

Reflections on HRE in Norway: Legislation, curriculum and practice

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Norway is in many ways a beautiful place to live. It is relatively peaceful and politically stable. Internationally, Norway is known for its prosperous economy, for ranking high on the Human Development Index, including the Gender Development Index, and for its diplomacy, assisting conflict-ridden societies in political negotiations. Last, but not least, Norway is associated with the Nobel Peace Prize and the related ceremonies taking place in December each year. The flipside of this coin is of course among other things Norway's involvement in extracting nonrenewable resources such as gas and oil both nationally and internationally and its history with the Norwegianization policy depriving the Sami people of their rights.

One of the challenges we are facing today concerns how many children and youth experience racist and sexist behavior in their everyday lives at school. According to the interviews I have done with adolescents in Norwegian upper secondary schools, harassment is just something they have to endure and they do not consider their teacher to have any particular responsibility for protecting them from such misbehavior nor do they have enough knowledge about their rights. This is where Human Rights Education (HRE) can play an important role in ensuring that children and young people have knowledge about their rights, that they develop respect for human rights and that the education is in concordance with their rights. I consider education about, through and for children's rights as a branch within the wider concept of HRE. In this article, I briefly present how HRE is expressed in the Norwegian Constitution, the Norwegian Education Act, the Core Curriculum, the subject-specific curriculum in social science education and teacher education.

The Norwegian Constitution and the Education Act

In 2014, amendments were made to the Norwegian Constitution as part of the bicentennial celebration of the Constitution (1814 – 2014). The amendment of article 109 confirms that "education shall safeguard the individual's abilities and needs, and promote respect for democracy, the rule of law and human rights". As pinpointed by Osler and Skarra (2021), this amendment made HRE a constitutional right (p.194). Unfortunately, as pointed out by legal scholar, Hadi Lile, the Constitutional Commission did not recommend changes in the Education Act, arguing that the amendment of article 109 "only reflected the aims of education enshrined in the purpose clause of the Education Act" (Lile, 2019, p.147). The purpose clause in the Education Act, Section 1-1 states that:

Education and training must be based on fundamental values in Christian and humanist heritage and traditions, such as respect for human dignity and nature, on intellectual freedom, charity, forgiveness, equality and solidarity, values that also appear in different religions and beliefs and are rooted in human rights.

Prominent scholars in the field of HRE affirm that this formulation equates Christian and humanist values with human rights, which may exclude students coming from other religious backgrounds (Osler

& Skarra, 2021). As such, there is room for improvement in Norwegian educational legislation for a more inclusive approach to HRE that does not equate Christian and humanist values with human rights.

The Core Curriculum

In 2017, the new core curriculum was adopted for primary and secondary education and training in Norway. This document presents the main values and principles for education. Children's rights are explicitly expressed in the Core Curriculum:

Based on human dignity, human rights are an important part of the foundation of our constitutional state. They are based on universal values that apply to all people regardless of who they are, where they come from and where they are. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is also a part of human rights, giving children and young people special protection. The education and training given must comply with human rights, and the pupils must also acquire knowledge about these rights (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p.5).

In my opinion, this document may contribute to make teachers aware of how education should be rights-based, although this formulation has been criticized for being very general and without direction for the curriculum (Lile, 2019). However, this document illustrates at least that the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research has good intentions for ensuring children's rights in school, although political intentions not always coincide with the actual practice in school.

Subject-specific curriculum: Social science education

In Norway, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training provides national curriculums in each subjects. In social science education for primary and secondary school (SAF01-04), some competence aims are related to HRE, as learners should:

- Present and give examples of children's rights in Norway and in the world, and what children can do when these rights are violated (2nd grade).
- Present human rights and children's rights, and reflect upon why these rights exist (4th grade).
- Discuss human worth and equality, and compare how human rights have been and are safeguarded in various countries (7th grade).
- Explore and describe how human rights and indigenous rights and international agreements and cooperation is of importance for national politics, human lives, equality and worth (10th grade).
- Explain the foundation of human rights and explore and give examples of human rights violations nationally or internationally (11th grade, upper secondary school).

As we see, children's rights are explicitly addressed in the competence aims for second, fourth and seventh grade in social science. In tenth grade, students should have acquired knowledge about human rights more broadly, including indigenous rights. In upper secondary school, students are expected to know the foundation of human rights and be able to give examples of human rights violations nationally or internationally.

Vesterdal's (2016) study among social science teachers portray that Norwegian teachers tend to teach about human rights violations abroad rather than human rights violations in Norway. This might be related to Norway's self-image as a human rights haven. If teachers rather choose to address human rights violations abroad rather than ongoing violations nationally, many learners may not feel represented in the human rights narratives (Adami, 2021). The way the competence aim is expressed in upper secondary school, teachers have the autonomy to choose what to emphasize in teaching – human rights violations nationally *or* internationally.

In Osler and Skarra's interview study with Norwegian teachers, they find that teachers at times do what they please depending on personal interest, which illustrates teachers' autonomy when implementing the curriculum. Although a certain level of autonomy is essential in the teaching profession, teaching about, through and for human rights is not a simple matter of choice, as "teacher autonomy needs to be matched by a recognition that learners have the right to HRE" (Osler and Skarra, 2021, p.202).

Children's rights and teacher education

The curriculum regulations for Norwegian teacher education include children's rights, and particularly express the importance of how teacher students should acquire knowledge about violence and abuse targeting children:

Knowledge of children living in difficult circumstances, including knowledge of violence and sexual abuse against children and young people, of children's and young people's rights in a national and international perspective and on how to take necessary action under current legislation (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2020, p.2).

These regulations provide a basis for teacher students and future teachers action-capacity for prevention and protection – at least in theory. Whether teacher students actually get this kind of training, is most likely dependent on whether the teacher educators they meet have competence in this field. In a recently published report by Svendsen and Furunes (2022), they discuss findings based on interviews with 14 teacher educators. They find that teacher educators' perceived lack of competence is especially high regarding issues related to sexual violence, gender and sexual diversity (Svendsen & Furunes, 2022).

Although the regulations for teacher education are well developed on a policy-level, there is great potential for improvements in practice in teacher education. Increasing teacher educators' competence and legal literacy is essential for equipping current and future teachers to teach about, through and for children's rights.

Concluding reflections

As we have seen, there is room for improvement regarding the Norwegian educational legislation as Christian and humanist values are equated with human rights. There are good intentions in the Core Curriculum stating that education should be in concordance with human rights, and in particular children's rights. The current regulations for teacher education are clear about the importance of how teacher students should acquire knowledge about children's rights, and action-capacity in particular concerning prevention and protection from violence and child abuse.

In school, there is still a gap between rhetoric and practice concerning ensuring children's rights, and the way in which human rights education is implemented depends at times on teachers' personal interests and how they choose to use their autonomy. Teachers' autonomy cannot take precedence over learners' right to HRE. I believe that ensuring this constitutional right could entail finding a balance between teachers' autonomy, curricular and institutional support. In my own research on teaching practice concerning children's rights, harassment and abuse, I find that teachers who experience support from the school management and who collaborate to develop good teaching lessons, feel more equipped to take on approaches to education that may, or may not, be emotionally challenging (Goldschmidt-Gjerløw, 2022).

HRE aims to integrate knowledge, attitudes and action-capacity for respecting one's own and others rights and build a shared human rights culture that acknowledges all human beings dignity and worth across differences. Education about, through and for human rights entails providing a space for enabling students' voices and active participation in decision-making and learning both when planning, conducting and evaluating teaching lessons. Teaching and learning about human rights violations close to students' own lives is an emotional journey, and it is essential to establish trust and good relations in class as a foundation for learning. In this regard, HRE entails an emotional dimension in addition to the knowledge component. Last, but not least, HRE is about solidarity in the sense that students' concerns should also be teachers' concerns.

I conclude this article in memory of one of our greatest educational philosophers, Nel Noddings, who reminds us that "True happiness requires a capacity to share unhappiness; that is, to be truly happy, we must be moved to alleviate the misery around us" (Noddings, 2003, p.3).

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