

## **International human rights, citizenship education, and critical realism**

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Citizenship education invokes dilemmas even for the most committed teachers and students, researchers, and innovators. How can citizenship education advance equity and equal rights within highly unequal schools and societies? How can it support young people to feel they have the competence, confidence, and right to vote and to challenge injustice? How can we be sure international human rights are realities, not merely passing ideologies? This paper argues that rights really exist as expressions of visceral embodied human needs and moral desires that are integral to human relationships. Rights also serve as powerful legal structures that can help to prevent and remedy wrongs, and they work as enduring high standards and aspirations. The paper suggests how critical realism can help educators to resolve dilemmas in theoretical education about rights as knowledge, principles, and mechanisms, and in practical education that enables students to enjoy and exercise their rights and respect those of other people.

**Keywords:** children's rights; critical realism; embodied rights; ethics; politics; universal rights

### **Introduction**

Citizenship education invokes dilemmas (Osler, 2015a), even for the most committed teachers and students, researchers, and innovators. How can citizenship education advance equity and equal rights (Osler and Starkey, 2010) within highly unequal schools and societies? How can it support young people to feel they have the competence, confidence, and right to vote and to challenge injustice? How can we be sure international rights are realities, not merely passing ideologies? This paper argues that rights really exist as expressions of visceral embodied human needs and moral desires that are integral to human relationships. Rights also serve as powerful legal structures that can help to prevent and remedy wrongs, and they work as enduring high standards and aspirations.

The paper suggests how critical realism can help educators to resolve dilemmas in theoretical education about rights as knowledge, principles, and mechanisms, and in practical education that enables students to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect those of other people. Critical realism examines the independent existence of rights related to human nature on three levels of reality: the empirical, the actual, and causal reality. Practical grounds for the reality of rights will be shown to exist at four levels or planes of social being: physical, interpersonal, social structural, and inner being. The paper will then consider problems that challenge and limit citizenship education about rights as realities, and will conclude with ways to help to strengthen and expand analysis of international human rights in citizenship teaching and research.

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### Doubts about rights

Over the past 25 years, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), the creation of many children's voluntary organizations, the rise of childhood studies and its concern with children's agency (for example, James and Prout, 1997), and the *International Journal of Children's Rights* (Freeman, 2007) have all encouraged much social research on children's rights. However, this research has had limited influence on mainstream sociology and on how the reality of rights has been doubted. This doubt has been cast in several ways. Rights may be seen as rhetoric without reality, idealistic notions, aspirations that can never be realized. Natural rights (or innate, inalienable, human rights apart from legal rights) have been called 'nonsense upon stilts' (Bentham, 1843). Human rights are denigrated by powerful groups who find them challenging and inconvenient. For example, the former Director of Liberty has analysed how British government ministers work to suppress rights at home, despite justifying armed interventions abroad in the name of promoting human rights (Chakrabarti, 2014).

The rational person's rights to self-determination may be respected, but the rights of people who are assumed to be irrational may be questioned, especially children's tenuous and potentially disruptive rights and social status as rights holders. Their rights have been dismissed as empty slogans or 'a movement in search of a meaning' (Bricker, 1979). Although Bricker's paper predated the UNCRC, such views have been repeated later in influential circles. The barrister and later judge, Christina Lyon (2006), dismissed UNCRC international rights as 'toothless tigers', lacking the legal bite of national law, even though many UNCRC rights do exist in English law. Some philosophers see children as too volatile and unreliable to be able to exercise rights. Children are 'persons in the making' who are not 'the best or even the most appropriate guardians of their own interests ... they need protection from themselves as well as from others' (Brighouse, 2000: 11). The philosopher Onora O'Neill (1988) advised that the remedy for children's apparent lack of rights is for the child 'to grow up'. When Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and a leading expert on trust, O'Neill (2012) seemed to set children below inanimate objects, stating: 'I would trust some people to care for a young child, but not to post an important letter.'

The British Sociological Association (BSA) was formed in 1951, around the time when international human rights were agreed and enshrined (UN, 1948; CE, 1950). Yet for 60 years in its conferences and journals, the BSA largely ignored international human rights (Bauman, 2005; Hynes *et al.*, 2011; Alderson, 2012), partly because rights do not fit into dominant sociological traditions. These traditions include arguments from structural functionalism (rights are hardly needed in well-functioning societies), from objective positivism (normative rights concern abstract values rather than factual evidence), from sociology as a distinct discipline concerned with culture separated from nature and 'essentialism' (so that social constructionism treats beliefs and values as emerging from and only understood within local contexts, and therefore neither universal nor essential), and from post-structuralism and postmodernism (relativism denies universality). Developmental psychology's age-stage hierarchies undermine more horizontal concepts of equal, inalienable human rights across all age groups.

For reasons considered later, educationalists tend to concentrate on human rights that are implicitly adult rights rather than also children's rights. Even within international childhood studies, there is growing criticism of children's rights as 'post-colonial', individualistic, 'Western' ideas, imposed across the poorer majority world without respect for local needs and cultures (for example, Twum-Danso Imoh and Ame, 2012; Balagopalan, 2014). And if rights are only local and contingent, are they then expendable, perhaps unnecessary, and even illusory?

### Three levels of the reality of rights

This section will summarize a few ideas from critical realism, and will apply them to demonstrate the reality of rights. Critical realism is a philosophy of natural and social science, and its relevance to research about children and young people has been considered at length (for example, Alderson, 2013a; Alderson, 2016). Critical realism begins by separating ontology—existence from epistemology—thinking. So, for example, teaching and talking about rights involve epistemology, whereas children organizing a protest against the sale of a school playground involves ontology in the being and doing of rights. This difference challenges mainstream philosophy and science, which for 2,500 years have tended to collapse ontology into epistemology, things into thoughts in the *epistemic fallacy* (Bhaskar, 1998).

Empiricists collapse things into thoughts by presenting their data and evidence of reported beliefs and behaviours as if these can adequately represent, for example, the real, living, rights-related activity of the people being researched. Social constructionists also collapse things into thoughts, by contending that most, or even all, of the social world, such as how rights are respected or violated, exists only through human perceptions and social constructions of these activities. Yet although there can be a great overlap and interaction between thinking and talking about rights (epistemology) and the being and doing of rights (ontology), they are also partly separate, as this paper will discuss.

In critical realism's three layers of reality, the *empirical* level involves our perceptions and responses, whether we endorse rights or are sceptical about them. The second, *actual*, layer involves what actually happens, for example when children's rights to nutritious food, clean water, healthcare, education, and freedom from inhuman or degrading treatment are honoured or violated. Most research and teaching are active on these two levels, and tend to reduce the actual into the empirical, emphasizing views, definitions, discussions, and examples about rights.

However, critical realism also examines the deeper, third layer of *real causal* forces. These are often unseen and are only known in their effects, although they are crucial to enable us to understand and explain the world. The limitations of staying on the empirical and actual levels can be shown by an analogy with physics. It is as if we were to watch countless falling objects, tracing and wondering how and why they fall. Yet research and teaching are most useful when they explore hidden causes, as Newton did when he discovered gravity. Similarly, critical realism recognizes rights as powerful human aspirations that cause countless effects on our lives at actual and empirical levels.

Critical realism stresses the possibility of naturalism, meaning that although there is not uniformity between the natural and social sciences, there is more unity between their theories and methods than is commonly realized (Bhaskar, 1998). Gravity in physics can be compared with unseen causal powers in social science, such as class, gender, and race, which, like gravity, can only be seen in their effects, and which explain and partly predict trends and likely events. Causal powers also include human desires and struggles for justice and freedom, and the respect for equal rights, as well as human greed for control and resources, which drives oppression and war.

A critic might reply: 'We can accurately predict the velocity of falling objects, but no one can predict whether a 3-year-old child might one day go to Oxford University. A few extremely disadvantaged students gain admission to Oxford, and this disproves the idea that class, ethnicity, poverty, or privilege are causal powers.' And, the critic might add, 'Unpredictable free human agents cannot be compared to the inanimate matter of physics.'

The critical realist concepts of *closed and open systems* are useful here. Closed systems, when only one force is at work, are extremely rare. In open systems, two or more competing powers exist. Gravity, for example, is counteracted in open systems by factors such as aeroplane engines and the wings of a bird in flight. These resist gravity but they do not refute it. Natural scientists

do not demand 100 per cent results from a causal force such as gravity before accepting its existence, because they know that most events occur in open systems of competing powers. In the social world, many intersecting powers compete and interact in complex open systems. It is therefore even less reasonable to expect completely predictable results from socio-economic disadvantage as necessary evidence for proof of its causal significance.

The very rare entry into Oxford of disadvantaged black students demonstrates the highly predictable causal forces of social class, ethnicity, and poverty. The students' success also demonstrates the great effort and ability of the few who succeed against these forces. Human rights play a crucial part in supporting such human agency and potential against oppressive and unjust social forces. The next section considers ways to understand human rights as realities.

#### **Four grounds for the reality of rights**

Critical realism identifies four main areas or *planes of social being*: bodies in material relations with nature, interpersonal relations, social structures, and inner being (Bhaskar, 2008; Hartwig, 2007). Far from being only abstract concepts, rights are real because they exist on these four planes, which this section will review in turn.

On the first *physical plane* of social being, almost all rights are embodied. They are violated when food and shelter, physical freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and protections from abuse and arbitrary detention are denied. Rights-respecting schools honour children's bodies by attending to their basic needs for nutritious food and clean water (UN, 1989: Article 24); hungry and thirsty children are less able to concentrate and learn. Such schools do not expect active children to sit still for hours in cramped classrooms, or punish restless children with detentions, but give children time and space to revel in being energetic. Schools respect 'the worth and dignity of the child' (UN, 1989: Preamble) by nurturing both physical and mental well-being in such physical ways as providing clean toilets. Teachers are respected too, and are not required to try to control classes of fifty or a hundred students (Alderson and Yoshida, 2016). Rights-respecting schools also promote active intellectual exploratory learning through physically embodied practical activities in all subjects, from maths to chemistry, from drama to visiting historic sites. Global justice may be learned, for instance, through sharing a meal, arranged so that a few children have a four-course dinner, most have smaller two-course meals, and over a quarter have just a spoonful of boiled rice. The children then discuss their physical-moral sensations and emotions about world hunger and injustice.

Another important physical arena for rights is the natural world, with children's universal rights to clean air and water, to roam and explore freely, and to enjoy landscapes and many other living species. Action to reduce global warming involves protecting millions, potentially billions, of children from extreme weather, floods, and droughts, with ensuing forced migration and armed conflict over land and natural resources. Ancient religious traditions and equal rights require that all these resources are fairly shared and they connect environmental with human well-being. For example, Pope Francis (Cook, 2016) connected personal to global health and justice when he said that the priorities for bioethics are 'the inter-disciplinary analysis of the causes of environmental degradation [and respect for the human] person in his [sic] singularity, always as an end and never simply as a means.'

The second plane of social being, *interpersonal relationships*, unavoidably expresses rights in verbal and body language when each individual respects or disrespects the other, for example in the way in which teachers either simply demand respect or actively work to deserve it, and in how individuals question, resist, or submit to oppressive relationships. In New Zealand, Bronwyn Hayward's (2012) research on children, citizenship, and the environment follows a long

tradition through Rousseau and Dewey, in emphasizing how children learn through practical activity more than through abstract talk. Hayward gives many examples of how children become democratic, responsible citizens through critical questioning, challenging, and actively protesting against injustice and damage to natural spaces. In London, school students were so shocked by experiencing the government's threats to imprison and deport asylum-seeking children who were their friends that they led compassionate public protests. A teacher commented:

It was so powerful for the young people because really it made them aware of what it is to have rights ... and be able to exert your freedom of speech ... They would go along to demonstrations and marches and speak in front of thousands of people ... [Q]uite demure Muslim girls were primarily the driving force behind the campaign ... [They became] involved in the democratic process and [did] not see themselves as powerless but able to manipulate and control things.

(Pinson et al., 2010: 200)

Thirdly, rights exist through enduring and partly physical *social structures* inscribed on stone and parchment, such as in national statutory and common law and the many United Nations international rights treaties, administered by governments and courts. Increasingly, English lawyers are invoking these in the courts, through the 1998 Human Rights Act, and thereby embedding them into the legal precedence that influences Common Law in the 53 member countries of the Commonwealth of Nations. Citizens' rights also exist through their entitlements to state services: health, education, child protection, benefits, and systems of law and order. Transport and utilities systems are essential infrastructure to enable citizens to communicate and exercise their rights and freedoms. Progressive tax systems support all these structures and, crucially, promote justice through redistributing wealth (Murphy, 2015).

The fourth social plane is *inner being*, the personal–political self and the driving human impulses for freedom and justice (Bhaskar, 2008; Norrie, 2010). Rather than inventing modern rights, Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke and Kant refined and gave formal wording to age-old aspirations in the historic struggle between oppressors and oppressed. Later, nineteenth-century slaves were to echo the ancient Exodus history in their cry, 'Let my people go!' As well as the contest between King John and the barons that produced Magna Carta in 1215, one of the first formal legal rights documents, there was the equally important 1217 Charter of the Forest. This was based on centuries of the physical–moral rights of the English common people to the commons, that is the right to use local natural resources, collect food, fuel, and building materials, and graze animals. Peter Linebaugh (2014) records this history, following it through to the land enclosures and many other harsh oppressions of the common people, which drove Tom Paine to leave England to work for the American and then the French revolutions, and to write his passionate bestseller *Common Sense* (2004 [1776]).

Modern universal rights were documented and agreed by the United Nations (UN, 1948; see also CE, 1950) in response to the physical–moral oppressions of the Holocaust, with vows that it should never happen again. The Nuremberg trials revealed the atrocities of the Holocaust to the world, including lethal medical experiments, and the trials led to the Nuremberg Code (1947). Nuremberg international standards for medical research begin with the Kantian basic rights of non-interference and of people being regarded as ends in themselves, not being used as the means towards others' ends: the first point of the Nuremberg Code states that 'The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential.'

Grappling with complex medical dilemmas, modern bioethicists combine ethical traditions from Aristotle and Kant (deontology), and Mill (utilitarianism) to identify four basic principles: non-maleficence (do no harm); autonomy (respect each individual); beneficence (promote each person's best interests); and justice (equality, non-discrimination, and fairness). In critical realist terms, these principles are basic to human inner being and our *natural necessity* at the third real

causal layer of human being. They inform and drive our agency, at least to promote our own concerns, if not also those of other people. (For debates about when these driving motives emerge in early childhood, see Alderson, 2003 and Alderson, 2013a: Chapter 6).

Critical realism is concerned with absence, and what is ignored or denied. Paradoxically, rights are most present and urgent when they seem most absent, such as when people are starving or wrongly imprisoned. Rights exist as legal claims and remedies for wrongs.

The lawyer Conor Gearty (2011) sees human rights as ‘the ethical architecture necessary to decent everyday life’ and ‘the only contemporary idea with true universal and progressive appeal’ in the present ‘post-socialist, post-religious haze of market supremacy’. Rights respect everyone’s dignity through structures of accountability, equity, an independent rule of law, and a framework for greater justice between rich and poor individuals and states.

### **Challenges to citizenship education about children’s real human rights**

This section reviews how the above realities can complicate citizenship education about rights, when the education appears to work against human nature, when rights are distanced in time and space, and when serious conflicts are glossed over instead of being addressed.

#### **Rights and human nature**

Critical realism’s interest in natural necessity does not reduce human nature to the biological. Instead it recognizes complex interdependencies between human consciousness and mind that emerge from the brain and that continually interact with the body. Individuals’ strong views and experiences about how their own rights are respected or violated interact with their hormonal responses and moral emotions, such as delight when they are respected, and fear or anger if they are oppressed.

Human rights are complex ideas and values, which are learned and taught, and which refine and express in modern philosophical and legal terms seemingly innate, powerful, and timeless human impulses. Although ‘respect’ may be honoured in many different cultural ways (for example, either by looking directly at the other person or by politely averting one’s gaze) universal messages of underlying respect or disrespect are conveyed, received, and understood. From birth, babies resist and protest about being restrained and they relish being nurtured and comforted (Murray and Andrews, 2000) in a seemingly universal natural necessity. Rights derive their meaning, value, and necessity by resonating with the innate human capacities to suffer and to flourish. A constant question throughout life is when to cooperate with others, accept and support their views, and when it is right to protest against wrongs and try to remedy them. Young people’s protests can be especially exuberant and imaginative (Popović and Miller, 2015). Schools that simply suppress all disagreement and protest do not help students to work out peaceful democratic ways to resolve these questions together.

Critical realism usefully distinguishes between negative coercive *power2* and creative emancipating *power1*, overcoming the confusion that may arise when the single word ‘power’ is used to convey wholly opposite meanings. Critical realism sees the impulse towards freedom to move away from *power2* towards emancipating *power1* as central to human natural necessity (Bhaskar, 2008). Among countless examples, this driving impulse was recognized by two doctors who reviewed their work in a health promotion centre. They concluded:

Our failures during our first 18 months’ work have taught us [that] individuals, *from infants to old people*, resent or fail to show any interest in anything initially presented to them through discipline, regulation or instruction, which is another aspect of authority ... We have had to learn

to sit back for [the members' spontaneous] activities to emerge. Any impatience on our part, translated into help has strangled their efforts.

(Gribble, 2010: 163, my emphasis)

Citizenship presented as boring instruction may create long-lasting antipathy towards becoming an engaged citizen. Schools can, however, deeply engage children. For example during a campaign to preserve a local pool, 9-year-old Ashley said, 'You've got this kind of vibe inside you ... and you're putting your heart towards something' (Hayward, 2012: 155). At a renowned inclusive school, all the children were committed to equal care and respect for all (Alderson, 2013b).

Children arrive at school with highly developed awareness that may be explicit and conscious or tacit and subconscious. They know whom they trust, respect, and like, and can see when events seem to cohere and make sense or when they seem contradictory. Good teaching and learning flourish within this almost instinctive personal trust and truth. Unfortunately, teachers have to attend increasingly to externally planned, imposed, standardized, and assessed lessons. When many children inevitably resist such coercion, teachers have to impose deterrents and punishments, which work against rather than with human nature. This demands a passive compliance incompatible with active democracy.

Tensions and contradictions arise between the rhetoric of teaching human rights and freedoms, and the reality of coercive schools run by a senior management oligarchy, rigid zero-tolerance, and strict rules that must not be questioned. Competitive league tables undermine attempts to teach values of equality and solidarity. Fixed exclusions without the right to appeal deny values of tolerance, democratic negotiation, and conflict resolution, and they deny values of inclusive compassion, such as for neighbours and refugees. These unresolved contradictions feed cynicism and are likely to discourage future adults from trusting authority figures, whether teachers or politicians.

Might the contradictions also increase feelings of helpless confusion and apathy, and the tendency to opt out of political discussions and decisions when people feel they have no voice or influence? Compulsory citizenship lessons, which began in 2002, have not managed to reverse the continuing fall in numbers of younger adults who vote. Government interest in citizenship courses in schools, and in citizenship ceremonies for immigrants, developed in the late 1990s, when contrasts between two forms of politics, identified by Jeremy Gilbert (2015), became clearer. The first form, 'liberal' politics and journalism, favours personable, competent candidates who sell a political brand to please rational, self-interested voters. Government is then seen as a fairly neutral tool to be used towards any ends that might buy votes and power. Manifestos and politicians' promises may not be honoured, so that electors lose influence as well as faith in politicians.

Gilbert's (2015) alternative 'sociological' democracy celebrates the positive power of the great majority. It is highly aware that politics is 'essentially a matter of conflicts between competing sets of interests' held by many groups that greatly differ in size, strength, and public influence, in their wealth, effectiveness, and access to power and influence. A very few elite groups, the '1%', can control governments, whereas very many large but weak groups seldom do so. Citizenship education designed to be neutral and objective is liable to support this unjust reality by default and by avoiding critical questions about its injustice.

### ***Distancing rights***

Rights are distanced in many ways in schools. Human rights may be presented as future adult rights with little discussion of children's and young people's present rights and freedoms. Dull lessons about systems of government can bore, alienate, and confuse students. There is a fallacy

that school children ‘must be taught right from wrong’ and that they do not already know the difference. This view links to beliefs that children should be taught that certain behaviours *are wrong because they are vetoed*. In contrast, in real morality and justice certain behaviours *are vetoed because they are wrong* (Bauman, 2005). The real nature—ontology of wrongful behaviours exists before empirical epistemology formally judges them. Realist education about rights, therefore, appeals to children’s own longings for justice, freedom, fulfilment, emancipation, inclusion, and respect, moral and social emotions that are felt from the early years.

This has vital implications for moral and citizenship education, to move from instruction to active learning. More than through teaching and talking (epistemology), children learn about rights through their being and doing (ontology), being true to their sense of justice and the ‘worth and dignity’ of everyone, honoured in the Conventions (CE, 1950; UN, 1948; UN, 1989). Working children who are oppressed and denied schooling are especially aware of their living human rights (Hanson *et al.*, 2015).

### **Addressing serious conflicts or glossing over them**

If history and citizenship education present overly national, partial, and conflicting narratives of rights and overlook minorities’ interests, they do little to promote peace or justice in the globalized, interdependent world. Instead, education that retells these narratives more accurately moves from nationalism to pluralism, and examines cosmopolitan and universal human rights as the grounds for peace and justice (Osler, 2015a; Osler, 2015b; Starkey, 2015). In this approach, British school students may learn about Islam’s spiritual depths and great contributions to civilization (Wilkinson, 2015). Slavery is often taught as if it is a past problem. Yet with more slaves than ever today and with an estimated 13,000 slaves in Britain (Anti-Slavery, 2016), school students need to learn about present slavery and its origins in colonial, neocolonial and neoliberal eras. The black lawyer Bryan Stevenson (2014) contends that the silence and ignorance among white people about the extremely unjust endemic racism in the USA will never end without a formal peace and reconciliation process, in which schools would play a central part.

Such examples involve very controversial and painful matters, and require teachers to move beyond unreal ‘objectivity’ into sharing with students their moral judgements and hopes of political and economic change. Present routines pressure teachers into the traditional smoothing over of underlying conflicts to encourage superficial social harmony. Yet real harmony involves probing complex underlying injustices and untruths and working to reform them. Wendy Brown (2015) analysed how Canadian schools avoid complicated political deliberations about justice, values, class, democracy, economics, party politics, and power, while they promote neoliberal competitive individualism that is hollowing out experiences and values of community, class solidarity, and effective democracy. Brown contends that young people are led to feel powerless, passive, and apathetic. Youth suicide rates are rising (Sullivan *et al.*, 2016). Giroux (2015) writes of present US school education as a dis-imagination machine that purveys paralysing indifference, stupidity, and helplessness instead of courageous commitment and compassion. The decline in reported life-satisfaction, and the rise in inequality, in stress and pressure at school, in obesity and self-harming are all higher among British 15-year-olds, with poorer physical and mental health, compared with most other rich countries (UNICEF, 2016).

To surmount these many serious problems, teachers of citizenship education therefore need to be very well-qualified and supported (and many are not) and also to work in rights-respecting schools where the formal and informal curriculum reinforces their work. However, current routines in schools undermine equal human rights when they promote the following values: setting the individual effort and achievement of each student in competition against the rest; teaching



students to become good workers, entrepreneurs, and consumers but teaching little about the good life; simplistic ideas about ‘correct’ answers that can easily be marked electronically, moving away from complex and often collaborative activities; rewarding success and punishing failure. Such values and routines within schools are reinforced by growing competition between schools based on economic notions of success (Dorling 2016; Giroux 2015).

Many children enjoy and succeed at school but many do not and, for them, one of the most serious effects is to split work from play. Babies are brilliant learners, mixing intense curiosity, serious concentration, deep thought, and much-repeated effort with laughter, playful often zany exploring and creating, and absorbed pleasure. Too often, formal teaching and employment take the fun and joy out of learning and working, and instead enforce dull, pointless, unrewarding repetition and passive compliance. Rigorous punishments include over 150,000 English school students having fixed-term exclusions in 2013/14 (Gov.UK, 2015).

There is then a danger of young people assuming that schoolwork and employment are hard, complicated, often pointless, coercive, and dull. In contrast, free time must therefore be easy, playful, entertaining, unchallenging, and offer free consumer choices. Since the media and politicians attract public attention mainly during free time outside work time, it follows that many people want their politics to be light, amusing, and entertaining, and to gloss over their problems and prejudices instead of challenging them. The British mass media, almost wholly owned by a few billionaires, promote the public’s interest in distracting trivia and gossip about celebrities rather than serious political debate. Anxious citizens living precarious lives are also encouraged to fear and reject others in need, from ‘skivers’ to ‘bogus asylum seekers’. They are persuaded either to vote against their own interests and rights by supporting governments who favour the small elite, or else they are deterred from voting, whether through mistrust or contempt for politicians, hopelessness, apathy, or confusion, or perhaps a learned helplessness, a sense of being too ignorant and humble to have rights and to be electors.

## Conclusion

Erudite, self-educated nineteenth-century working men predicted that universal state schooling would create helpless, passive, lifelong submission to injustice and state power (reviewed in Alderson, 2003). And although English schools cannot be held wholly responsible for the low numbers of young adults who vote, they are clearly not successfully promoting an active democratic rights-respecting society. Citizenship classes may lend schools an appearance of democracy that helps to divert attention from how undemocratic they are in their routines and outcomes.

Tom Paine (1987: 277) longed for everyone, helped by the government in its own best interests, to fulfil their ‘genius and talents ... a mass of sense lying in a dormant state, and which unless something excites it to action, will descend with [them], in that condition, to the grave.’ How can schools help to bring forward everyone’s genius and talents and great capacities? Schools have huge potential to do so, if they change.

Besides the questions raised at the start of this paper, citizenship education involves dilemmas about how to promote social harmony and mutual understanding (Starkey, 2015; Wilkinson, 2015), yet not suppress active protest against injustice, oppression, and destruction, as well as how to promote mutual respect within education systems that humiliate, punish, exclude, and fail so many students. How can dwindling humanities education about the good life and good society relate to dominant concerns in the curriculum with business, personal success, and profit? How can citizenship classes attempt to be objective, neutral, and apolitical without seeming dull, irrelevant, and misleading in a highly politicized world? How can teachers

ensure that children and young people enjoy practical politics by learning through doing, critical questioning and debate, creative projects, practical conflict resolution, drama, and other activities that involve them deeply (Hayward, 2012), when schools increasingly emphasize the memorizing of abstract information for tests?

In summary, how can citizenship education recognize the living reality of rights in young people's present lives, overcome many inconsistencies and contradictions between theory and practice in schools, address serious conflicts instead of glossing over them, and promote Gilbert's (2015) 'sociological' rather than 'liberal' democracy? A first step would be to work to alter the context, the aspects of schools and education systems that undermine and deny children's present status as citizens with rights. Giroux (2015) calls for a revival of the radical imagination, defence of the public good, and renewed hope (and see Alderson, 2016: Chapter 12, on how utopian thinking can involve children). This involves getting off the fence of imagined impartiality, which inevitably defends existing problems and systems of power. The human rights Conventions (CE, 1950; UN, 1948; UN, 1989) offer educators extremely carefully worded and universally agreed ways forward for the whole school curriculum. Beyond education *about* rights (knowledge, principles, mechanisms), education *through* rights includes raising awareness, enjoying and exercising rights, and respecting other people's rights (UN, 2011).

### Notes on the contributor

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