



Shakespeare for Human Rights in Schools

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The present paper shows the results of an exploratory study about the relationship between human rights themes and Shakespeare education in schools. This work examines whether, in the area of humanities, teachers (of English) effectively use their classes to discuss some elements of the citizenship education related to human rights such: freedom, equality and justice. The study analyses the educational potential of literature and drama using Shakespeare as a case study.

The methodology used was interviews with English teachers from a range of secondary schools in the UK, under a qualitative approach.

The study found that teachers of English do not just talk about human rights when they teach Shakespeare, but also consider an important, fundamental topic for discussion. However, the study shows that despite that most of the teachers interviewed regard as imperative the relationship between human rights and Shakespeare, they never mention the words "human rights" within their classes and had never thought "consciously" about it before.

The study proves that the strategic partnership between citizenship education and literature could be translated into a real and positive experience for students. Furthermore, it demonstrates that some Shakespeare's plays can be a great way to discuss and analyse issues relating to human rights in the context of secondary school.

1. Introduction

This paper presents the results of a pilot study based on experiences of English teachers who teach Shakespeare in stage 3 and 4 (11-16 years old) in secondary schools in the UK. This pilot study is part of the doctoral exploratory research: *Problematizing Shakespeare through the gaze of Human Rights: Educators' perceptions and attitudes regarding Human Rights themes in Shakespeare Education*. The aim of this research is to explore how Shakespeare is taught in the UK viewing the relationship between Shakespeare teaching and human rights education.

2. Methodology

The main research questions are oriented to teachers' perceptions and attitudes regarding human rights themes in Shakespeare education in secondary schools: How do Shakespeare educators perceive the relation between Shakespeare plays and human rights themes? How do they face the issues of human rights themes within the class?

In order to answer these questions, the pilot study has been conceived under an ethnographic approach.

3. Findings

3.1 Gender Equality

Gender equality is the first theme that appeared recurrently during the study in questions related to human rights. They were more often linked to *Romeo and Juliet* but also to *The Tempest*, *The merchant of Venice* and *Macbeth* and its female protagonists. Teachers often use terms such as equality, race, gender, and freedom to talk about different things in very different contexts. During the interviews all the teachers linked *Romeo and Juliet* with women's issues. However, all of them verbalized the issue differently. Some of them use directly the words "gender", "women situation", "women agency," and "power of woman" but not one used the term equality of rights in any interview.

When teachers mentioned gender in relation to Shakespeare's plays, it could be observed two perspectives. One in regards to women and authority, and the other one to women as property, and both linked to the relation of the women with a master, a father, or husband. These two terms are mentioned in the literature [1] showing the relation of women dependence in Shakespeare's plays. Authority and property are part of the lexicon of patriarchal culture. Understanding women as a property of the father or the husband is one of the fundamental roots of the idea of men's authority over women in Early modern England. [2]

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Some teachers declared that they used *Romeo and Juliet* to make a comparison between Elizabethan society and modern day in terms of how “the women’s situation has changed in time”. Teacher C states that:

“In *Romeo and Juliet*, we do look at the situation. Has much changed for girls now? How controlling are fathers within their relationships? Do they have much choice over their partner?”

They attempted to introduce the comparison looking after similarities and differences. They explained that female students were more interested in the exercise of comparing *Juliet* or *Lady Macbeth* with their own experiences in relation to “being a woman”.

Another example that clearly demonstrates how the teacher was able to create a link between the play and the experience is develop in the literature [3]:

“Teacher B has a traveller girl in his class: Maria (pseudonym). Maria talks for the first time in front of the class about how *Juliet* is expected to wed when she is 13. Maria, as a traveller girl, is also expected to be married within a particular group of people. Some of her classmates asked: “So, if you brought home a boy who was not a traveller, how would your father react?” She replied: “I would not bring home a boy who wasn’t a traveller. I wouldn’t do that,” talking to the class as a whole (pg. 44).

Teacher B emphasizes that a lot of children did not know that something like that could happen nowadays or in their own class. Maria was a weak student in English before Shakespeare, but because she could relate with *Juliet* (with the idea of being very religious and having constraints) she engaged with the play. As a result of this, she got her highest marks in Shakespeare above any other assessment. On the other side, it was an opportunity to talk about diversity with the rest of the class. “We discussed her lifestyle in relation to this, and most of the class had no idea of the expectations put on her as a traveller girl, but she could say ‘Well, *Juliet* does this and I am meant to do this as well” expressed Teacher B.

In relation to the issue of authority, several teachers mentioned in these interviews that *Juliet* is seen as her father property so he would say ‘I give you to my friend’. However, although educators observe this as an important fact in the play, it was usually explained in terms of “property”. I asked them if they thought that it was an issue of freedom. They thought that it was an issue of women rights but they agreed that they had never thought of it as a human right issue. In the discourse over the interview, it was never explained like a problem of rights or freedom. No one mentioned the word freedom or equality of rights for *Juliet*.

3.2 Stereotypes versus respect for diversity

Some general content identified by the teachers are linked with the idea to avoiding stereotypes and promote respect for diversity.

“Something like the *Merchant of Venice* makes it very easy to explore issues of potential prejudice. I say we’re very good in terms of homophobic bullying not being there because we’ve had quite a few people in the sixth form who have been openly gay and it’s been just an amazingly tolerant society. But we do have some prejudice sometimes about travellers, for example, because our students haven’t really been exposed to travellers.”

As Cunningham [4] says avoiding prejudices and stereotypes, learning about injustice and inclusion, equality of opportunities inside school, racism or xenophobia in language, are some of the themes that HRE could promote. Teachers mention diversity as an ideal that motivates some of they decisions. Teacher M said:

“I was trying to get the kids to understand how that’s linked to Shakespeare and “*Romeo and Juliet*”, and about how obviously, you know, I’ve seen it performed where *Juliet* has been Palestinian and *Romeo* has been Israeli and so forth.”

Identifying categories such as gender, ethnicity, class and race, are interlinked [5] but the question that arises if it is sufficient to mention this issues or if it is necessary to empowering student to transform this idea in action.



3.3 Human Rights: a problem of others

In general, teachers were categorical in pointing out that they use Shakespeare to teach human rights; however, none of them mentioned the words human rights. Teachers used words like equality, racism, respect, values education when referring to the potential of literature to educate. The absence of the term human rights could be attributed to the possibility that it is considered to highly politicized, which could denote a left wing thought. Moreover, two teachers interviewed defined the term as 'sensitive topic. Some teachers commented that HR were not a problem in their school: "We are a white school so we don't have that problem". They mentioned that themes like diversity and racism are not common in the student daily life because they are a "white school". On the contrary, one professor interviewed in a school where there is greater diversity, explained that for them terms as multiculturalism or racism are not the exception, they are the norm. For these students, the issues of diversity and inequality are daily issues. Teacher M declared:

"I would say in this school, because we've got such a mixture of pupils that you could be from Venus. Honestly, it wouldn't matter. They are so open, because the ethos of the school is somebody from somewhere else and that's the norm. So difference is the norm"

The question that arises is whether or not for this teacher, in the first example, it is less relevant to teach HR in a school with less diversity. By contrast it could be argued that HRE in such schools is even more important because students are not "experiencing" diversity as in the second example.

My perception is that, many times, teachers answered positively to the relationship between Shakespeare and human rights because it is politically correct, but the fragility of their answers and poor analysis on the issues of HR, suggest that they had not made the relationship before the interviews. Some of them said: "Of course we do all the time, but I had never thought about it before". But is it the duty of teachers to teach English HR? or it is only the task of PSCE teachers.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has shown that the theatre of Shakespeare can effectively facilitate and promote HR within the classroom. Based on the literature on the promotion of HRE in schools this has three indirect consequences : It help o protect Democracies. In the recognition that democracy is essentially fragile and depends on active engagements of citizens and participating in cohesive communities [6]. Second, follow the thinking of Hahn, C. [7] it help to exercise democracy, in the understanding that teaching about human right is not sufficient and it is necessary to enable young people to be active citizens. Lister (1984) argues that teaching *about* HR in education is teaching *for* HR in society [8]

In general, teachers agree with the idea that Shakespeare theatre can encourage children to put themselves in others people's shoes through the characters: especially if they are using an active method, performing a character or just reading since it allows the student to experience "other lives".

The results proved that Shakespeare can help students to imagine how it would be to have been born in another culture, speak other languages, have other believes and background, practice tolerance and respect for others ideas and views. As teacher M affirms:

'Shakespeare helps you to do that very much, because it brings the issues out into the open and makes it alright to talk about it. It depersonalizes it, to a certain extent and you can talk about things then in the abstract, as a big issue, rather than just as a personal issue. Although as we've said, sharing their own personal thoughts is an important part as well. But if you can take it out of their background and talk about it generally...'

This is directly linked with the idea that theatre can "make the invisible-visible" [9]. In the way of allowing students to connect abstract concepts such as freedom, justice or identity with real experiences and behaviours. This paper has shown that the theatre of Shakespeare can effectively facilitate and promote HR within the classroom.

However, the findings also open new questions related to the preparation that teachers have to educate about human rights. Are teachers prepared for teaching about HR? Are they teaching their own understanding of HR? Is it possible to avoid bias? Are teachers aware of the cultural difference within their class? Is arrange marriage always a "forced marriage"? If a teacher is part of the UKIP party or the Green party have the same understanding of the word "human rights", "diversity" or "multiculturalism"?



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