² Interview 15.

³³ Interview 7.

that they are unlikely to be developed. It is difficult to believe therefore that learners are being equipped with the skills necessary to reflect upon – and be critical and questioning of – the world around them, and to take action to change the status quo. Educating *for* human rights is therefore likely to be severely undermined (and perhaps even countermanded) if the small sample in this study is reflective of English primary teachers more generally.

Involvement of Learners in Community Engagement

Based on their positive approach to empowerment, it is unsurprising that some teachers reiterated the importance of learners' involvement in relevant community activities. Most provided examples of engagement in such activities, covering a number of the activities discussed earlier in this article. Fundraising was also identified as a vehicle for community engagement, with some teachers saying that this is accompanied by discussion on why it is necessary.

Thirteen teachers said that when undertaking these activities, learners are taught about relevant values such as equality, justice, non-discrimination and respect. One explained that Harvest Festival was used to highlight that 'we have lots and round the world they haven't got so much, so that's an issue of equality',³⁴ and another felt that supporting a local foodbank was important to enable learners to understand that inequality and injustice happen in their own communities:

They've been supporting the foodbank...which...is really important...because I think quite often they see issues of equality and

³⁴ Interview 2.

justice, they connect those to places overseas and I have to say they assume it's African children...³⁵

Whilst only one interviewee reported that their learners were not involved at all in the community, 23 others indicated that when facilitating community engagement, this would generally not involve discussion of human rights values. This suggests that teachers are unlikely to be relating empowerment explicitly to human rights.

It was suggested at the turn of the century that the UK had witnessed a marked trend towards greater community involvement of schools (Carr and Steutel, 1999: 251). However, the findings from this study indicate that many primary learners are engaged in community activities involving human rights values only to a minimal extent, and some teachers provided reasons for this. Three simply acknowledged that they do not have time to explore values when engaging with the community, with one highlighting that 'I'm sure I'm not alone as a teacher in that we don't spend enough time reflecting on why we're actually doing it'.³⁶

Others, however, saw the lack of values-based community engagement as a more entrenched issue within the English educational landscape:

[T]he schools in England have 3-metre fences and the schools in Sweden have a 1-metre picket fence...[E]ven now that Ofsted have pulled that back out of the inspection, schools have still got this obsession with keeping the community away...I think we've got a long way to go as a society rather than a school on that one.³⁷

³⁵ Interview 22.

³⁶ Interview 39.

³⁷ Interview 27.

In the interviews, the most commonly identified influence upon community engagement was government policy. Teachers explained that the Labour Government had prioritised community engagement, and that the coalition Government has curtailed this, with emphasis placed instead almost exclusively on academic attainment.

Some teachers remained passionate enough about community engagement to continue despite the lack of Government support. Others were not so confident, however. They tended to be influenced to a greater extent by official instruction, even though they were often the most passionate critics of government policy.

Teachers' engagement with empowering education *for* human rights is furthermore only likely to lessen, for despite the recent punctuation of the banking education trend in England with initiatives aimed at developing critical thinking skills,³⁸ the new curriculum is moving away from an anti-banking philosophy. To borrow the words of Shor it is becoming 'teacher-proof' (1987: 75), moving towards greater control of the learning process, with social action disvalued and importance placed instead on knowledge for its own sake. Shor laments that such curricula instruct the teacher on matters such as 'how many pages should be read in a week,...how many years of history should be covered in a term, and so on' (1987: 75).

These examples replicate almost identically the criticisms that have been levelled at the English primary curriculum. The Government deemed the existing curriculum to be too much about thinking and not enough about acquiring knowledge and introduced sweeping reforms in 2014 (Department for Education, 2010 and 2013). Whilst some continue to see scope for inculcating empowerment-related skills, nine interviewees lambasted the curriculum's inflexibility and potential for curbing empowering education:

³⁸ These initiatives include educational programmes such as Building Learning Power, Contexts for Learning and the 3 R's.

[W]e were...excited by the Labour Government's curriculum...and then because that's taken away, we've...gone down the 'okay, well what have we got to do next'...so...that has definitely put a spanner in the works...for more empowerment in school.³⁹

Without the inculcation of a number of empowerment-related skills or the experiences of community engagement required to enable learners to reflect upon and transform the status quo, it is less likely that they will leave primary schooling with the desire or capacity to defend and promote human rights. At the least, it would suggest that any inclination towards such engagement will not have been instilled as a result of primary education. In this regard, it would be difficult to conclude that the overarching aim of education *for* human rights is being either recognised sufficiently or fulfilled in England.

5. Conclusion

By engaging learners in issues of social justice, social difference and social transformation, and by equipping them with the skills and experience necessary to reflect critically on the world, empowering education provides them with the tools for taking action to address injustice, inequality and human indignity. It therefore provides the means through which learners can become empowered human rights activists. This article has suggested, however, that some teachers are avoiding engaging with important empowerment-related skills and are similarly treating community activities that aim to improve learners' understanding of human rights values with scepticism. Whilst teachers

³⁹ Interview 24.

ostensibly support the idea that learners should be empowered to change the world, they are not necessarily equipping them with the skills and experience to be able to do so.

The interpretation of education *for* human rights in English primary schooling therefore looks problematic. Two developments may help to alleviate these problems. Firstly, teachers need to become more comfortable and confident about addressing empowerment-related concepts. This is only likely to happen if they are equipped with knowledge and understanding about human rights – and about the importance of learners being reflective, critical and active about rights situations – through their own teacher training. With recognition of the problem of competing demands on teacher training programmes (Struthers, 2015b), it is perhaps unsurprising that teachers currently receive little or no training regarding HRE (Struthers, 2016: 161-162). However, whilst not a panacea, it is arguably only through the provision of such training that teachers will gain the confidence to facilitate empowerment and broader engagement with the promotion and defence of human rights.

Secondly, the current shift in English government policy towards banking education would need to be reversed. The move towards didactic rote learning results in learners having fewer opportunities for empowering education through engagement with relevant community activities (Shor and Freire, 1987: 125). Whilst it may seem unattainable at present, curriculum policy would need to place greater emphasis on empowerment-skills and community engagement in order for current teaching practice to change to any significant extent. These changes are only likely to happen, however, if a strong evidence base outlining the importance and benefits of empowering education is developed.

This conclusion is not only relevant at the national level, but is likely to have broader implications for HRE practice. As the author has argued elsewhere, the barriers

to effective HRE practice are comparable at the international level (Struthers, 2015a), with many countries struggling to move away from ‘banking’ forms of education. The recommendations in this article may thus be applicable beyond the English context. Until the transformative potential of HRE is recognised across domestic education systems, therefore, education *for* human rights will remain marginalised in school practice, and learners will be equipped with neither the skills nor the experiences required to promote and defend human rights more broadly.

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