

Critical Approaches to Human Rights Education

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Abstract

Human rights education has developed considerably over the last couple of decades and spread all over the world. Many different understandings of what human rights education is or should be have developed. More and more scholars criticise a “declarationist” approach (Keet) towards human rights education and advocate for more critical pedagogy. But what do such critical approaches look like?

Socio-material learning seems to provide an obvious answer to this question. Based on post-humanist theories, socio-material learning delves into a topic by avoiding pre-conceptions and binaries. Instead, it incites learners to discover different aspects and perspectives in order to understand complex (global) issues. Importantly, it does not focus on the human being only, but on the web of relations between human and non-human actors.

This poses several challenges: How can human rights education and socio-materiality be reconciled, given that human rights do focus on the human being and its dignity by definition? And is an educational approach that is based on an well-developed and institutionalised framework - international human rights (law) - compatible with an approach that explicitly tries and to part from pre-defined concepts?

At the same time, socio-material learning and human rights education do share certain commonalities: First, both aim at agency and transformation. Second, both perceive of education as a process - whether this process is open-ended or not depends on the specific understanding of human rights education. Third, both place the learners at the center of the educational process, where they assume responsibility for their own learning and determine what and how they learn.

Based on previous research and anecdotal experience, I will develop a few key theses about (critical) human rights education and socio-material learning and put them up for discussion.

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