

Democracy & Education

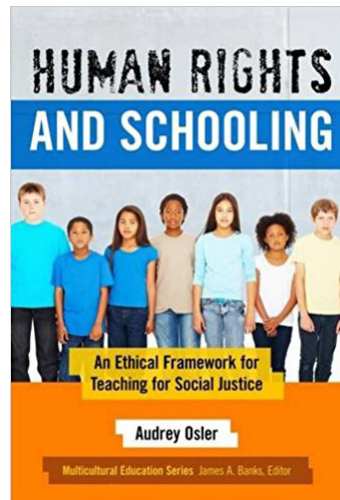
Human Rights Education in Different Contexts

A Book Review of *Human Rights and Schooling: An Ethical Framework for Teaching for Social Justice*

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DISCOURSES OF HUMAN rights are often more visible in the reporting of international organizations than in schools and curriculum. This is especially true in the United States, where significant segments of the population are suspicious of international organizations or frameworks. Schools reflect the contexts in which dominant discourses and narratives function in society, and nationalism is one such discourse. Some of the sites of analysis in Osler's (2016) book are in the United States, which has not ratified many international rights treaties. This calls attention to the need for human rights education (HRE) but also highlights some of the obstacles that exist in implementing HRE in communities where there are powerful movements toward increased xenophobia, isolationism, and laws that counter human rights. This is why Osler's book provides an important means for reforming discourses and schools to support the development of democratic, socially just, and cosmopolitan communities. Osler wrote, "In practice, a right is only a right if people know about it *and* if they are prepared to struggle for it" (p. 44, emphasis in original). This struggle is not an abstract principle that students discuss but an on-the-ground struggle that every community can identify as a means toward social justice within their community. The HRE framework that Osler described and proposed provides the educational grounding for examining and implementing human rights within and across communities.

One of the advantages of HRE is that it can span the needs of different communities by focusing upon how social justice can



work locally and globally. A central purpose of Osler's (2016) book is to "explore the meaning of *universal* human rights within *diverse* contexts" (p. 2, emphasis in original). They are universal because "human rights are an expression of the human urge to resist oppression. The urge to resist oppression is universal in the sense that it does not belong to one culture or tradition" (p. 119). Rather than framing human rights as something that is applied in distant places, Osler provided

examples of how all communities benefit from examining human rights. The strength of this stance is that it provides grounds for solidarity across communities while recognizing differences between and within communities. HRE needs to be global and local. If HRE falls into the trap of examining human rights in communities across the globe but not in local communities, HRE fails to live up to the democratic principles and commitments to social justice that are contained in human rights. Osler wrote, "What is the value in expressing concern for strangers in distant places if an individual is blind to others' experiences of injustices and their lack of rights within the same neighborhood, community or nation?" (p. 76). One of the particular strengths of Osler's book is in the variety of contexts that are described.

In order for human rights and HRE to be responsive to diverse contexts, schools must be places where diversity is understood through intersectionalities and positionalities in relation to human rights. This is central to Osler's (2016) framework because universal rights are responsive to the diverse contexts where power asymmetries function to construct and maintain social injustices. It is only

through an understanding of how power operates through society that communities are able to understand the needs of every member of the community and form solidarities that struggle for social justice. Osler wrote, “A more just society cannot be reached by individuals working alone, but it is one worth struggling for in a spirit of solidarity” (p. 122). An understanding of intersectionality and positionality creates the conditions where human rights are seen as relational within a network of power relations. This emphasis upon different contexts and human rights creates a framework for building alliances against oppressions that span communities.

The positionalities and experiences expressed through narratives provides students, educators, and community members with personal connections to human rights across these different contexts. Osler (2016) effectively portrayed the integration of an HRE lens in contexts ranging from classrooms with young children to classrooms with graduate students. In these classrooms, students share their experiences with human rights as a way to understand local and global dimensions. Osler wrote, “Narratives have the power to link legal and ethical frameworks within learners’ own struggles” (p. 52). She emphasized this by providing an autobiographical account of her design and implementation of HRE throughout her career. These various examples and contexts, which span the globe, provided compelling rationales for the framework and strategies that she proposes. If these are integrated within the discursive fields that dominate many educational landscapes, there is hope for implementing HRE.

Osler’s (2016) project in this book was as complex as the main themes indicate. The resolution of tensions such as those between universality and diversity, cosmopolitanism and nationalism, and utopia and dystopia are binary constructions that Osler deconstructed. As with many such projects, this can lead the text to be disjointed at times. The framework that Osler proposed sometimes reads as a collection of essays, and I would have liked to read more about the connections across the different cases. However, this also lends authenticity to a project that attempted to deconstruct the

binaries that perpetuate inequalities. The differences between cases and contexts added to the authenticity and quality of the book.

The book concludes with specific principles and practices that are part of Osler’s (2016) HRE framework. It is not enough to understand human rights in different contexts. Schools at every level must move toward implementing the policies and curricula that increase social justice within local and global contexts. This social action component creates a powerful rationale that can be used to change communities and increase social justice as students, educators, and community members examine social injustices. These tangible changes in communities provide HRE proponents compelling grounds for dialogues and alliances around human rights because the changes are related to the local and the global.

Along with these guidelines, Osler (2016) discussed the difficulties in implementing HRE. The list of obstacles is discouraging, and it keeps getting longer. Osler’s examination of universality and diversity within HRE was foreshadowed by the enormous pressures that work against most proposals for school transformation. Neoliberal discourses of globalization, standardization, and accountability work against HRE discourses of democracy, diversity, and social justice. If transformation of schools toward increased human rights and HRE is to be accomplished, it needs to be framed in a way that aligns enough with these discourses to gain traction. It is in the face of such pressures that Osler’s book is particularly salient because it has the potential to transform the discursive terrain of schools where HRE might be implemented. As a field, HRE needs to increase theorization of guiding principles that can focus upon universality and diversity. Osler’s well-established work in this area and recent book make the historical and global dimensions of this work a valuable contribution to our conversations about HRE.

References

- Osler, A. (2016). *Human rights and schooling: An ethical framework for teaching for social justice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.