

Human Rights education, turning words into action

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Recibido: 07/06/2020; Revisado: 02/07/2020; Aceptado: 10/11/2020

Abstract. This article considers how lecturers can use human rights education as a core element of preparing students for professional social work practice. This paper is based on a symposium held at the EASSW conference in Madrid 2019 which was hosted by members of an interest group of lecturers, from Belgium, the Netherlands and Ireland. The symposium elaborated on the interest groups action plan: ‘Human Rights, turning words into action’. The group posit that the application of human rights in social work practice should follow the rights and interests of service-users. The challenge for educators is that that in the first instance, students must learn about human rights instruments and enforcement mechanisms and then they must be schooled about the discursive, dialogical and democratic particularity of rights. Ignoring this character of human rights risks reducing rights to a technical debate. This article reflects on some of the difficulties, pitfalls and drawbacks that we have encountered, and some of the critiques of current human rights structures. The aim is to try to develop a ‘practice of critique’ and propose a strategic human rights agenda for professional social work education and practice.

Keywords: human rights; social justice, practice of critique; curriculum development in social work

[es] Educación en Derechos Humanos, convirtiendo palabras en acción

Resumen. Este artículo trata de cómo el profesorado puede incorporar los Derechos Humanos en la formación del alumnado de Trabajo Social. El origen del artículo arranca de un simposio presentado por un grupo de interés de Bélgica, Países Bajos e Irlanda en el Congreso de la EASSW de Madrid 2019, que se titulaba “Derechos Humanos: convirtiendo palabras en acción”. Se trata de hacer hincapié en que los Derechos Humanos son esenciales para la práctica del Trabajo Social, si entendemos la misma bajo el prisma de los derechos e intereses de las personas usuarias. El reto para el profesorado es, en primer lugar, que el alumnado debe aprender los instrumentos y las fortalezas que proveen los derechos humanos para la intervención del Trabajo Social y, después, estudiar las particularidades discursivas, dialógicas y democráticas de los derechos. Si ignoramos estos aspectos esenciales de los Derechos Humanos corremos el riesgo de reducirlos a una mera cuestión técnica. En este artículo se reflexiona, asimismo sobre las dificultades, las trampas y los inconvenientes que se han encontrado, así como algunas de las críticas de las actuales estructuras de los propios Derechos Humanos. Por último, el objetivo es intentar desarrollar una “crítica de la práctica” y proponer una agenda estratégica de los Derechos Humanos para la formación educativa y profesional del Trabajo Social.

Palabras clave: Derechos Humanos, justicia social, crítica de la práctica, desarrollo curricular en Trabajo Social.

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Cómo citar: Dijkstra, P.; Geraghty, C.; Klein, A.; Gradener, J.; Tirions, M.; Reynaert, D. (2021) Human Rights education, turning words into action. *Cuadernos de Trabajo Social*, 34(1), 67-77.

Introduction

In 2016, a Working Group published a Dutch and English language manifesto entitled *Human Rights at the Heart of Social Work (Education)!* The purpose of this manifesto was an appeal for a human rights-based approach in social work education. The manifesto has since been signed by over a hundred lecturers, professors, opinion leaders, and advocacy groups in and around Flanders and the Netherlands. This manifesto was followed by several planning meetings and conferences in the Netherlands, the establishment of an active Facebook page, the creation of a special interest group (SIG) ESWRA and a well-attended symposium in Paris as part of the 2017 EASSW conference, where our endeavour received overwhelming support. The result of all these activities is a vibrant, expanding (inter)national network and a real action plan (2018-2022).

This paper is a summary of our symposium at the EASSW Conference 2019 which took place in Madrid. It is our aim to exchange ideas, experiences and practices that have inspired us with the English and Spanish language community of social work and social work educators. We wish to explain the developments which have been achieved through our action plan and to elaborate on our experiences of how to teach human rights to social work students. This paper will also reflect on some of the difficulties, pitfalls and drawbacks that we have encountered and also some of the critiques of current human rights structures. Our approach is to support and to enrich the international networks of partner organizations that actively contribute to the development and dissemination of human rights in social work curricula.

The paper follows the five pillars in our manifesto and reflects our action plan. Each pillar is a key element for the implementation

of Human Rights in the Social Work curriculum. The pillars consist of : 1) Recognize human rights as both a socio-political framework and a framework for social practice; 2) Embed human rights in the social work curricula in an integrated and explicit way; 3) Learn how to use human rights as a framework for self-critical and politicizing social work; 4) Work towards professional development of lecturers in the field of social work and human rights and 5) Initiate research in order to boost the incorporation of human rights into the curricula of social work. (Reynaert, 2018).

1. Recognize human rights as both a socio-political framework and a framework for social practice

Recognition of human rights as both a socio-political framework and a framework for social practice can be realised by using a model which respects the different links between social work and human rights. Over the past 20 years, the connection between human rights and social work has become acknowledged within the professional community and forms a prominent part of the Global Definition of Social Work by IASSW. Here human rights are explicitly named as ethical principles. However, the discourse about the concrete content associated with human rights as a point of reference for social work is widespread.

1.1. Human Rights addressee and professional ethics

The basis of the model is a subdivision of the link between social work and human rights into two different perspectives: the link via social work as an addressee of human rights norms and human rights as a necessary reference for professional ethics including structur-

al and overarching approaches. The first perspective refers primarily to social work in welfare states where the practice of social work is directly or indirectly strongly integrated into the execution of state action. In their practice, social workers are therefore bound to this legal perspective of human rights in the sense of the ratified human rights conventions through this connection to (social) state action. From this perspective, human rights are mandatory for social workers, regardless of the professionals' position on human rights. On top of this, social workers also fall under the dual role of the state as fulfillers and violators of human rights, i.e. social workers are also potential human rights violators. Understood in this manner, human rights are a claim that is brought to social work from outside, and a reflection on one's own role as a potential violator of human rights follows on from critical theories of social work (Ife, 2012).

Irrespective of its integration into (social) state executions, however, the second mentioned perspective requires for social work ethical references. This can be derived from the overlapping of objectives. Social work and human rights name the fight against discrimination and liberation from oppression as a goal and one principle of human rights is the universality of their claims (IFSW, Staub-Bernasconi, 2018). This universality is a central moment for social work that wants to do justice to the diversity of people. Ife (2012) even goes so far as to describe human rights as a unifying core of social work internationally.

However, human rights are not a monolithic block. Their codification in the form of international human rights treaties as ethical basis of social work practice can be understood as a political expression of the claim to universality, even if this process can only be described as an approximation to a democratic procedure. Named rights are open to interpretation and the rights when codified always remain a historical product. The interpretability of human rights results from the fact that the rights or articles that have arisen politically are necessarily formulated so openly that they can be applied in the everyday life of all people on this globe in their diversity. Although interpretations of the organs concerned, e.g. the UN committees of the individual conventions or the ECHR, offer concretizations of the individual rights, the specific rights are nevertheless in need of interpretation. Even more fun-

damentally, the specific codified human rights must be understood as a product of the historical context and are thus subject to a –albeit historical– development (Galtung, 1994). The necessary interpretation of human rights and the process of their codification takes place in real political and social conditions, inherent in which is unequal power and injustice. The resulting conflicts are expressed in the appropriation of the idea of human rights by political currents to assert their interests and, at the same time, in the post-colonial and pluralistic criticism of human rights. The claim expressed in the principle of universality must therefore be realized in a process of universalization (Menke & Pollmann, 2007).

1.2. Socio-political framework and a framework for social practice in Social Work study

Based on the considerations outlined above, conclusions can be drawn for the integration of human rights into the study and curricula of social work. There is a need to accompany the necessary process of the universalization of human rights both in socio-political context and social practice. This asks for a sublime knowledge of human rights in their legal, ethical and political dimensions on the part of social workers. Codified human rights can –and should– be used as a legal foundation for the enforcement of clients' claims. This requires a basic knowledge of the international human rights regime, so that the concrete rights of people can be identified first and foremost.

In order to be able to do justice to the complexity of the diverse worlds in practice an understanding ethics of human rights is required in the curricula. It enables the development of a human rights-based attitude for future social workers and these insights are needed to weigh up the legitimacy of interests in conflicts in daily practice. It should necessarily include the interests affected in the social workers own role as the executing force of (social) state action and the associated power-based role. Including their own possible position as a potential violator of human rights. The latter point already ties in with the necessity of dealing with the political dimension of human rights. Based on the understanding that the social problems of clients also have structural causes and are often caused by mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion, the question

of representing and asserting interests in a society –from the local community to the world society– is fundamental in order to realize the human right to freedom from oppression and suffering.

To do justice to this orientation of social work and at the same time enable the realization of human rights a development process with the necessary concepts for action is required in addition to knowledge and insights. Reflection instruments for questioning social workers actions from a human rights perspective can already be found in many curricula of Dutch and Flemish universities. But from the perspective described above, they should require great involvement of clients in order to fulfil their position as human rights subjects. Subsequently, the social work curriculum demands structural approaches to action in order to represent the interests of for instance disadvantaged people in the sense of a political dimension.

An example of this is the implementation of policy work in the training of social workers is the approach taken at Saxion school of social work with the introduction of a new curriculum. The aim is to enable students to tackle the social problems they face on a higher, structural level. The legal perspective of human rights plays an important role in this context. Not only to teach how to prevent “passive” human rights violations on the part of social work, but also to enforce “active” human rights claims of clients (Prasad, 2018) which also includes more conflictual approaches up to civil disobedience. This necessarily brief presentation is intended to illustrate the necessities of insights into the universalization of human rights and the process of their realization. The workgroup supports this aspect of a human rights orientation to further shape and to promote its implementation in the curricula of social work.

2. Professional regulation as a complex example of embedding human rights, democracy and the rule of Law in curricula

Students awareness and fluency with Human Rights is a powerful tool in pursuit of our objective that social workers are human rights workers. Embedding human rights in the social work curricula in an integrated and explicit way can be achieved and supported in a number of ways. This section references the prin-

ciples of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the education goals of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). The mechanism of integrating human rights into the social work curriculum in Ireland will be referenced and the ways in which human rights and ethical principles can be further embedded into the learning of social work graduates will also be considered.

2.1. International Context

In 2015 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. This resolution acknowledges the fundamental importance of education and training for human rights and democracy in contributing to the promotion, protection and effective realization of all human rights. It can therefore be reasoned that it is a *professional imperative* that the principles of democracy and human rights are driven by schools of social work. Furthermore, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) place human rights as one of its overarching principles thus locating human rights firmly at the core of the profession;

Advocating and upholding human rights and social justice is the motivation and justification for social work. ... human rights can only be realized on a day-to-day basis if people take responsibility for each other and the environment, and the importance of creating reciprocal relationships within communities.

The International Association of Schools of Social Work has also confirmed the centrality of human rights in the education of social workers in its global standards for the education and training of the social work profession. Their global standards specify at point 8.8 the objective of:

Ensuring that social work students are schooled in a basic human rights approach, as reflected in international instruments such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the UN Vienna Declaration (1993).

It is reasonable to assert that the international drivers such as the UN, the IFSW and the IASSW provide the impetus for each coun-

try to ensure that Human Rights inform and shape all elements of social work practice and education. Each state can then reflect human rights principles in professional education and curriculum development.

2.2. Professional Regulation in Ireland and the Human Rights Proficiencies

In Ireland, a statutory body known as ‘Coru’ regulates a number of health and social care professions. As the professional regulator *Coru* sets ‘Standards of Proficiency’ for each profession and these standards detail the skills and abilities that all graduates, from an approved education programme, must possess in order to enter the public register of professionals. In all, there are 83 individual proficiencies detailed for Social Workers, and educators, must provide evidence that their curriculum addresses each. Programmes are only approved by the regulator where the educators can attest to all 83 proficiencies. If a programme is not approved, then the graduates cannot engage in professional practice. The *Coru* standards for the Human Rights Proficiencies specify that graduates will:

- Understand and apply a human rights-based approach (HRBA);
- Critically understand and be able to apply principles of social justice in one’s work including being able to appropriately challenge negative discrimination and unjust policies and practices.
- Empower service users to realise rights;
- Critically understand the legislative basis of actions within a service;
- Respect and uphold the rights, dignity and autonomy of every service user including their role in the diagnostic, therapeutic and social care process.

2.3. The Challenge

These developments are both necessary and welcome, however, the ‘standards of proficiency’ do not articulate the practicality and resilience that graduates, and new professionals will need in order to navigate the political and legal structures as they endeavour to care and campaign simultaneously. It is necessary to equip our students with a knowledge of human rights, but it is also essential to arm them with the socio-political skills that are necessary for

what Garavan (2012) describes as the ‘mess and circumstances of today’.

The challenge is further deepened by Jim Ife (2016) as he calls on educators to look deeper and differently at human rights. He states that the conventional approach to human rights education, with lawyers, teachers and action plans, is not sufficient to establish a culture of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of others. He regards ‘human rights from above’, with some suspicion as they are generally statements by the powerful about the powerless. Human rights are regarded with some mistrust, by those who feel marginalised by the actions of elites. For Ife (2016) the usual response is ‘education is the answer’ – true enough, but Ife challenges us to do more than what is usually meant by the term ‘human rights education’. He posits that we need to adopt an approach to human rights education that draws on Paolo Freire’s methods of pedagogy. Students of social worker should be educated to enable people to talk about human rights starting with their own experience of humanity and the ways in which they feel their own rights may be violated and need to be expressed, validated and protected.

3. Two Birds of a Feather Flock Together: Human Rights and Social Justice perspectives as pillars of a future proof social work

The application of human rights as a framework for self-critical and politicizing social work has in recent years evocated a firm debate in Belgium as well as in the Netherlands. Scope as well as impact differs in both countries, and this can be traced back to the respective traditional relationship between social work education and social work practice. In Belgium linking human rights to ‘future proof social work’ sparked discussions in a broad coalition of scholars, politicians, and social work professionals The Flemish Social Work Conference stated in 2018 that a human rights-based approach is crucial to develop a future proof social work, a more modest response. In the Flemish context a vivid debate takes place about the claim whether or not social work is ‘a human rights profession’. Proponents of this idea are challenged by critical voices who promote ethics of care as a basis for the profession. In contrast, it was the debate in Flanders,

that inspired mainly social work educators and researchers in the Netherlands, seeking to re-define practice in human rights and social justice principles. More specifically, the role of social work was explored as a counter-veiling power to the dominant discourse of self-reliance and activating communities. In 2019, the most prominent Dutch social work journal, *Sociale Vraagstukken* (Social Issues), hosted a number of critical analyses on the subject and even dedicated a special issue on the need for social work as a politicizing practice.

3.1 The essence of the debate

This debate often refers to the importance of the social justice perspective (Hubeau, 2018). We try to capture the core of the discussion and promote an alternative perspective: we state social work can and must be defined as both a human rights profession and as a social justice profession. Starting from the Global Definition of Social Work (2014) we conclude that both the human rights and the social justice perspective are crucial perspectives for the mission of social work: social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. Human Rights, both from a social constructivist and legal perspective legitimize the value claim of human dignity and universal rights (Reynaert *et al.*, 2018), the social justice lens underpins the necessity of solidarity, democracy, equal opportunities and social support. This not only illustrates how the founding ethical principles of social work can inspire social work education: when combined they offer opportunities to strengthen a curriculum and to train students to become future proof professionals. During the workshop at the EASSW 2019 conference in Madrid, it became clear that Belgium and the Netherlands are no exceptions on the negative impact of neo-liberal governance for practicing human rights and social justice as ethical guidelines. Students and staff in Social Work education are not immune to the surge, and in some European countries' systemic presence, of populism. At the same time, due to its strong institutional roots and qualifying function, it seems that higher education in Social Work might be one of the last bastions where the founding ethical social work principles can be cultivated. In our conclusion we will make some suggestions for Social Work education

as a counter force and as a gatekeeper for human rights and social justice in practice.

3.2. Social Work education and democratic tasks for the profession

This becomes clear when we combine for instance perspectives from the human rights lens with elements from capability approach to social rights and human dignity (Robeyns, 2017). We subscribe to Nussbaum's thesis (2012) that they are a starting point and not an end point in thinking about human dignity. A dignified existence should be shaped by and subject to individual choices and public deliberation and debate (Nussbaum, 2012, Sen, 2002, Dzur, 2018). In social work, this requires a democratic practice that ties in with people's lifestyles. In this world, social workers nurture dialogue and work with the frictions that come with shaping socially just structures that enable people to make choices about the life they want to lead with reason (Den Braber *et al.*, 2019). The basis of human dignity lies in the freedom of people to shape their lives in solidarity (Sen, 2002). This is the democratic task of social work (Spierts, 2019). The pursuit of human dignity for every individual therefore requires a strong collective focus. It requires, quoting C. Wright-Mills "to translate private troubles into public issues" (Wright-Mills, 1959). In order to realize individual human rights and freedoms, social work education must engage in democratic processes. Shaping a just society that can collectively contribute to building a dignified life is an important focus. (Den Braber *et al.*, 2019). Social work and education can contribute to this mission by placing issues of social justice and human rights at the heart of training and also by engaging in public debate and dialogue with policy makers on these issues. "It's about finding and organizing (new) collective solutions that contribute to strengthening (vulnerable) individuals, groups and communities" (Spierts, 2019).

4. Work towards the professional development of lectures in the field of social work and human rights

In the EASSW presentation of 2017 the UNESCO ASPnet was introduced as a (inter)national framework for curriculum development in democratic processes for social work students.

The objective was to ensure that students learn to read contexts and enhance their awareness when issues on human rights and (in)justice arise in situations, and how to respond to these issues. Vocational education is in this moment taken very literally: “as a vocation”. The four key areas of the ASP schools: intercultural learning, peace and human rights, and education for sustainable development, can be seen as the *vocational* areas on which societies invoke professionals, especially social workers. From this point of view vocational education has a *double* meaning: learning objectives for education and recognition of issues made by client users or citizens. Through recognising, analysing and responding to a concrete appeal they enhance the profession and enhance the democratic task for the social work professional. Creating learning objectives in education is for lectures work as usual but listening to the appeals from society and applying these into our teaching also requires additional training. The manuals of the UN can support a ‘train the trainer programme’ for professional development of lectures in the field of social work and human rights. How this double aspect of vocational education can guide the development will be briefly explained.

4.1. Training Human Rights for professional development requires themes, real issues from society and participatory methods

Professional development on Human Rights asks for a participatory approach where not only the lecturer, student relationship is addressed but also the direct relationship to society and the people (Ife, 2012; UN, 1994). It requires an awareness on real issues at stake in society and needs methods to translate these into the educational environment. We assert that it is crucial for social work education that it interacts with the social work field and its clients. In professional development it is not enough to direct the energy only into teacher student relationships. The UN in the Professional Training series, issues 1,18 and 19 contain the basic elements for a professional development (UN, 1994), Manual Issue 1, 1994. The basic human rights instruments are explained and depending on the training issues they could be addressed in different ways like international standards for the profession or to address concrete issues in the field. The philosophical values like equality, non-discrimi-

nation, solidarity and social responsibility deliver the main concepts which in a ‘train the trainer’ programme can be elaborated serve as a heuristic concept to analyse and structure the actual curriculum or as working dilemmas. Special attention needs to be given to the Human Rights instruments because they do not belong to the core business of education or to the professionals in the field. Cooperation with national representatives like UNESCO or the UN University of Peace or non-governmental organisations and movements in the field is advisable.

The core elements of the “train the trainer” programme are the issues found in the field and can be transformed to education through the didactic use of the concept’s problems (identification and response), themes (divided in generic themes and vulnerable groups) and dilemmas. Through vignettes and the method of recognition, analysis and responding (recognition and prioritizing) a programme can get its core elements (UN, 1994). The manuals 18 and 19 enable to get the voice of society and the real training needs in the classroom. The two manuals deliver a method based on participation through a five-step process for designing and evaluation developed courses in school or at work. The five evaluative steps are: understanding the change that is needed (training needs assessment), describe the desired change (defining results), increase effectiveness (formative evaluation), determine the change that has occurred (end-of-training summative evaluation, transfer evaluation and impact evaluation) and the last step; communicate results (the evaluating report) (UN, n.d.). The manuals deliver extensive examples, schemes and tools and explains how to cooperate with service users or organisations.

4.2. Developing professionals in dynamic societies

Professional education takes place in a dual context of work and school. These environments can enrich education programmes if we can find adequate ways for connecting to the dynamics of society; otherwise social work education loses its (professional) legitimacy. The UN manuals provide context, methods and issues for developing ‘train the trainer’ programmes. However, it is challenging to get a grip on these dynamics due to the slow pace at which institutes and curricula change?

One of the main purposes of the work-group is to discover, to address and to develop through the dynamics the structural and static elements and awareness on Human Rights and Social Work. By active teaching, meetings, the ESWRA SIG, cooperation on international conferences and organising special issue conference in Flanders and the Netherlands we share and discuss educational experiences and develop conferences we on human rights try to understand and transform the human rights-based approach.

The Universal Human Rights Declaration and other declarations and covenants can be used as static and stable instruments for legitimating the social work curricula or as tool for structuring the programmes in a curriculum and as a reference for cooperating with organisations and society (Reynaert et al., 2018). For the youth specialisation of Social Work in the University of Rotterdam the Rights of the Child serve as an example of how to combine educational themes in the curriculum. Dilemmas in education serve to recognise, analyse, prioritize, act and evaluate human rights in practice. The UNESCO organisation and its themes are explored a middle and long-term development concepts for curriculum development and workshops with relevant stakeholders. Another, less known, aspect of UNESCO is the connection which can be made with the society is the intangible heritage list (on International and National level) and the World Days. In the University of Rotterdam cooperation is realised with non-governmental organisations and citizens for extra-curricular activities on support of the abolition of slavery in the Keti Koti Festival or masterclasses on the international day of the dialogue on the 22nd of May. Multiculturalism, discrimination and solidarity become an in this way essential part of education and serve the general development of teachers, students and our stakeholders meanwhile diversity, anti-discrimination and solidarity will remain core elements for social work for many years.

5. Social work research on human rights: A giant with feet of clay?

The last pillar of the Manifesto reads as follows: *Initiate scientific research in order to boost the incorporation of human rights into the curricula of social work.* Institutions for

higher education in general have a threefold assignment: education, research and service to the community. These three assignments are closely linked to one another: the nexus between education and research guarantees that the latest scientific insights on current topics are included in the educational programs or that students can participate in ongoing research projects. At the same time, research must also serve practice by being a partner in practice development. Learning in practice through models such as community service learning for instance ensure a close connection between education and practice. So, education, research and service to the community are closely linked.

While educational programmes in social work have often been innovative in the development of a variety of learning models on human rights closely connected with the field of practice (Libal *et al.*, 2015), it is remarkable that research is rather lags behind. Although it is generally recognized that human rights are a fundamental framework for social work, both as a practice and as an academic discipline, limited research has been carried out on human rights in social work. There is little 'evidence' that human rights contribute to a better respect for human dignity and social justice for the clients in social work practice. If we want to avoid a scenario that human rights in social work just becomes an ideology rather than a framework for practice, we need to take human rights in social work research more seriously. Otherwise, we risk human rights in social work becoming a 'giant with feet of clay'.

5.1. Social Work research on human rights: a constructivist perspective

In line with Ife (2012), we argue that the practice of human rights in social work is characteristically discursive in nature. There are no clear-cut answers to realise human rights in social work practice. There are several reasons for this. One element is that realising human rights in social work is a highly contextual activity, both at the micro and macro level. Following Lorenz (2008), who explains that social work's identity is strongly connected with the nation state and the 'architecture' of the welfare state. Translations of human rights in the national or local context can be very diverse. Social services for instance that are a necessary resource to realise human rights,

can be much more ‘targeted’, addressing particular groups, as is generally the case in Anglo-Saxon oriented countries. While Scandinavian oriented countries organise social services much more from a universal point of view. Likewise, as our modern democratic societies are characterised by a plurality of interests, corresponding with a plurality of different claims (Mouffe, 2011). Different or even opposing claims for human rights might exist in particular contexts. Claims for the right to a sustainable environment for instance do not necessarily go hand in hand with claims for the right to employment. Given these particularities of national and local context, human rights in social work practice demand different constructions. To say that human rights are ‘constructed’ by social work means that social workers ‘make’ human rights. In their confrontation with the needs of service-users and their lifeworld, social workers shape ideas, interpretation and constructions of human rights. This is in line with what Ife and Fiske (2006) who assert: *Human rights (...) are collectively constructed, collectively understood and collectively experienced.* So, human rights in social work are not only to be understood as theoretical or universal principles that have meaning regardless of context. On the contrary, human rights in social work can only be understood in their connection with the contexts in which social workers make use of them. If we want to properly understand the value and possibilities (but also the limitations) of human right for social work, we have to make an ‘empirical shift’ in social work research in relation to human rights. We than need to recognize the ‘practice’ of human rights in social work, i.e. the often complex, recalcitrant and ambiguous nature that goes together with realizing human rights in social work practice. Practice-based research on human rights in social work can give insight in the diversities of constructions of human rights in social work.

5.2. Social Work research on human rights at the University College Ghent

At the University College Ghent, the largest University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Flanders (Belgium), education and research are inextricably linked. Research contributes to the professionalization of the educational programs and it facilitates reflection on professional practice. In line with this general

philosophy, the Department of Social Work of the University College Ghent in 2012 established the research group on ‘social work and human rights’ within the department. The research group gathers lecturers and researcher who in one way or another have expertise in the field of human rights-based social work practices. Key in the expertise of the research group is a shared focus on ‘professional discretion’ of social workers in constructing human rights. Inspired by the work of Evans (2016), we consider professional discretion as the ‘space’ social workers have or take to give meaning to rules, protocols, contexts, etc. in their daily work as frontline professionals. In the work of the research group, the focus of research projects is exactly on the professional discretion of social workers when seeking after the realization of human rights in practice. Research projects of the research group are set up in close collaboration and partnership with social work organizations in very diverse contexts such as organizations for community development, mental health social work, social housing, school social work, poverty organizations, children’s rights organizations, community restaurants, etc. These projects have a shared interest in issues such as non-realization of rights, in particular, for people living in vulnerable conditions, the (un)accessibility of social work organizations and community-based approaches to social work. Based on these partnerships, the research group’s aim is to critically engage with the way human rights are constructed by social work.

6. Final Remarks

Human rights in social work education are characterised by their discursive and democratic particularity. The application of human rights should follow the rights and interest of service-users of social work to fulfil the threefold assignment of education, research and service to the community. Ignoring the discursive and dialogic character of human rights risks reducing rights to a technical debate. Human rights in action means critically analysing the application of human rights in a concrete context in both education and professional practice. An objective of our workgroup is to develop an (intern)national ‘practice of critique’ in social work education in order to equip future social work professionals with the skills to advance

human rights in the practice of social work. A strategy to further galvanize this ‘practice of critique’ requires at least the following:

- Identification, and scrutiny of neoliberal ideas incorporated into social work methods and organizations vis a vis instrumentalization of human rights in practice;
- Highlighting in research how (dis)regard for human rights and social justice principles negatively or positively impacts social work service users;
- Initiation of a value-based dialogue with social work practice organizations and client users around the ethical principles of

social work, the boundaries of practice and experiences of social workers;

- Strengthening critical reflection and policy practice within the social work curriculum;
- Cultivating pluralism in social work ideas.

As educators we need to school our students on human rights instruments and enforcement mechanisms, but we also need to enable our students to develop ideas of human rights from below, and what that means in theory and practice for client users. Our goal as a working group remains the translation of human rights knowledge and practice into a set of professional skills for social workers.

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