

Research articles

Human rights and children's rights in worldview education in Finland

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Abstract

In this article we examine the profiling of human rights and children's rights in religious education (RE) and its secular alternative in Finland. We use the term 'worldview education' to describe the combination of these subjects. We analyse what kinds of human rights and ethical issues are raised in Finnish worldview education. One specific focus is the explicit mention of human rights and children's rights in the worldview education section of the Finnish national core curriculum (2014). We conclude that the curriculum gives plenty of space to human rights and children's rights, and that this enables one to conceive of human rights as being an overarching ethical perspective in worldview education. Nevertheless, we indicate that the organisation of worldview education in Finland has some problems when it comes to the realisation of children's freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

Keywords

Human rights, children's rights, ethics, human rights education, religious education, worldview education

Introduction

Global and local societal trends, such as the rise of autocratisation, polarisation and populism, have underlined how important it is for schools and teachers to advance knowledge of human rights) and knowledge about important aspects of the constitutional state. Human rights education (HRE) has the potential to increase this knowledge. In Finland, human rights were strengthened in the latest curricula reforms - from early childhood to the upper secondary school (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE], 2018; 2019). Our interest in this study is the human rights and children's rights issues that arise in Finnish worldview education. In analysing the Finnish curriculum we focus on the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (FNAE 2014). This covers grades 1-9 (7- to 16-year-olds). Our analytical framework draws on Müller's (2009) definition of explicit and implicit forms of human rights education.

The Finnish school system is very homogenous; in basic education more than 96% of schools are municipal and practically all schools follow the National Core Curriculum. We use the collective term 'worldview education' to describe the education provided by religious education (RE) and its secular alternative—culture, worldview and ethics (CWE). RE is a compulsory subject in basic and general upper secondary education in Finland, but the different syllabi for RE and those for CWE are alternatives for pupils, and instruction in all of them is non-confessional in principle. A teacher can in theory teach any combination of worldview education subjects if he or she has the relevant university degree, because the teacher's own worldview or religious community membership is not supposed to influence the non-confessional instruction (see e.g. Seppo, 2003, p. 184). In basic education there are currently 10 different RE syllabi and one for CWE. We describe this system in more detail below.

We focus on these questions: 1) How are human rights and children's rights profiled in the 2014 Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, particularly in worldview education? 2) What kinds of human rights and ethical issues does the Finnish worldview education system raise?

Human rights, children's rights and human rights education

Human rights and HRE can be defined from many perspectives. HRE has moral, legal, political, and practical levels. In Finland, like in many other European countries, there are continuous disputes related to the role of religion, secularism or worldview in the public institution of the school (see Poulter, Kuusisto, Malama & Kallioniemi, 2017; Poulter, 2019). From the legal perspective, human rights are a part of public law, and this is relevant to the teacher as a public authority figure and schools as public spaces.

HRE has been criticised for overemphasising law, being considered 'declarationist' (Keet,

2012, p. 7), uncritical and apolitical (Zembylas & Keet, 2019). Without reducing HRE to 'declarationism', we want to maintain an awareness of the legal principles of human rights in this article. There are many reasons for this. Lundy and Martínez Sainz (2018) have argued that neglecting the legal knowledge aspect of teaching children's rights is problematic. Research has shown that in Finland this neglect is a disquieting fact: the judicial base has been neglected in HRE (Human Rights Centre, 2014); teachers and students have not understood human rights but have seen them as 'obvious yet alien' (Matilainen, 2011); domestic human rights problems have been neglected (Toivanen, 2007); and student teachers have wished for explicit teaching of human rights and children's rights (Kasa, Rautiainen, Malama & Kallioniemi, 2021). Our approach does not reduce human rights and conflicts to legal issues, nor is human rights law considered 'pure' or neutral in the sense that it does not have biases. The European Court of Human Rights decisions, for example, have been criticised for being biased against Muslim minorities (Pirjola, 2011).

From the legal perspective, human rights are a part of international and national public law. In Finland, human rights are included in the Constitution (1999/731) as fundamental rights (§ 6-21) and § 22 states that public authorities must protect them. In section § 6 Equality there is a special mention that 'children shall be treated equally and as individuals and they shall be allowed to influence matters pertaining to themselves to a degree corresponding to their level of development' (Constitution 1999/731, § 6.3). Additionally, Finland has ratified the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in 1990, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991, and 16 human rights treaties (see Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights [OHCHR], 2021).

The CRC (United Nations, 1989) is the widest and most readily ratified convention in the world (Howe & Cowell, 2010, p. 92). It sets minimum standards to secure children's rights in education; these include educating children about their rights as part of the formal school curriculum and creating a culture that reflects the principles of CRC (Osler & Starkey, 1998, p. 313). These principles concern the best interests of the child (Article 3), non-discrimination (Article 2), the inherent right to life (Article 6), and age-appropriate participation. Participation means the right to be heard and the views of the child to be considered 'in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (Article 12) (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], 2003, p. 12; Howe & Cowell, 2010, p. 93). Sormunen (2021) has found that the legal interpretation of the concept of the best interests of the child varies and suggests a processual approach to the concept rather than trying to define it substantially. Between 2001 and 2014, Finnish Supreme Administrative Court precedents related to children's education did not show a profound awareness of the child's interests and rights (Sormunen, 2021, p. 199). This finding should be seen in the wider context of a lack of human rights knowledge in the field of education. The best interests of the child are not generally recognised as an

obligation, although they ‘shall be a *primary consideration*’ in ‘*all actions concerning children*’ (CRC, Article 3.1., emphasis added).

In soft law, at the declarational level, the right to have an education which strengthens respect for human rights is stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations, 1948, Article 26.2). The specific right to HRE is defined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (United Nations, 2011), in which HRE is defined in Article 2.2 as education about, through and for human rights. On the ratification level, Article 13(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (United Nations, 1966b) states that education shall be directed to the development of human personality to a sense of its dignity and shall strengthen respect for human rights. According to CRC’s Article 29 (b), the education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for human rights. Article 42 says that States Parties shall undertake to make the convention widely known to adults and children.

In the Finnish context, definitions of implicit and explicit HRE are relevant, since previous studies suggest that HRE has only been implicit in Finland (Human Rights Centre, 2014; Matilainen, 2011; Kasa et al., 2021). Müller defines explicit HRE as referring to aspects of the HRE ‘*canon*’, such as international norms and mechanisms. On the other hand, implicit forms of HRE may focus on human rights problems, social relations and actions in the spirit of human rights, without specific reference to human rights documents (Müller, 2009, pp. 8-9).

We acknowledge that legal knowledge is not always the best pedagogical approach and that spiritual and implicit approaches may be good in various pedagogical settings. Educational systems may implicitly enhance human dignity and encourage students to act to protect human rights (Müller, 2009, pp. 8-9). However, neglecting legal knowledge in HRE or when teaching children about children’s rights (cf. Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018) may produce an inaccurate discourse. It may, for example, reduce child rights to some rosy talk about participation or ‘*pupil voice*’ (Lundy, 2013), or discussion of values or lifestyle that is disengaged from concrete legal consequences (Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018, p. 15)—discourse that is detached from actual international political and societal structures. Inaccurate discourse may also reduce human rights to mere opinions or a vague range of related topics (democracy, participation, values, encounters, co-operation, etc.). Furthermore, it diminishes the understanding of human rights problems in terms of one’s own context (cf. Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018). It is important that the management and staff of educational institutions (Osler & Starkey, 1998)—teachers and principals—understand that human rights are binding law and not just empty rhetoric (Toivanen, 2007, p. 43).

The Finnish way of organising religious education and children's freedom of religion and conscience

After the Second World War there has been turbulence around RE in more and more pluralistic European states. This has led to different approaches (see e.g., Grimmitt, 2000; Jackson, 2014; Stoeckl, 2015). It has even been suggested that 'it might sometimes be appropriate to talk about the existence of religious educations in the plural' (Berglund & Gent, 2019, p. 324).

The historical roots of the organisation of RE in Finland can be traced back to when Finland gained its independence, in 1917. The Evangelical Lutheran Church played a notable part in the formation of Finnish society and the school system (e.g. Poulter, 2013). Independence was followed by a civil war between Whites and Reds. This continuing cultural clash had a religious dimension (Pikkusaari, 1998) and, together with an urge for reconciliation in the building of a new nation, led to a specifically Finnish way of organising RE. Finnish RE is based on membership and is compulsory for members of the majority Lutheran Church. Pupils and students who are not members of the religious majority can be exempted from Lutheran RE and either have their own RE or an optional secular alternative (Salmenkivi, Elo, Tomperi & Ahola-Luttila, 2007). The secular alternative to RE came to the fore with the Hartikainen v. Finland complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee (1981) that the curriculum of the subject designed for those released from Lutheran RE still had a largely Lutheran content. Due to this complaint, Finland changed the curriculum and created a genuinely secular alternative subject (*elämäkatsomustieto* [Finnish], *livsåskådningskunskap* [Swedish] - in English officially called 'ethics' until 2019, and subsequently 'culture, worldview and ethics') (Salmenkivi et al. 2007, pp. 131-132; Scheinin, 1998, p. 384).

Finland has had a very strong tradition of public schooling. In 2019, 2,172 schools providing basic education were municipal, while there were only 66 private schools (Vipunen, 2019). If private schools receive state funding they are also obliged to prepare their curricula to confirm to the National Core Curriculum. Just under 20 of private schools are religious, one Jewish and the rest Christian (mainly Free Church); about half provide an alternative pedagogy (mainly Steiner schools) (Vipunen, 2019).

Finland had a constitutional reform in 1995 related to the ratification of the ECHR in 1990. In the revised Finnish Constitution (1999/731, § 11) RE became non-compulsory and non-confessional: 'No one is under the obligation, against his or her conscience, to participate in the practice of a religion'. This change was made because the Constitutional Committee of the Parliament (Perustuslakivaliokunta, 1982) considered confessional RE to be a religious practice. The Finnish Parliament revised the Freedom of Religion Act as well as school laws to comply with the new Constitution, in 2003. RE had to change: it could either be compulsory or confessional, but not both. The solution was simple: RE was given in accordance with one's

own religion, based on membership of a religious community, but was no longer confessional. In practice, however, everything stayed as before, except that the law stated that RE was not to be confessional anymore (Seppo, 2003, p. 181).

All RE in Finland is non-confessional, although it is based on membership of a religious community. Connecting non-confessional RE to religious membership appears to be an extreme case of the Nordic way of ‘belonging without believing’, which Grace Davie contrasts with the British way of ‘believing without belonging’. The point is that in the Nordic Lutheran state church tradition ‘what the Scandinavians believe in is, in fact, belonging. Membership of their respective national churches forms an important part of Nordic identity.’ (Davie, 2000, p. 3; see also Casanova, 2013; Witte, 2013). It is natural in this tradition that even faith-based national RE core curricula are issued by FNAE, the Finnish National Agency for Education. In practice, FNAE cooperates with religious communities in the process of constructing a new RE core curriculum for each religion, but the power to make decisions about both cooperation and curricula is with FNAE (Kallioniemi, 2007, p. 60; Slotte, 2013, p. 340).

Nordic countries share a similar Lutheran tradition, one in which the ties between church and state run deep (Slotte, 2013, p. 333). However, RE in public schools is organised differently in Finland than in its Nordic neighbours, which have integrated RE models (Slotte, 2010, pp. 252-254; 2013, p. 343). Slotte discusses some of the problems of the complicated Finnish model (Slotte, 2010, p. 254; 2013, pp. 340-342), but suggests that the Finnish system of organising ‘non-confessional RE along confessional lines’ may allow some additional safeguards for religious freedom (Slotte, 2013, pp. 350-351). Since the 1990s, immigration has increased religious plurality in Finnish schools (see e.g., Åhs 2020, pp. 16-17). In the Finnish model, this could lead to multiple new RE syllabi, because in theory any registered religious community can have its own RE classes if there are at least three comprehensive school-aged children belonging to it in the same municipality (Basic Education Act, section 13, 2003/454). Currently, there are five different syllabi for different Christian denominations (Adventist, Catholic, Lutheran, Pentecostal, and Orthodox). Five other religions (Bahá’í, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Krishna [ISKCON]) (FNAE, 2014; FNAE, 2020) have one syllabus each, although there are, for example, dozens of registered Islamic religious communities in Finland. However, the majority of Finland’s 110,000-120,000 Muslims are not members of a registered religious community (Konttori & Pauha, 2021, pp. 237-238).

The different RE subjects and the secular subject of culture, worldview and ethics are subsumed under the term ‘worldview education’. The concept of worldview is complex and multifaceted (e.g. Jackson 2014, pp. 27-31, 67-75; Lemettinen, Hirvonen & Ubani, 2021, pp. 537-541; van der Kooij, de Ruyter & Miedema, 2013). It is also a contested concept, both internationally (e.g. Bråten & Everington, 2019; Freathy & John, 2019; Lewin, 2017, pp. 450,

453) and in Finland (e.g. Åhs, 2020, pp. 69–84; Lemettinen et al., 2021, pp. 539-540). However, in this article we only use ‘worldview education’ as an umbrella term for our findings concerning human rights and children’s rights in the Finnish national basic education core curriculums of RE and its secular alternative (see Åhs 2020, pp. 31-34).

Section 11 of the Finnish Constitution (1999/731) guarantees freedom of religion and conscience. This right also applies to minors (Hakalehto, 2018, Section 13.4). Additionally, CRC (Article 14.1) safeguards a child’s freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Article 30 safeguards the right of children belonging to minorities to practise their religion. Freedom of religion and conscience is also stated in the ECHR (Council of Europe, 1950, Article 9) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966a, Article 18). On the other hand, UDHR states that parents have the right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children (United Nations, 1948, Article 26.3). The parents’ right to choose their children’s religious and moral upbringing is stated in the ICESCR (United Nations, 1966b, Article 13) and Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 to the ECHR. According to CRC, a child is the holder of the right to freedom of conscience and religion (CRC, Article 14; Hakalehto, 2018). The parents’ or legal guardians’ task is to ‘provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child’ (CRC, Article 14.2).

The Act on the Freedom of Religion (2003/453) in Finland also guarantees special rights for parents or guardians. According to Article 3, the guardians decide a child’s religious affiliation. After a child turns 12, guardians need his or her written consent to change the child’s religious affiliation. A child who has attained the age of 15 years may join a religious community or resign from one, but he or she still needs a written consent from his or her guardians. Only 18-year-olds can make decisions by themselves. This is also the case with schools and education: the organisation of a child’s religious education or secular alternative is under the parents’ control in the Finnish system. A pupil or student who is a member of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, the majority religion, must attend Lutheran RE even if this might not be in accordance with his or her own view. Pupils who are members of Lutheran or Orthodox churches are automatically directed to their own RE instruction and can only choose between the majority and their own RE. This means that Lutherans who are normally the majority do not have any choice and the Orthodox can only choose their own Orthodox or Lutheran RE. RE instruction based on another background must be requested by the families, but they have more options: in addition to the majority Lutheran RE and their own RE they can choose CWE and even full exemption from school RE (Hakalehto, 2018).

Human rights and children’s rights in Finnish curricula

Human rights are referred to as a value basis, and their inclusion and transmission are obligatory in the Finnish core curricula for basic education (FNAE, 2014), early childhood education (FNAE, 2018), and general upper secondary school education (FNAE, 2019). In our analysis, we concentrate on the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, which was approved in 2014 (FNAE, 2014). It covers the education of the entire age group of 7 to 16-year-olds, in grades 1–9. We have analysed the explicit mentions of human rights and children’s rights in FNAE 2014, but focus on the role of these rights in the structure of the curriculum and in worldview education.

The commitment to human rights and children’s rights is strong in the general part of the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education—the part of the document which introduces the background, values, and goals of basic education. Human rights are mentioned nine times and children’s rights seven times (FNAE, 2014, pp. 12-19). Human rights treaties and declarations—including the CRC, the ECHR, the ICESCR, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples—are also specifically listed as obligations for organising schooling (FNAE, 2014, pp. 13-14).

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 has marked structural elements that aspire to bridge the gap that might easily emerge between the general parts of the national curricula and subject-based syllabi. These parts also contain references to human rights and children’s rights that concentrate on transversal competence, for example: ‘School work systematically promotes the recognition and appreciation of human rights and, in particular, the rights of the child, and actions indicated by these rights’ (FNAE, 2014, pp. 20-21). In our analysis we will concentrate on RE and CWE, although the syllabi of other subjects contain many references to human rights and children’s rights.

The only difference between the syllabi of different religious groups is in the specifications of content areas; everything else, including objectives and assessment criteria, is identical. However, the objectives and content areas often contain the expression ‘the studied religion’, thus implying different objectives and content. For example, grade units 7-9 objective 2 is ‘to guide the pupil to deepen his or her knowledge of the studied religion and its impacts’ (FNAE, 2014, p. 483). The knowledge content will depend on the RE study group—e.g., Lutheran Christianity, Islam or Judaism—that students belong to. All the different RE syllabi share the same three key content areas:

- C1 The pupil’s relationship with his or her own religion
- C2 The world of religions
- C3 The good life

In the common part of RE instruction, ‘human rights’ is mentioned as an instruction objective for all grade units (1–2, 3–6 and 7–9). Human rights and children’s rights are included in content area C3, ‘the good life’, which situates the themes of human rights education as ethical RE issues. The relevant parts of both objectives and contents are collected in Table 1.

Table 1: Human rights as objectives of instruction and explicit content areas in the common religious education curriculum

Grades	Objective of instruction	Content areas explicitly related to human rights and children’s rights
1–2	O6: to guide the pupil to be fair, to empathise with other people’s situations, and to respect other people’s thoughts and convictions as well as human rights	The pupils are given a preliminary introduction to the rights of the child and what they mean. The CRC and holistic human well-being are taken into account when selecting contents.
3–6	O9: to guide the pupil to understand the inherent values of Human Rights and, in particular, the CRC from the perspective of the individual and the community	The CRC is discussed in class.
7–9	O6: to guide the pupil to become acquainted with the key concepts of ethical thinking and human rights as well as the ethical principles of the studied religion and other religions and worldviews	The ethics of the studied religion and other religions and worldviews as well as the UDHR are emphasised. Human rights violations, such as the Holocaust, are also examined.

While content can be categorised as ‘implicit’ in grades 1–2, according to Müller’s distinction, the objective is more explicit. Grade units 3–6 and 7–9 are explicit both in objective and in content. In the grade instructions the formulations are explicit.

Human rights and children’s rights in the CWE curriculum are presented in the same way as in RE. Human rights has always had a central role in CWE, but when the subject was launched in 1985 there was no similar emphasis in RE (National Board of Education, 1985, pp. 113–130). The 21st century commitment to human rights and children’s rights in Finnish RE makes RE syllabi similar to secular CWE.

Table 2: Human rights as objectives of instruction and explicit content areas in the culture, worldview and ethics curriculum

Grades	Objective of instruction	Content areas related to objectives
1–2	-	Pupils are given a preliminary introduction to the rights of the child and the child’s status in different communities.
3–6	O9: to guide the pupil to learn about the human rights that are ethically based on the UDHR in particular the rights of the child	They examine the rights of the child and reflect on their realisation in their own lives and elsewhere in the world.
7–9	O5: to guide the pupil to become aware of freedom of belief as a human right, as well as the national and international means for securing it O10: to guide the pupil to become aware of the significance and ethical foundation of human dignity, human rights, and human equality	Pupils become acquainted with human dignity, human rights, and equality. They familiarise themselves with the development of human rights and human rights violations, such as the Holocaust.

Human rights as an overarching ethics

The strong commitment to human rights and children’s rights in the general parts of the curriculum is clearly reflected in worldview education. This means that human rights and children’s rights provide an overarching curricular ethics. This is understandable, given the modern plurality of worldviews and the different cultural and social bases of morality. It is, however, an approach that could be considered clearly secular. The relationship between Lutheranism and secularity is a moot point, and this approach might also be acceptable from a Lutheran ‘two kingdoms’ perspective (Witte, 2013; see also Casanova, 2013; Riitaoja, Poulter & Kuusisto, 2010). In the Finnish context, however, a secular ethics has been opposed by the Lutheran Church (Salmenkivi et al., 2007, pp. 128–129; Slotte 2013, pp. 365–366). The last time such an overall ethical approach was proposed, in 2010, ‘Finnish churches and religious communities concurred in their denunciation of the draft proposal’ (Slotte, 2013, p. 266).

Some researchers have also suggested that human rights compete with religions, arguing that they are just one religion among many (Bahmanpour, 2004; Palva, 2004, pp. 115–116) or a sacralised discourse (Casanova, 2013, pp. 29, 32).

From the perspectives of moral anthropology and cultural psychology, Richard A. Schweder (Schweder et al., 2003) has suggested that there is a ‘big three of morality’, consisting of ‘values associated with autonomy (freedom of choice, freedom from harm, equality), community (duty, hierarchy, interdependency, loyalty, sacrifice) and divinity (purity, sanctity, cleanliness, sacred order)’ (Schweder & Menon, 2014, p. 358). In this context, religious ethics might be seen to emphasise community and divinity, while human rights emphasise autonomy. However, things are not that simple.

Human rights actors have often been accused of having a Western individualistic and rationalistic bias. One particular aspect of this critique has been the position of children. In childhood studies and research on children’s rights there are new relational approaches in understanding children (e.g. Klasson Sundin, 2016). This is obviously related to the question of how to understand a child as a rightsholder in children’s rights (Klasson Sundin, 2016, pp. 81–86). This kind of approach seems promising when it comes to many of the ethical issues we discuss in this article (Klasson Sundin, 2016, pp. 186–197).

In whatever way we understand children as rights holders in the children’s rights discourse, there is a further point concerning children in the 2014 Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education. The first value of basic education is the uniqueness of each pupil: ‘Each pupil is unique and valuable just as he or she is. Each pupil has the right to grow into his or her full potential as a human being and a member of society’ (FNAE, 2014, p. 14). This appears to focus on the individual in relation to, for example, religious traditions, and this might be one of the reasons why human rights and children’s rights are natural common denominators of all ethics in worldview education. This does not, however, mean that the common ethical doctrines of various religions will be neglected in RE. For example, the objectives for grades 3–6 are: ‘to guide the pupil to become acquainted with the ethical teachings of the studied religion and the common ethical principles of different religions’ (FNAE, 2014, p. 284). In the case of religious ethics an inclusion of ‘obligations’ is added to HRE in some RE syllabi (e.g., FNAE, 2014, p. 151).

Teachers have been suspicious of teaching rights if they are detached from responsibilities (Cassidy, Brunner & Webster, 2013). This has led to miseducating children about their rights by overemphasising their responsibilities. Although responsibilities are connected to rights, it has been argued that students should have the opportunity to find the connection themselves (Howe & Covell, 2010). Robert Jackson has argued (2019, pp. 119–120) for the inclusion of

duties or responsibilities in the ethical education of RE in addition to more explicit HRE. He refers to the InterAction Council of former world leaders who have launched a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities, which ‘seeks to bring freedom and responsibility into balance’ (InterAction Council, 1997, p. 1). The InterAction Council has clearly been aiming at a universal ethics which can be approved by representatives of the major religions (Giacomazzi, 2005, p. 170).

Many human rights actors have had certain reservations concerning the project (Amnesty International 1998; Giacomazzi 2005, pp. 172–173). The general question of using the language of rights in ethics is complicated (see Wenar, 2021, chapter 7.2), but adding responsibilities to human rights-based ethics education does not seem to adequately respect human rights concepts. Firstly, human rights are intrinsically linked to obligations of different actors (Scheinin, 2014, p. 269) and human rights law focuses on the state as duty-bearer (e.g. Scheinin, 2013, Chapter 3). Article 28 of UDHR already contains many of the core obligations at both the social and the international level (Eide, 1998), and Article 29 explicitly mentions the duties of individuals. These issues are obviously complicated (Opsahl & Dimitrijevic, 1998), and the case of the rights, freedoms and duties of children is a particular conundrum (see e.g. Klasson Sundin, 2016, pp. 59–61), but the intrinsic conceptual connection between rights and responsibilities is essential in human rights. Secondly, it does not acknowledge that the current human rights discourse is intimately connected with the contingent global historical, political, and societal developments and structures over the last hundred years. Ethical and political dialogue and the implementation of various human rights mechanisms since 1945 have created, via explicit human rights instruments, a contingent, but real, societal backdrop for human rights ethics which cannot be sidestepped. Finally, it misses the pedagogical chance for pupils and students to ponder the complicated and intriguing relations between the concepts of rights and responsibilities.

Human rights education’s curriculum problem and powerful knowledge

HRE’s curriculum problem, as formulated by Walter Parker (2018), is clearly present in the HRE of Finnish worldview education. Parker (2018) argues that HRE lacks a disciplinary structure created in a specialist community: ‘[T]he HRE curriculum remains scattered, ill-defined, and too variable to be robust’ (Parker, 2018, p. 5). On the one hand, Parker refers to the need for local approval and the importance of the curriculum having legitimacy. This is what Finnish worldview education appears to offer. On the other hand, he (2018, pp. 11–14) refers to the need for a background *episteme*, i.e., powerful knowledge about the subject matter allowing a construction of a curriculum that enables the structured teaching of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Powerful knowledge is a concept created by Michael Young who, in the 1970s, was one of the pioneers of ‘the new sociology of education’. Young tried to raise ‘questions about what might be meant by the notion of knowledge being socially organized or constructed. ...how knowledge is organized and made available in curricula’ (Young 1971, p. 19). Politically, the idea was to criticise traditional ‘undersocialised epistemology’ (Gericke, Hudson, Olin-Scheller & Stolare, 2018, p. 430) from the standpoint of social justice. By the end of the millennium, however, drawing upon postmodernist and constructivist perspectives, an oversocialised voice discourse (Moore & Muller, 1999, pp. 190–192) had developed. This had also become a threat to the idea of good education for all, because the concept of knowledge had almost become lost. Thus, Young (2008) suggested that knowledge be given a central place again—at the same time, there should be a continued awareness of its epistemological structure and social construction. This powerful knowledge is a specialised kind, one that is differentiated from and more powerful than everyday knowledge. It creates a third way to build curricula, between traditional academic elitist epistemological and postmodern and/or social constructionist approaches (Young & Lambert, 2014). Powerful knowledge is often associated with science and mathematics, but Young (2013, p. 108) explicitly argues that there can be a powerful knowledge of ethics.

There are particular worries concerning HRE (see Parker, 2018; Jerome, Liddle & Young, 2021). One of them is that HRE is not a school subject. For example, in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 this tends to lead to the goals and contents of HRE being mentioned in a somewhat scattered manner. Crossing subject boundaries in search of powerful knowledge is, however, not impossible (Jerome et al., 2021, pp. 20, 22; Niemelä, 2020). Naturally, the work of HRE curriculum design on these lines is in its beginning, but our analysis of Finnish RE curricula shows the kind of pitfalls to avoid.

The syllabi of grades 7–9 do not mention children’s rights at all in worldview education, except once in a list of human rights documents in the Orthodox syllabus. It is a glaring oversight that the strongly endorsed CRC is dropped at this critical stage; one would expect that pupils would deepen their understanding. Of the four central principles of the CRC (UNCRC, 2003, para 12) the one connected with Article 12—that the child has the right to express his or her views freely in ‘all matters affecting the child’ and that these views are given due weight—would appear to demand a greater focus in secondary education, when children’s understandings and responsibilities are growing. Therefore, this omission is very detrimental. From the pedagogical point of view, it is quite understandable that adolescents are not called children, as they might easily take it as a grave insult. However, the inability to find words that avoid adolescent indignation should not be a reason to make major curriculum decisions.

The best interests of the child and the child's right to freedom of religion and conscience

The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 contains relatively strong support for human rights and children's rights, but the uniquely Finnish concept of worldview education raises further human rights, children's rights and ethical issues. An important perspective in discussing these issues is that of the best interests of the child—one of the leading principles of the CRC (UNCRC, 2003). On the one hand, children are entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (CRC, Article 14); on the other, they are entitled to education which shall be directed to the fullest development of their personalities and abilities (CRC, Articles 8 & 29). It is probable that providing such education requires a point of view that surpasses the child's current understanding. This implies that two perspectives, the children's point of view as current agents and the point of view of the full potential of their personalities and abilities, are needed when children's freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is evaluated.

The developmental consideration above demands delicacy when it comes to dealing with schoolchildren's religious freedom. This delicacy can be seen, for example, in the statements about children's convictions, their possibility to be heard and make decisions about their learning, and the age limits concerning these issues. The Finnish system is problematic if analysed from this perspective. The regulations and age limits of the Act on the Freedom of Religion (2003/453) and the Basic Education Act (1998/628) are problematic in relation to CRC's Article 14 and Finland's Constitution's Equality Section (Constitution 1999/731, 6.3.). It is curious that in Finland 15-year-olds are responsible for their crimes but not considered mature enough to make their own decisions about belonging to a religious community until they are 18 (Hakalehto & Toivonen, 2021, p. 129). This raises the question of how the freedom of religion and conscience of the child is actually realised if there is disagreement between parents. The obligation for children who are members of the Church of Finland to take Lutheran RE has also been considered problematic. There is a discrepancy between a strong curricular commitment to children's rights and a system which does not necessarily guarantee the child's freedom of choice.

The Constitution of Finland (Articles 6 and 11) and CRC (Article 14) safeguard a child's freedom of thought, conscience and religion. On the other hand, the UDHR (Article 26.3), the ICESCR (Article 13) and Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 to the ECHR state that parents have the right to choose the kind of moral and religious education that children receive. It is obvious that in many cases the concept of one's 'own religion' in the Finnish model of RE is not the child's but the parents' religion. The concept is problematic, anyway, because it is argued that no actual changes are needed in the curriculum or instruction to change confessional RE into a non-confessional 'personal RE'. One's own religion, i.e., the family religion, is repeatedly

mentioned in all the RE syllabi. This emphasises the role of parents, family and even the religious community in making decisions about a child's religion. At the same time, the curriculum is adamant on the individuality and uniqueness of the child, which underlines his or her own freedom (see Parliamentary ombudsman of Finland, 2019).

Conclusions

We have analysed how human rights and children's rights are profiled in the basic curriculum and what kind of human rights and ethical issues are raised in Finnish worldview education. Finnish society emphasises human rights and children's rights at the official level and our analysis shows that human rights and children's rights have a strong presence in worldview education curricula at the comprehensive level. Our analysis concentrates on the curriculum and general ethical and human rights issues, and it is obvious that further research is needed if we want to understand how HRE is actualised in pedagogical practice.

One might venture a guess that the faith-based but non-confessional RE which is taught in practically all schools is unique to Finland. As we have shown, this system has various interesting positive elements from the point of view of human rights and children's rights. For example, it is possible for minorities to have their own RE, and the non-confessional nature of the instruction protects pupils' religious freedom. However, there is also a number of problems. The fact that the system is based on membership means that it is biased in favour of some religious views and it is especially problematic in families where parents have different religions or worldviews. In addition, compulsory Lutheran RE for students who are members of the Church of Finland is especially problematic from a children's rights perspective. Despite the strong commitment to human rights and children's rights in the curricula, we conclude that it would seem that the Finnish worldview education system does not sufficiently take children's rights into account.

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