

Human rights literacy: A quest for meaning

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This blog is to publicize important aspects and the position of a HREiD-project hosted by the NWU and funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa 2012-2014

Since 2004 researchers in the HREiD-research group (part of Edu-HRight-research entity in the Faculty of Education Sciences-NWU) has deliberated and published widely on the theoretical understandings of Human Rights Education and Diversity, Human Rights Education and related topics (cf. <http://www.hreid.co.za/>). We as authors of this blog and researchers in this field are of the opinion that Human Rights Education can only be effective if the knowledge construct and theoretical underpinning of *human rights literacy* can be defined and ontological determined. Human Rights Literacy also reflects the arguments constituting hermeneutic literacy as one of the underlying principles for human rights literacy (Roux, 2010). This notion however has never been explored further and the South African diverse and complex teacher education contexts, societal and political compositions, with its many constraints, serve as a challenging environment to conduct this research.

Why this research project?

Human rights refer to inherent and inalienable rights possessed by all humans simply by virtue of being human (English & Stapleton, 1997:1). Human rights education is an important part of creating a sustainable environment for human rights. One can argue that human rights and human rights education are two sides of the same coin and therefore the cornerstones of any developed and developing democratic society (cf. Du Preez, Simmonds & Roux 2012; Roux 2012). As human rights education was sanctioned by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 49/184 (23 December 1994) and further endorsed by the eight Millennium

Development Goals (MDGs) (2000-2015) it has implications for the comprehension of human rights literacy and praxis underpinned by social justice and values. Educators and activists of human rights argue that knowledge about human dignity is one of the important core principles of human rights. Qureshi, (2004:77) also states that the main aim of human rights was that society should respect human dignity and explore avenues to enhance respect amongst humans. Research has shown (Almqvist, 2005; Litorp, Franck & Almroth, 2008) that ignorance on human rights and the absence of human rights education can impact negatively on a society's concepts of social justice. Human rights education is not always taken very seriously in education systems and particularly in the South African education milieu. The question for us is why did some of the research studies shown that the lack of content and pedagogical knowledge (Simmonds, 2010) on human rights result in superficial content knowledge and classroom praxis. Furthermore Lohrenscheit, (2002:176) argues that human rights education should include “.. knowledge and cognitive skills and the understanding and positive valuing of human rights” (cf. also Tibbitts, 2002:162). In this project we are concentrating on a rhizomatic research methodology and infuse theories on the philosophical, ontological, and epistemological underpinnings of human rights education especially in teacher training. The assessment of skills, knowledge development and human rights values (Du Preez, 2008) can only be achieved if *human rights literacy* exists (Roux 2010). This research project with its different research domains identified to explore the ontology and epistemology of *human rights literacy*.

The overall aim of this research project is *to determine the knowledge field of human rights education in teacher education at South African Faculties of Education*. From this understanding, the project aims to develop a theoretical and philosophical underpinning for human rights literacy for teacher education and other curricula. The purpose of the study is to **“develop a theory on human rights literacy which may contribute to the knowledge field of human rights education for teacher training at South African Faculties of Education”**.

The exploration of *human rights literacy* was first indicated as an important issue (discourse) in our research on interreligious and intercultural teaching-learning (cf. Roux, 2010) and previous international projects (Roux, Smith, Ferguson, Du Preez, Small & Jarvis, J. 2009; Du Preez & Simmonds, 2011; Du Preez, 2013). According to Roux (2010: 1000), some human rights issues find moral relevance in international declarations and constitutions. However there are also areas of specific understandings and responses to human rights issues as well as the influences of particularistic views of different cultures, religions and world-views (Du Preez & Roux, 2010). This however does not explain or justify the abuse of universal human rights. Most Western democratic governments function from a humanist frame of reference (collective or particularist) and this paradigm also determine the social construct of a society.

Rationale and motivation

Research in and debates on diversity in education, highlights that teaching-learning will be able to function more positively in an ever-growing and in a less politicised manner, but still within the educational and social construct. Research projects and outputs on the abovementioned discourses indicate that understanding interreligious and intercultural teaching-learning through

the means of human rights education derive from the notion that in diverse social and education environments, a common denominator (human rights) might overcome differences, skewed by previous political dispensations with a history of violating human rights (cf. Runzo et al, 2007; Osler & Starkey, 1996; Gearon, 2002; Davies, 2000; De Tavarner & J Pollefeyt, 1998). However, content knowledge alone cannot guarantee the success of such an exercise. The development of a consciousness and moral construct on human rights might have a positive impact on society. If all the fundamentals, infused in human rights education, can successfully be utilised, a more just society may develop. The problem identified thus far, is that teachers (in-service) and students (pre-service) do not have the knowledge construct to successfully facilitate human rights education (Du Preez, 2008; Simmonds, 2010; Roux, 2010). An investigation to the anthropological aspects of human rights education was explored in a previous international research project (Roux et al, 2009) and outcomes of that report infuse the new identified subject matters. The lack of *human rights literacy* seemed to be the main impediment. This research explores fundamentals to determine what *human rights literacy* entail and how it can establish and develop an improved transformative curriculum and teaching-learning approaches (Du Preez, 2013). The rationale of this project is therefore to determine through *basic* and *applied* research the theoretical foundation of *human rights literacy*. The research concentrates on different identified areas that may contribute to the development of the epistemology and ontology of *human rights literacy*. These areas are (i) gender issues; (ii) human rights values (iii) social justice; (iv) socio-cultural contexts and (v) curriculum development and implementations. Each of these five identified areas is a starting point to construct a theoretical underpinning for *human rights literacy*. (See diagramme at the end of this document).

Research methodologies

Research design

A rhizomatic design based on grounded theory

The rhizome as metaphor for postmodern epistemology is the main research design. In order to define this, it is important to elaborate on the rhizome as a metaphor for postmodern knowledge, as opposed to the tree as a modernist model of knowledge (Deleuze & Guattari, [1983] in Lather, 2007). According to Lather (2007:124), "... [r]hizomes are systems with underground stems and aerial roots, whose fruits are tubers and bulbs". Rhizomes represent a complex nexus with "an open trajectory of loose and resonating aggregates" (Lather, 2007:93). In this sense it defies linear, hierarchical networks that create one-dimensionality in complex human and social knowledge constructs. Instead it suggests a "... journey among intersections, nodes, and regionalizations through a multcentered complexity" (Lather, 2007:124).

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1976; Glaser, 1993) is utilized as part of the rhizomatic research design. Grounded theory enables theory generation which is in line with the main purpose of this research. The theory needs to derive from the "grounded data". The methods used are designed to collect "rich data" that will influence the direction of the developed theory. Jacelon & O'Dell (2005:4) describes grounded theory as a qualitative research methodology "in

which substantive theory is derived through an ongoing process of continually reviewing the data, refining questions and re-evaluating these changes”.

Grounded theory was chosen for two reasons:

- i. Grounded theory seems to optimize the possibilities and outcomes to develop the knowledge construction and knowledge field on *human rights literacy*. It is also an appropriate design to answer the proposed research question of the project.
- ii. Research in the five different identified areas is conducted simultaneously. The point of departure is the *topic* that develops with a historical literature review into the *research question* and *hypothesis* feeding into the *conceptual framework*, which gives structure to the *data collection*. At this point *theory* is generated from the different methodologies. The researchers' specialization enhance the analyses of the collected data and should improve the outcomes of the research question on knowledge development of *human rights literacy* especially for teacher training at Faculties of Education.

The following methodological processes are used in order to collect the research data. It is enhancing the re-development and optimizing of theoretical discourses on *human rights literacy*. A mixed research methodology is utilised to explore different possible methods in obtaining the data and executing the empirical research. Qualitative and quantitative research methods will therefore be used. (cf. Merriam, 1998; 2002).

- i. A *walk-about* was conducted in November 2012 to explore the possible pitfalls and try to determine the potential questions suitable to fit the research aim.
- ii. The *survey* (questionnaires with 1st and 4th year teacher education students) as the starting point of the research is determining the knowledge construction on human rights literacy comprising of the five determined issues. These students as beginner and final year pre-service teachers and determine these students' knowledge on the five determinants and knowledge on the concept *human rights literacy*.
- iii. *Focus group discussions and interviews* will be conducted after the survey with voluntary student-groups (used in the survey) at the selected Faculties of Education. The reason is to validate the data collected in the survey, to challenge the feedback, identify opportunities and explore related avenues for the next phase of the data collection. This is also strengthening the discourses to re-evaluate the literature and epistemological understandings of *human rights literacy* we developed thus far.
- iv. The *analyses of curriculum content* and modules on human rights (theoretical and literature review) determine the knowledge content used in teacher training at Faculties of Education and therefore validate and crystalize the content with the data obtained in the survey and the focus group interviews. Research (Du Preez, 2008, Simmonds, 2010; Roux, 2010; Ferguson, 2010) has shown that teachers' lack of intrinsic knowledge hampers “good and reliable education” on diversity and human rights issues. Content on the five determinants identified is part of the grounded theory exercise.
- v. Finally, *questionnaires will again be administered to students* (1st 2nd and 3rd year student) to determine their basic knowledge construction on *human rights literacy* consisting of the five determined issues. The reason for this final follow-up survey is that the students are part of existing training programmes and recipients of the curriculum

content on human rights education and we need to detect any change in their literacy skills during their teacher training and development of literacy skills.

Conclusion thus far

This research project started in November 2012 and is at present conducting the first phase of the survey at different tertiary institutions. The outcome on the first analyses on the *walk-about*s indicate that there is a wide gap on students' conceptual understanding of human rights and human right values on the different campuses. This very diverse understandings is indicating that the questions in the survey on the different spheres, as outlined in the project, need to push the boundaries of questioning to the limit where students need to explore their own and inner moral, political, religious, cultural and social boundaries on the meaning of human rights in a developing democratic society. It is by no means possible to assess the "*walk-about*s" with imaginary ideas on the students' understanding of human rights or to define a gist of human rights literacy. We determined that the information, notions and perceptions given on human rights, gathered during the "*walk-about*s" can only be utilized with the final analyses and determinants after the analyses of the first survey. Pre-theoretical explorations on human rights literacy are therefore not only impossible, but will be determined by subjective interpretations that may inherently undermine the rhizomatic research design of this study.

Publications on the progress of the project are submitted to academic peer-reviewed journals.

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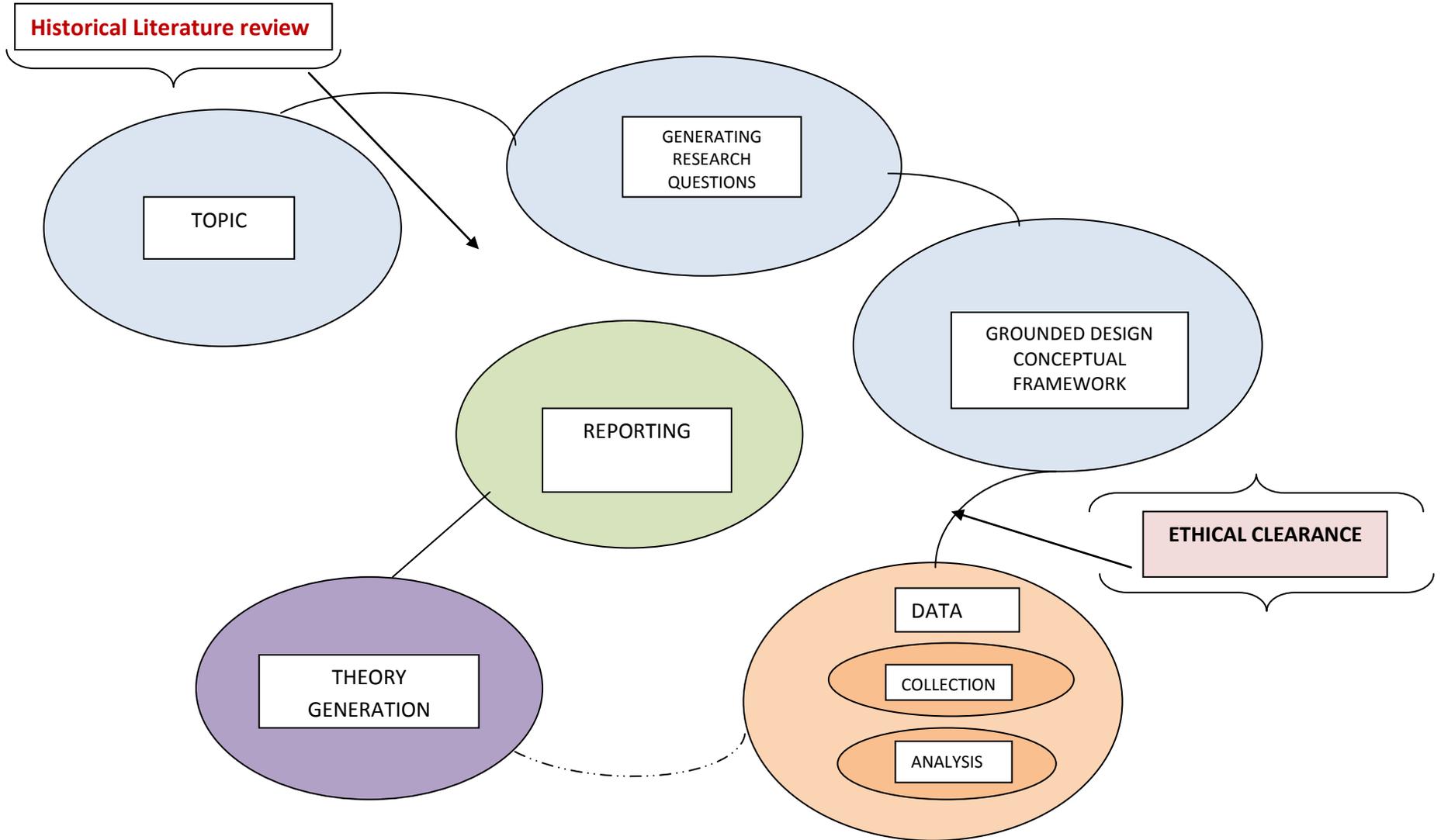
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Further information on research projects: <http://www.hleid.co.za>

Addendum A

Rhizomatic paradigm and grounded theory



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