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Teachers, human rights and education

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Background

This paper explores the implications of the powerful knowledge that is available to educators and to young people when they recognise and claim their human rights and use them in struggles to advance holistic and humane education and schooling.

In all economically advanced countries, including the UK, education policy is primarily driven by "a vision of education as an investment in human capital and an engine for enhancing international competitiveness" (Tomasevski, 2001: 22). This has led to a strong, sometimes exclusive, emphasis on school performance, driven by testing and inspection regimes. In these circumstances, tests often serve to ensure that students themselves feel responsible for their failure.

Such a reductive view of education has been resisted by teacher unions, by school principals, by parents and by students themselves. There are many examples of school communities struggling to promote an alternative vision of education as a site of creativity, dialogue, conviviality and democracy (Apple and Beane, 1999; Apple, 2008; Richardson, 2007).

There is now a developing body of research to suggest that regular testing can undermine children's self-confidence and commitment to learning and lead to a range of unintended behaviours, such as self-exclusion and opting out of learning, as young people adopt strategies which avoid the risk of failure and / or the criticism of teachers, parents or peers (Osler and Vincent, 2003; Jackson, 2006).

This paper argues that teachers, recognising the negative effects on young people of education structures that reproduce inequalities, require a language and a set of principles that they can deploy both in making judgements on a day to day basis and in developing longer term strategies. It builds on a growing body of research and practice that finds in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) universally agreed principles of human dignity, and children's human rights to provision, protection and participation that have wide-ranging implications for classroom organisation, curriculum and pedagogy, school leadership and teacher education (Lansdown, 1997; Osler and Starkey, 1996; 2010).

Research Questions

The paper explores the implications for schools and for teacher education of understandings of human rights as "a globally available repertoire of legitimate claim making" (Levy and Sznajder, 2006: 657). The universal acceptance of the CRC, ratified by the world's governments, provides a set of broad general principles for all those working with young people. However, these principles have to be operationalised and applied to actually existing settings and contexts. The paper draws on the CRC to derive pedagogical principles for consideration by teachers.

Methods

Human rights and children's human rights require an interdisciplinary perspective (Freeman, 2002). This paper builds on understandings of human rights from legal, sociological, historical, cultural, philosophical and political perspectives and applies them to education. It draws on a range of literatures, brought together in a new volume *Teachers and Human Rights Education* (Osler and Starkey, 2010).

Frame

Human rights and children's human rights are proposed as an analytical frame for viewing the world and informing the worldview of educators.

Research findings

This paper applies the globally validated principles of human rights both to existing theories of education and to the current realities of schools in the UK and the wider world. Previously, the power of this discourse has rarely been acknowledged and yet an understanding of the power of human rights principles and norms informs and supports democratic education (Dewey, [1916] 2002); critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970); capability approaches to education (Nussbaum, 1997; Sen, 1999); transformative citizenship education (Banks, 2008); critical democratic schooling (Apple and Beane, 1999; Apple, 2008); multicultural education (Banks, 2006; Au, 2009); citizenship education (Osler and Starkey, 2005).