

NORDIC PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

Research and Practice for
Social Justice

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CHAPTER 1

FRAMING HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION IN THE NORDIC REGION

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FRAMING HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION IN THE NORDIC REGION

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Nordic Perspectives on Human Rights critically examines human rights education (HRE) practices in the Nordic region and considers how human rights principles are currently applied in classrooms. It considers the degree to which human rights are guaranteed in practice and whether there are communities in the increasingly diverse Nordic region who continue to struggle to claim their rights. It provides a legal and moral rationale for the right to human rights education.

In the first five chapters we contextualise teaching and learning for human rights in the region, and discuss some of the social, legal and historical factors that influence how human rights and human rights principles are understood, interpreted and applied in society and in educational settings. Subsequent chapters present research from each of the five Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – examining curricula and considering how policy-makers in the region interpret their duty to implement human rights education and looking at how teachers understand their legal and professional duties. The contributors make research-based suggestions on how students and teachers might be better supported in their efforts to grapple with ongoing societal problems, whether these take place far away or close to home. Some focus on teachers' professional development and suggest how teacher education might be strengthened in this regard, for example, by making explicit the human rights standards that can be applied in the classroom when addressing contentious issues. The volume concludes with reflections from renowned scholars in the US and UK with a deep understanding of comparative education and of a human rights-based approach to inclusion and belonging. They discuss many of the book's themes and their implications for teaching and learning in other global contexts.

Nordic Perspectives on Human Rights Education is the first collection of essays to draw on experiences in human rights education from across the five Nordic countries. It makes no claim to be fully comprehensive, but rather to raise a series of questions that are not only timely for teachers and teacher educators in the region, but may also resonate with human rights educators in other global contexts. Together, as editors, we bring to this book nearly 30 years' experience of teaching and teacher education in Norway, and a much longer history of collaboration and research with human rights educators across the Nordic region. In fact, it was in Denmark that Audrey first encountered human rights education back in 1985; when working as a secondary school advisory teacher for multicultural education in Birmingham, UK, she took part in an international teachers' seminar organised by the Danish Ministry of Education and the Council of Europe.

The Nordic region is well known for its leadership and rhetorical commitment to human rights. We are conscious that some readers of this volume, particularly those coming to it from outside the region, may have strong expectations that HRE, as taught in schools across the region, might represent exceptional or exemplary practice that will provide them with solutions to challenging pedagogical problems. As editors, we expect there to be resonances and commonalities for those engaged in human rights education elsewhere and we are confident that the cases presented here will shed fresh light on complex challenges and enrich the international debate. But we are also conscious that these cases highlight how there is a long way to go to ensure that students in schools across the Nordic region, one of the world's richest, are able to access their right to human rights education. Human rights are centrally positioned in discourse, but this is not always reflected in practice. Similarly, we observe that students in higher education, studying for professional qualifications, do not necessarily have access to the human rights education they need to fulfil their professional roles, as teachers, social workers, journalists and so on. We caution that policy-makers, teachers and researchers in the Nordic region need to be self-critical if we are to advance social justice through education. The contributing authors do not present an idealised picture, but critically analyse both the social and pedagogical contexts in which they are based. They highlight elements of HRE they consider important to share, but they also discuss things that need to change and, where possible, propose concrete strategies for strengthening this field.

Human rights and national identity

Since the introduction of mass education in Europe towards the end of the nineteenth century, at the height of nationalism, education across the globe promotes a sense of belonging to a national community (Dewey, 2018; Ramirez & Boli, 1987). This is the case in the Nordic region, as elsewhere. Nordic identity, and even nationalism within the region, is closely tied to

human rights. This is illustrated in the work of the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council, the main forums for official cooperation between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. This work is premised on a shared commitment to human rights and a recognition of shared culture, history and traditions across the member-states. The vision of the Nordic Council is ‘to make the Nordic region the most sustainable and integrated region in the world’ (www.norden.org/en).

Across the region, it is assumed that in education, as in other policy areas, the curriculum is underpinned by human rights. But in a region where human rights frequently underpin official discourse, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between national and regional values and human rights values. So, for example, school curricula based on national values are assumed to reflect human rights norms, since human rights are us (Osler, 2015; Osler & Lybæk, 2014). Not only does this risk reducing *universal* human rights principles to *particular* national values, but it may effectively remove the need for explicit human rights education. If human rights are equated with national values, and all education is necessarily about strengthening allegiance to the nation, then, by default, human rights education takes place. Human rights do not need to be taught explicitly, they are the bedrock of society and the curriculum, seemingly part of the national DNA.

As with the United States, the Nordic countries frequently adopt a position of *exceptionalism* in relation to human rights (Langford & Schaffer, 2015). Whereas US exceptionalism means that the US has frequently been slow to ratify international human rights instruments, in the Nordic region human rights exceptionalism works differently. The various nations are generally proud to be among the first to ratify such human rights instruments and frequently incorporate their provisions into domestic law. But a problem occurs when we move to the fields of education and training.

Since the Nordic region so closely identifies with human rights, human rights education may commonly focus on human rights abuses in distant places. Commitments to HRE become part of foreign policy initiatives and are then more likely to be supported by ministries of foreign affairs, as part of international aid, rather than ministries of education. Initiatives to educate for human rights at home frequently focus on new migrants, as in efforts to educate migrant men into Nordic gender values (Bauer et al., 2023), addressing issues such as gender-based violence and sexual harassment, based on an implicit, and often explicit belief, that migrants need to be acculturated into these ‘Nordic values’ and norms in relation to gender relations. Similarly, migrants may be given parenting advice concerning the unacceptability of physical punishment of children. Such programmes adopt the moral high ground, overlooking that respect for the rights of children and women form part of legally binding *internationally* agreed standards encapsulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UN, 1979).

A human rights façade?

Since the first publication of the World Happiness Report in 2013, the five Nordic countries have all been ranked in the top ten positions, sometimes claiming the top three spots (Martela et al., 2020). Similarly, on the Human Development Index and on related matters such as lack of corruption, citizens' sense of trust, democratic institutions and political rights, measures to ensure gender equity, equal distribution of incomes, and the extensiveness and reliability of welfare systems, the Nordic region scores well (Andersen et al., 2017; Jeiersen & Torp, 2020). While this sets a very positive framework for the realisation of human rights in the region, we are conscious that human rights are rarely realised, particularly for the most marginalised, without struggle.

The contributors to this volume were encouraged to frame their discussion of human rights education in the context of ongoing societal problems. Our focus is the ways in which human rights principles are applied in the classroom when students and teachers are grappling with challenges such as climate change, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, misogyny, racism, global inequalities and human rights violations, either at home or internationally. While the Nordic countries have established a reputation for legal and welfare systems that support gender equality and women's rights, such structures and protections do not eliminate misogyny, even if they permit women to assume positions of leadership. The MeToo movement which came to global prominence in 2017, in response to revelations of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace, challenged both feminists and the wider Nordic society to look afresh at the sexual harassment of women and girls, especially in workplaces and schools (Goldschmidt-Gjerløw & Trysnes, 2020). It challenged those in Nordic society who assumed that full equality is realised once legal and structural protections are in place.

Similarly, the Black Lives Matter movement, which came to the fore globally following the police murder in 2020 of African American George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, had an immediate impact across the Nordic region, with young people in particular taking to the streets to demand racial justice. It might be expected that the Nordic nations, like all others, have skeletons in their human rights closets. Perhaps one of the most sensitive is their role in the European colonial project. Until we face the difficult past, it is impossible to educate for justice and rights, and problematic to address experiences of racism and to build human rights-respecting schools. Sadly, we both have witnessed claims by a handful of educators in Norway that using racist epithets is fine in the context of the history classroom, since such language exists in historical sources. Such claims are sometimes justified as freedom of speech. To seek to legitimise racist language as a question of freedom of speech or academic freedom is to neglect any code of ethics that prioritises students' right to learn and colleagues' right to work in an atmosphere free from racism or threat of racism.

Not only do the Nordic countries top the charts in the World Happiness Report, but they also top the charts for a more insidious reason. The 2018 *Being Black in the EU* study (FRA, 2018) found that people of African descent reported perceived racist harassment most commonly in Finland (61%), compared with Sweden and Denmark (41%). The lowest rate of perceived racist harassment across the countries surveyed were UK and Malta (21% and 20% respectively) (FRA, 2018, p. 15). In Autumn 2023, a 13-year-old we know, who had transferred from primary to lower secondary school just a few weeks earlier, reported that three teachers at her new school had used the N-word. She reassured her mother that she only needed to address the problem with two of them, since she was confident, having challenged the third teacher, that it would not be repeated. That young teenagers should encounter commonplace racist language among teachers is an indication of the scale of the problem. Yet the larger problem is to address school structures and leaders that effectively condone such behaviour. They reflect an atmosphere of denial, and a climate where intent ('I do not intend to cause offence') counts for more than respecting children's rights or those of co-workers and citizens. Interestingly, in an article based on a study funded by the Research Council of Norway, examining older teenage boys' use of disparaging humour and slurs, including the use of variations of the N-word, the White researcher uses the boys' claims of humour and lack of ill-intent to categorise the White boys' use of such slurs to their Black friends as 'ambiguous' (Johannessen, 2021). Although the researcher acknowledges the frequency of the White Norwegian students' racist slurs, she does not explore the impact of such language on Black or minoritised students or report on their perspectives. In contexts like this, where White students' use and justification for racist language is addressed in a moral vacuum – with no reflection on societal discrimination or disadvantage according to race and ethnicity – it is difficult to see how the high levels of racial harassment in the Nordic countries reported in the EU study might be addressed or how the human rights of minoritised groups might be properly guaranteed in school or society.

Nordic Perspectives on Human Rights Education is cognisant of the ongoing need to address the rights of indigenous people in education. Three of the nations under consideration – Finland, Norway and Sweden – are home to the Sámi people. An area inhabited by the Sámi, comprising northern parts of Finland, Norway and Sweden and the Kola Peninsula in Russia, is called Sápmi. In all three countries the Sámi, as an indigenous people, have the right to maintain and develop their own languages and culture. They also have linguistic and cultural autonomy in the Sámi homeland. Each country has a Sámi Parliament, set up in Norway in 1987, in Sweden in 1993 and in Finland in 1996. The national authorities must negotiate with the respective Sámi Parliament on matters that may affect the status of the Sámi as an indigenous people. These rights have been hard-won, through many years of struggle and after many decades of mistreatment and denial of rights by the national

authorities towards the Sámi. In 2021, the Swedish government announced it was setting up a truth commission that will review the history of Sweden's policies towards the Sámi and the effect these have had on the Sámi people. Norway has established a similar truth and reconciliation commission, reporting to parliament in 2023, and affirming the need for a continuous, ongoing process to ensure indigenous rights, both in education and in society at large (Norwegian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2023).

The Sámi struggle is ongoing, as is illustrated by the Fosen case. Traditionally, the Sámi have practiced reindeer husbandry on the Fosen Peninsula. The Norwegian Supreme Court's 2021 unanimous judgement (the Fosen judgement) was that the 2013 decision, by the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, to permit the expropriation and granting of a licence for the construction of wind power plants on the Fosen Peninsula, was invalid under Article 27 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (UN, 1966a). The reindeer herders claimed that the construction interfered with their right to enjoy their own culture under ICCPR Article 27, but this was rejected by the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, and by a lower court. Under the Ministry-issued license, the company constructed two wind farms, completed in 2019 and 2020. They form part of the largest onshore wind power project in Europe. The Fosen judgement did not specify how the Norwegian government should act to rectify their earlier decision, and it took more than 500 days for the government to apologise (Stömngren et al., 2022; NIM, 2023). At the time of writing, although it seems clear that under the judgement Norway must implement measures to bring the violations to an end and ensure that similar violations do not occur in the future, the case is still unresolved and the Sámi have an ongoing struggle ahead to secure their cultural rights. While *Nordic Perspectives on Human Rights Education* does not focus on indigenous rights and includes just two chapters written from the perspective of Sámi scholars, this brief review indicates the scale of the challenge for Sámi rights today.

The right to have rights

Nearly 60 years ago Hannah Arendt (1968) proposed a universal 'right to have rights'. She was addressing the needs of stateless persons who find themselves beyond the protection of the law, something of which she had first-hand experience during and after World War II. Her arguments focused on two questions: the human subject's vulnerability to domination and the human need for political engagement. The right to have rights might equally be applied to children who lack the full citizenship rights that adults enjoy, and who are frequently vulnerable to domination and exploitation (Osler & Kato, 2022). For the right to have rights to apply to children, they first need to know about their rights and, secondly, be empowered to claim them. This implies human rights education.

Children and young people do not simply have the right to education but also the right to HRE as articulated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948b, Article 26.2) and confirmed in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (UN, 1966b, Article 13.1), which all five Nordic countries ratified in the 1970s. This right was further expanded in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; UN, 1989, Article 29), which is almost universally ratified and increasingly incorporated into the domestic law of countries around the globe. Incorporation of the CRC often provokes a renewed emphasis on human rights education. Four of the Nordic countries have incorporated the CRC. The exception is Denmark, which is obliged to fulfil the terms of the CRC even though it has chosen not to incorporate it.

The morally binding Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed shortly after the end of World War II, claimed a high purpose for human rights, asserting in its preamble that ‘recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’ (UN, 1948b, preamble). We recall this key role of human rights and therefore of human rights education – *‘the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’* – as at the time of writing, the world is again at war, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The war represents a breach by Russia of the 1945 Charter of the United Nations which states:

All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.

(Article 2.4)

The impact of the war in Ukraine is felt across Europe and beyond, but is experienced in a particular way in those countries that border Ukraine and Russia. Finland, Norway and Sweden are all direct neighbours of Russia, with Finland and Norway having land borders and Sweden a maritime border with the Russian neighbour.

At the time of writing, levels of global warfare have escalated. Following a shocking attack on Israeli citizens by Hamas fighters in October 2023 in which some 1,200 people died, Israel has carried out a deadly attack of an unprecedented scale on occupied Gaza, killing 15,000 Palestinians over seven weeks, of whom more than 6,000 are children, and denying the population of Gaza access to basic human rights, such as food, water, shelter and health care. Israeli airstrikes have largely destroyed Gaza’s infrastructure, and the United Nations has warned that ‘time is running out to prevent genocide and humanitarian catastrophe’ (UN, 2 November 2023). Gaza, on the Mediterranean, is also one of Europe’s neighbours.

As *Nordic Perspectives on Human Rights Education* goes to press, we observe developments in the Israel-Gaza war likely to impact on public understanding of human rights, with implications for HRE. In December 2023, the Republic of South Africa instituted proceedings before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against the State of Israel concerning alleged violations of its obligations under the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the Genocide Convention) in relation to Palestinians in the occupied Gaza Strip, asserting that ‘Israel has engaged in, is engaging in and risks further engaging in genocidal acts against the Palestinian people in Gaza’ (ICJ, 2023). Both South Africa and Israel are signatories to the Genocide Convention with a duty to act when they have evidence of actual or potential genocidal acts. Under Article 2, genocide means:

Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- a Killing members of the group;
 - b Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
 - c Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
 - d Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
 - e Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.
- (UN, 1948)*

The principles of human solidarity and our shared humanity is expressed in the obligation of signatory states to the Genocide Convention to call other signatory states to account.

The ICJ found it plausible that Israel’s acts could amount to genocide, ordering Israel to take all measures within its power to prevent genocidal acts, including preventing the further expulsion and forced displacement of Palestinians from their homes; punishing incitement to genocide; and ensuring humanitarian aid, including food and water, fuel, shelter, clothes, hygiene and sanitation, and medical assistance reach Palestinians (ICJ, 2024). Human Rights Watch reports that Israel has failed to comply with the ICJ provisional measures and has committed acts of collective punishment that amount to war crimes, including strikes on hospitals, the starvation of civilians as a weapon of war, ‘warning that states that continue to provide arms [to Israel] risk complicity in war crimes’ (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Both human rights and democracy depend on the freedom of journalists to carry out their work unimpeded. Without their work human rights and HRE are undermined by misinformation and propaganda wars. As of 4 April 2024, preliminary investigations by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) show unprecedented numbers of journalists and media workers killed, with 95

confirmed deaths and confirmed cases of journalists injured, missing, assaulted or otherwise threatened. The CPJ further reports more than 32,600 Palestinian deaths in Gaza and the West Bank since October 2023 and stresses the need to recognise journalists as civilians (ICJ, 2024).

Language matters in human rights education, as does international human rights and humanitarian law. The UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories, Francesca Albanese, argues that the Israeli government and military leaders have deliberately redefined the rules and language of humanitarian law relating to civilians: ‘distinction, proportionality and protection’, as well as terms such as human shields, evacuation orders, safe zones, collateral damage, medical protection, to justify its military campaign and its genocidal intent (OHCHR, 2024). We observe that this redefinition of language; the ongoing and unprecedented scale of civilian killing by the Israeli army of Palestinians in Gaza in defiance of the ICJ ruling; and the state’s complicity in the harming and killing of Palestinians on the West Bank all serve to deny the most fundamental of human rights, the right to life. It is of grave concern to all engaged in HRE when the laws and institutions of the international community, laws which exist to protect us all and to recognise our shared humanity, are undermined.

Children around the world experiencing such violence, whether directly or indirectly, need emotional support and care. What both wars have highlighted is a sense of distress and helplessness among populations not immediately impacted by the violence, in trying to distinguish fact from fiction in the parallel information wars that are taking place. It would appear that both adults and children need both emotional support and knowledge: they need to learn and understand basic human rights, and the foundation of humanitarian law, namely to know that in modern warfare the global community has set itself standards, including the protection of civilians, regardless of the military objectives of the combatants.

Human rights education requires a strong legal knowledge base, applied in a way which is age appropriate. Yet teachers in the Nordic region, as elsewhere, are rarely expected to be legally literate. Indeed, many teachers may be unaware that they have a legal obligation to prepare their students to be familiar with their rights and to ensure that they are able to defend their own rights and those of others. Yet for children (and adults) to claim their rights, it is important that they know their rights and understand how both domestic and international legal frameworks can support them in doing so.

A frequent key starting point in standing up for human rights, and therefore for HRE, is experience. It is for this reason that we advocate that HRE builds on the prior knowledge and life experiences of teachers and aims to extend this by enabling them to empathise with those whose life experiences vary from their own. For this reason, we have encouraged contributors to this volume to situate their analyses within the context of recent societal developments, both local and global, and to frame them in a longer historical

trajectory, considering the impact of history on individuals and communities today. Put plainly, this means drawing on the stories of local communities and considering the meaning of these stories for society more broadly, and for the everyday processes of teaching and learning.

The end game

The goal of successful HRE is a strong human rights culture within civil society and a willingness to defend the rights of others, particularly the vulnerable, whether they be neighbours or people in distant communities. The socio-political climate suggests that the challenge of human rights educators in the 2020s is greater now than ever before. The 1990s were a time of global optimism for human rights, but the hopes of that decade were overshadowed, post 2001, and have become of even greater concern in the second and third decades of the twenty-first century. Denmark, Norway and Sweden, whose policies on refugees and family reunification were a model for the international community, have also moved away from a heady internationalism towards more restrictive approaches towards refugees (Hagelund, 2020). Across the globe, we observe increased authoritarianism and less respect of human rights in all regions.

The effectiveness of international UN mechanisms for protecting human rights is also causing concern. One example is the International Criminal Court, which has been unable to investigate allegations of the crime of genocide and crimes against humanity towards the Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples by the People's Republic of China. A UK People's Tribunal sought to plug the gap. As two US-based legal scholars have observed, the Uyghur Tribunal holds a mirror up to the international community and is 'a litmus test of the human rights legal establishment' (Stradner & Drexel, 2021). Without citizen action and an informed public, the world looks powerless to intervene or investigate.

At a local level, citizens are more aware than ever before of societal injustices, including the historical legacy of colonialism and mistreatment of indigenous people; the broader global legacy of European colonialism; and violence against women and girls. We have touched on some of these issues here. They will be developed in subsequent chapters.

Concluding remarks

In an age characterised by growing authoritarianism and extremism, but also social movements such as Black Lives Matter, MeToo and youth-led movements for climate justice, there is scope to build upon the ideals and hopes of children and youth to work for a just world.

The global political context means that for the present and foreseeable future, there is a growing need to extend HRE practice and research to support social justice. The discourses of distancing and denial in relation to the

colonial past; favourable comparisons with other places; high levels of trust in government; and pride in gender equity policies have frequently hidden uncomfortable realities in relation to present-day injustices in the Nordic region. Yet this prosperous region has a relatively strong legal framework within which innovative research and practice in HRE might take place. The need for human rights education for citizens has never been greater.

Research on human rights education has expanded considerably over the past two decades. We aim to make a contribution to this growing body of work, by examining the degree to which HRE is implemented in the Nordic region, drawing in particular on the lived experience of communities in this increasingly diverse region who continue to struggle to claim their rights. Our starting point is that human rights education should engage with students' lives and concerns, and it should be culturally relevant. Children and young people should feel that they are included in the human rights stories. Importantly, they need to shape those stories.

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