



Several aspects related to the teachers' views on the rights of the child based on focus group discussions on the example of Finland

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Abstract

The paper was prepared within the project *Advancing European Values and Standards in Georgian Schools* supported by Erasmus + Jean Monet program of the European Union. One of the main purposes of this project was to study the school education system of the leading EU member states by the team members. The author was involved in researching the school education system of Finland determining the views of school teachers in Finland related to schoolchildren's human rights protection. As it is known, this country has the leading position related to the introduction of the new and modernized system of education in school and providing maximum protection of children's human rights, particularly those of schoolchildren.

In general, this paper discusses pre-service teachers' views concerning the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child and the ways teachers perceive their connection to the educational context and their work. The author argues that pre-service teachers' perceptions determine how successfully human rights education is implemented in practice. The data were collected from workshops and focus group discussions conducted with approximately 100 primary school pre-service teachers in Northern Finland. The participants noted that children's rights are important and deeply connected to their work. However, they were insufficiently familiar with human rights education (HRE) concepts, and they were uncertain about whether it was acceptable to physically restrain children in order to protect them or others, as this could undermine a child's rights. To adhere to the principles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the topic must be included in the pre-service study syllabus, more clearly added to the curriculum, and implemented in teacher practice.

Keywords: Finland, schoolchildren's rights, human rights, secondary education, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Introduction

As it is known for the International Community, World's Children's Day has been celebrated on November 20 every year since 1959 when the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*. The date is related to both the 1959 declaration and the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF, 1989), the international legal framework. In Finland, the country which is considered as one of the leading states in the world according to the school education level, the Convention came into power in 1991. The objective of World's Children's Day is to promote the awareness of children's rights in different regions of the world among the representatives of the new generation, to create convenient conditions for children's overall welfare and enhance international unity and cooperation. *The Rights of the Child* can be considered as one of the main directions of the principles of human rights (Quennerstedt, 2010).

At the same time, it is necessary to point out that *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was adopted on 10 December 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN, 1948). Despite the fact that people, first of all scientists and politicians, had advocated for and debated about human rights for centuries, the Declaration brought together, for the first time, the fundamental principles of human rights that were reviewed to belong to every human being, regardless of age, nationality, race, sex, position, income, culture or religion. The tragic events of World War II, including the Holocaust, murdering innocent people, and the detonation of nuclear bombs, as well as the blatant trampling on human rights, established the conditions for the preparation of the UN Declaration so that similar atrocities would never occur again. On the basis of these approaches, the UN, as an International Universal Organization was founded in 1945, with the purpose to provide peace, security and political, legal, economic, social, national, religious, etc. rights for the world population. At the same time, moral values vary greatly across the globe, so it is relevant to teach children about such values and analyse the presented topics at school. Furthermore, children need to be taught about their rights and how these rights are interrelated with human rights.

In the modern period, children construct their worldview by combining elements from multiple sources rather than by basing it on the ideologies held by previous generations. With a widespread access to the internet, world society lives in a global transition period in the framework of which representatives of the new generations are developing their interpretations of the world by the agency of their own perceptions, imaginations, their cultural heritage and the media. Society, community and family all influence the development of a child's worldview (Kuusisto & Gearon, 2019). Schools as basic educational institutions play a particularly significant role in supporting learning various worldviews and tolerance, at the same time also preventing exclusion and radicalisation. Teachers hold a key role in this process of openness, fairness and justice. Besides, children and young people have a need in a conversational, harmonious and communal school environment. The teacher is requested to establish an educational space that promotes peer relationships and improves children's social skills, increasing their feelings of belonging and inclusion (Syrjämäki et al., 2019). However, pre-service teachers may be sorely underprepared for the challenging and diverse educational contexts they may encounter in their future careers (Jones, 2019). Moreover, carrying out the human rights education (HRE) remains challenging in the context of teacher education (Olsson, 2020).

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The rights of future generations are perceived to be at a high level in Finland: education is open to everyone, high quality social and health care is accessible for all and covered by the society. The care provided to children and their level of well-being are high, and the standard of living of families and parents' employment rate are relatively good. At the same time, based on the information of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Finland (2011), the increase in the level of children's exclusion is concerning; there are some categories of children and adolescents who do not feel comfortable and they are facing different risk factors within their lives. The concerns include loneliness, violence, mental health problems, drug abuse and family poverty. Harinen and Halme (2012) have noticed that schools in the country suggest an encouraging growth environment for students who are already doing well in life. On the other hand, students who are not doing well at school face challenges outside the classroom and they need more support and guidance. UNICEF Finland (2006) commissioned a study on the Rights of the Child to observe and understand the extent to which high school students in Finland have appropriate knowledge related to human rights and children's rights. The study determined that children do not have enough understanding of human rights; approximately half of them would permit mild corporal punishment. In this regard, information about the Rights of the Child and human rights should be more purposefully integrated in education system and has to be taught in all grades. This issue was being discussed in the framework of observation of the new curriculum in 2014.

In Finland, the core curriculum develops the principles advocated for in *The Rights of the Child*. The basic education curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, n.d.) takes into account that children's rights have to be considered in the curriculum and within all school activities, and inclusion must be promoted. Hence, conducting a study in a teacher education context with pre-service teachers is important and interesting. Since in general children's rights are viewed as being important in Finnish society (Jalonen, 2011; Lastensuojelun keskusliitto, 2020), this research analyses pre-service teachers' views on the Declaration and how they are able to utilise those principles when they consult children in their classrooms.

Studies that have been fulfilled within the previous periods have mainly paid attention to pre-service teachers' attitudes towards human rights or the rights of children, or topics related to those rights, such as inclusive education (Bilgen, 2019; Goddard & Evans, 2018). For the promotion of the role of HRE in teacher education curriculum, more research is necessary to understand what knowledge pre-service teachers actually have on fundamental principles of human rights and how they connect those to their daily activities.

To fill the research gap, the study based on the project *Advancing European Values and Standards in Georgian Schools* (620893-EPP-1-2020-1-GE-EPPJMO-PROJECT) (Makhashvili et al., 2021) presented in this research paper addressed the following research questions:

- What kind of knowledge do pre-service teachers in Finland demonstrate regarding human rights education?
- How do pre-service teachers in Finland perceive human rights education in connection with their work?

The main purpose of those research questions was to provide more insight into how pre-service teacher education should be progressed on the basis of the study results. Toward this direction, the research paper focused on the necessity to produce knowledge about pre-service teachers' perceptions of HRE. In the daily life, instructors work with students from diverse backgrounds. In current days, the student body has become even more diverse due to internal and external migration and societal changes, such as urbanisation.

In general, to study the Finnish (one of the leading democratic countries in the world) experience related to the increasing qualification of teachers in the field of human rights and teaching them in the schools and gradual sharing and introduction in Georgian schools the concept of democracy and human rights will be positively reflected on the political culture of the youth of Georgia – future generation of the country, which intends to become the plenipotentiary member of the European family. For the implementation of this idea into practice, it would be important to organize an appropriate training for the school teachers of Georgia in the field of democracy and human rights with the further perspectives to teach the main principles of human rights to school pupils of Georgia. As a result, representatives of the young generation of Georgia will have appropriate knowledge about their and others social, political, economic, legal, etc. rights. In this regard, to be familiar with the Finnish model by the representatives of the Education system of Georgia will create the convenient basis for the strengthening of the democratic institutions in the country in the mid-term and long-term perspectives.

Several aspects related to the school education system of Finland

The system of secondary general education (perusopetus) of Finland covers all citizens of the country aged 7 to 16 years. Compulsory education in the so-called primary school (peruskoulu) begins in the year a child turns 7 and continues for the next 9 years.

Since January 1, 2015, a law has been in force in Finland, according to which, before entering the first grade of basic school, all children must pass the test for preparatory education (esikoulu). In December 2014, the country adopted a document - Esiopetuksenopetussuunnitelmanperusteet (Basic Curriculum for Preparatory Education) (Paksuniemi, 2022), which regulates the organization of preparatory education on the basis of preschool educational institutions, general education schools or in another form that guarantees the achievement of the goals of preparatory education.



Today, the nine-year general education is carried out within the framework of a single structure, which does not imply a division into primary and secondary education. The Basic Curriculum for General Education (Perusopetuksenopetussuunnitelmanperusteet) (Agency for Education, n.d.), which has been in force in Finland since January 2015, defines the goals and objectives of education at the stages covering grades 1-2, grades 3-6 and grades 7-9.

At various stages of the Finnish basic school, subjects such as mother tongue and literature (Finnish or Swedish), second native language (Finnish or Swedish), foreign languages, mathematics, environment, religion / worldview, music, visual arts, manual labor, physical education, history, social studies, biology, geography, physics, chemistry, health care, and home economics should be taught. At all stages, educational and professional orientation of students is carried out.

Most subjects are taught by the same teacher for the first six years, and by different subject teachers for the next three years. The academic year of general education schools consists of 190 days from mid-August to early June. Schools are open five days a week. The minimum number of study hours per week varies from 19 to 30, depending on the level and number of optional subjects studied. Decisions on daily and weekly schedules are made in schools.

State educational standards are determined by the National Board of Education (Opetushallitus). These standards contain the goals and main content of various disciplines, as well as the principles of assessing students' knowledge, training in correctional or compensatory programs, principles of activities aimed at supporting student achievement, physical, mental and social well-being of students and supervision.

The educational standards include the concepts of a favorable learning environment, work skills, as well as the concept of learning. State educational standards are updated approximately every ten years.

In Finland, the main type of student assessment is continuous assessment during study and final assessment. Continuous assessment is part of the learning process and is carried out to support students and provide them with the necessary assistance. Each student receives a report card at least once a year. There are no state examinations for pupils of the basic school. Instead, teachers, based on the objectives contained in the curriculum, are responsible for the assessment in the subjects they teach. The grades in the basic school graduation certificate issued at the end of the ninth year of study are decided by teachers. Based on this final assessment, students may be admitted to a secondary general education institution or a vocational institution.

Students who have successfully completed compulsory education in basic school can continue their studies in general or vocational education institutions of the secondary level. The selection of students for general education secondary schools (lukio – gymnasium, lyceum) is based on the average score of the student's certificate obtained at the end of the basic school. The general education program of the secondary level is three years, but students can complete it in 2 or 4 years. Education is organized in a modular form, unrelated to the classroom according to the annual schedule, and students are relatively free to create their own individual schedules. Each course is graded at the end of the course and after the student has completed the required number of courses, including both compulsory and optional courses, she/he is awarded a General Secondary Education Certificate.

At the same time, children's well-being improves and problems are prevented through a wide range of social measures. It is about the safety of the child's environment and, for example, sufficient opportunities for play and other stimulating activities. Well-being is greatly influenced by a child's daily environment. Kindergarten and other early childhood education services, school, hobbies or other nearby communities together with her/his parents have a great influence on the development of the child.

Many public decisions directly affect children's lives. Transportation decisions, alcohol policy implementation, or parental employment decisions either support or diminish children's opportunities for a good life. The child protection service performs three main functions: influence on the general conditions for the growth of children, support for parents in their parental role, and child protection itself.

HRE in teacher education

According to the UN (United Nations General assembly, 2011), HRE includes all educational training that aims to increase awareness and strengthen respect for human rights. *The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training* was adopted in 2011. Its fundamental principles are to announce access to HRE and training at different stages and in all types of education. *The Declaration* is particularly focused on three aspects of HRE: education about, through and for human rights.

The significance of HRE in general education has evolved within last ten years period. At the same time, its implementation has been very slow (Roth, 2015), calling for familiarisation with and practice of the concept in teacher training at schools (Olsson, 2020; Robinson et al., 2020). Based on the information from the previous studies, delivering the knowledge on human rights in teacher education is a sensitive and particularly difficult topic, due to the fact that many people have misconceptions about it. In-service teachers and pre-service teachers often consider it difficult to teach human rights, and they probably do not have the skills to approach the topic with their students. Besides,



the integration of HRE is often unsystematic, as research and surveys in 12 countries has shown (Lundy et al., 2012). In the report presented by Zembylas in 2016 it was explained that pre-service teachers found it problematic to discuss and observe human rights. This affected how they prepared and taught the classes and their tutorial perspectives. In terms of the participants' teaching practices, Zembylas and his colleagues (2016) reported on the dominance of a "declarational" approach, decontextualisation, the trivialization of human rights, and the retreat to familiar discourses and activities. Similarly, Olsson (2020) found that human rights were usually implicitly present in the course plans of teacher education programmes, but the syllabi provided little guidance as to what knowledge pre-service teachers would need and what they are expected to learn about children's rights. Teacher educators supported the idea of including children's rights in the teacher education curriculum, but they were uncertain about where that topic should be included in the curriculum. Similarly, Boutros (2018) found that teacher training on the issues of HRE was deficient, resulting in the teachers' inability to connect human rights and children's rights to the students' everyday lives and implement them in their practice. Based on previous studies, it is evident that teachers need more knowledge about and guidance concerning children's rights and how to use them in their teaching.

Although multicultural society and tolerance, accepting and rejoicing in otherness are being discussed, studies have proved that children and adolescents with an immigrant background who speak in the family a language other than the state language of the country, or who are raised to hold religious values, are more likely to be bullied (Schihalejev, 2019). The predisposing factors for radicalisation include discrimination, lack of self-regulation, feelings of superiority and lack or incomprehension of knowledge. The factors that prevent radicalisation include knowledge, worldview, positive self-perception and strong social relationships. Dialogue about empathy and human dignity can be achieved through HRE; in turn, this can enhance intercultural respect and acceptance (Yamniuk, 2017).

Positive social relationships and strong links with immediate family members, relatives, friends and school-related peers have the potential to combat exclusion, which is a possible cause of radicalisation and violence (Kuusisto & Gearon, 2019; Zambeta et al., 2016). Previous studies (Howe & Covell, 2011; Tibbitts, 2009) also confirmed that in schools in which HRE has been implemented, empathy skills and understanding were enhanced when they were combined with the application of human rights principles. HRE can be considered as a process in direction to social change (Kingston, 2018; Tibbitts, 2017).

Methodology

Primary school teacher education programme as content

The research methodology was qualitative. Pre-service classes were observed where discussion on HRE questions took place. The analysis of the opinions expressed by the students made it possible to draw conclusions.

In the framework of the project *Advancing European Values and Standards in Georgian Schools*, for obtaining the knowledge about the experience of several EU member states in the field of school teacher education program, several countries have been selected. Special attention was paid to Finland, where, according to international community, the most developed school educational system is functioning. Accordingly, for the deep analysis of the secondary data, the example of the University of Lapland, a leading higher educational institution of Finland where school education programme is developed, has been taken. The primary school teacher education programme of the University of Lapland takes into consideration a research-based approach; thus, the educational courses are integrated with research and pre-service teachers have to independently complete empirical research. The duration of the programme is five years, and each pre-service teacher graduates from the master's degree course in education studies, which consists of both academic studies and practical professional development in a primary school (called the teaching practicum). Pedagogical and methodological studies are interconnected with the teaching practicum both chronologically and by content.

Pre-service teachers are presented as reflective practitioners and researchers; therefore, their identity formation and professional development are promoted in the framework of the programme (Kaasila & Lauriala, 2010). The ultimate purpose is to teach education specialists who are able to carry out their activity creatively and flexibly in changing situations and environments in cooperation within their own profession and as part of an interprofessional team. The programme uses an inclusive approach; thus, this topic is included in the study courses and curriculum as a cross-cutting theme.

Participants, data collection and data analysis

The study participants were 82 first-year pre-service teachers who attended the *Didactics of History and Social Studies* course as part of their interdisciplinary studies and additionally some other teachers, who have not attended those courses. In general, the study process included 100 pre-service teachers, who were divided into five groups (18–25 educators in each group).



Each group participated in its own sessions. The last session was focused on human rights and children's rights. The pre-service instructors received a pre-assignment for the session with a flipped learning type model, which can be executed by different directions and methods. The pre-service teachers had the task to study the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* by themselves through specific material having been delivered to them as well as with all the online material they could find, so they would have prior knowledge of the topic during the participation in the session.

Thus, in the framework of the project "*Advancing European Values and Standards in Georgian Schools*", the researcher who was a participant of this project from Georgia had an opportunity to study and analyse the above-mentioned process at the University of Lapland with the purpose of getting better acquainted with the Finnish experience related to the teaching and protection the children rights in schools.

The event started with a short introduction to children's rights headed by a university professor. Later, the pre-service teachers received the following instructions: "The workshop will be organized using learning café teaching methods. You will be divided into four smaller groups, and each group will attend one of the workshop sessions. The themes in the workshop sessions are connected to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Read the instructions with concentration of your attention and write down your own point of views or/and your group's positions on the sheets of paper. The duration of the task implementation process is 15 minutes."

The topics of the workshops were the following: 1) How the Articles 2, 12 and 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child effected the Finnish educational system? 2) What possibilities and challenges do Articles 2, 3, 30 and 31 present to schools and teachers from the positions of minority students? 3) How do Articles 2, 3, 28 and 29 reflect the inclusivity? What ideas can you offer for how to improve this? What has to be taken into account? 4) What issues from the Rights of the Child should tutors review in their researches when educating students to be responsible citizens?

The pre-service teachers, who were initially divided into five big groups (18-15 educators in each one), later were distributed into smaller four-person groups (which has significantly increased the number of groups). Using the learning café method, the groups located around four tables where they observed concrete aspects in relations to the Rights of the Child. The pre-service teachers could write down their opinions on poster paper. They were instructed by the university didactic professor of history and social sciences, a researcher with expertise in the supervision of pre-service teachers and a university scholar with expertise in Sámi educational issues, and, in two cases, another lecturer from other high educational institution with expertise in multiculturalism in education. Accordingly, the workshop leaders represented a team of interdisciplinary experts on HRE.

After compiling their ideas, each group presented their poster and summarised the basic issues that were written down. The lecturers and scholars acted as experts and led discussions on the topics. They also supervised the pre-service teachers' group discussions when needed. The pre-service teachers were deeply integrated in the process, and they perceived this type of working style to be motivating. They raised questions to the specialists during the seminar, so the sessions can be considered as a fruitful learning situation. The debates in plenary mode after the group work were recorded by the research team and transcribed later for research purposes. At the last stage of the lesson, the pre-service teachers were motivated to study the other articles from the Children's Right Convention.

In the framework of the workshops, the data were collected using focus group discussions. The focus group participants beforehand independently familiarised themselves with the topic; thus, by the time when the group met, everyone possessed the same knowledge. This is relevant due to the fact that the relations among participants of the group made it possible for the results to develop. The moderator was located in the background and had the role of the facilitator of the event.

For the focus groups to be effective, the discussion had to be planned in detail prior to the session. Preliminary assignment and material had to be defined, key questions about the workshop to be resolved, the number of people needed for the group to be determined, clear instructions to be given at the end of the workshop, and a final discussion to take place. It was also important to plan how to collect the data, create a relaxed atmosphere, and maintain a neutral attitude and appearance.

The data consisted of a recorded discussion that lasted 2 hours and 38 minutes, 41 pages of transcripts (in a Microsoft Word document), and 20 posters that were designed by the teachers prior to the workshop. The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Mayring, 2014). In this study, this involved familiarizing with frames, coding, creating topics, browsing topics, identifying and naming topics, and finally writing analysis. The first stage, familiarization, included reading the data and getting acquainted with them. The second stage, data coding, involved identifying important features of the data that would be important in answering the research questions. The third stage, theme creation, involved looking closely at the coding and identifying broader patterns. The fourth stage involved looking at the topics and double-checking that they were all relevant to the study. Before writing the task, a detailed analysis of each topic was developed. The analysis consisted of the main themes: the views of teachers before the start of the work and their perceptions of how the rights of the child are related to the daily educational practice of teachers, for example, understanding the meaning of the principles presented in the rights of the child, and uncertainty about their practical significance in education.



Findings

Pre-service teachers' opinions before starting work on the rights of the child

The data were collected through discussions with teachers prior to the start of the work based on the participation in a workshop in a learning café. The teachers learned about the rights of the child on their own before starting work based on the flipped teaching method before participating in the workshop. At the seminar, one of the tasks was to discuss how pre-service teachers perceived various articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

According to the educators, the articles in the Rights of the Child are structured in such a way as to support the development of children. For example, Article 2, which provides the prohibition of discrimination, was seen as a guarantee that children were accepted as individuals and seen for who they are, and that they were treated fairly and equally. Articles 12-13 deal with allowing children to express their opinions as long as it does not harm others. Pre-service teachers believed that this supported the ability of children to develop into adults capable of making a positive impact on society. In general, the rights of the child were considered to support the social integration of immigrants and prevent their marginalization in society.

There were several alleged ambiguities in the proclamations included in the rights of the child. The pre-service teachers were unsure of the practical implications of some of the articles, especially article 3, which states that the best interests of the child must be considered in all decisions regarding the child. It was also difficult for the teachers to identify in practice the situations in which teachers could undermine a child's right not to be touched against their will before they began work. For example, some of the teachers did not know before they began work whether they were allowed to physically restrain children who were involved in a fight, or to defend themselves if a child attacked them. Overall, they felt that the child's subjective experience was the best way to tell the difference between acceptable and unacceptable touch. They also noted that in some cases, such as when protecting a child from physical danger, it is impossible to avoid touching the child regardless of the child's feelings. It was also pointed out that sometimes children are not aware of their right not to be touched or what is considered inappropriate, touching or abuse. Conversely, teachers from the other group felt that children were very knowledgeable about their rights not to be touched. This is a good reminder that teacher education instructors need to be aware of current rules and ethical standards regarding teachers' rights to work with children. In response to a question about touching, two teachers noted before the service:

Some situations are very clear, I had a situation where I had to physically separate two children from each other because one attacked the other. In this case the situation is clear. You can't just sit back and watch what happens. (Educator # 26.)

Is there a law that says you can't be touched? Are there any restrictions? (Educator # 58)

Teachers, before starting work, perceived Article 3, which refers to the importance of considering the best interests of the child, as the most important both in general and in the educational context. It has also been observed that it is closely related to all other articles. However, article 3 was considered to pose practical problems, as taking into account the best interests of one child could lead to the infringement of the rights of another child. This was seen as a risk, especially in the context of education, where the teacher must take into account the interests of several children with different backgrounds and needs. Teachers also noted prior to commencement of the work that a child's own needs or wants do not necessarily represent that child's best interests and should not be considered as such. The best interests of the child are also determined by his/her unique situation and needs, which require careful attention from adults. One of the pre-service teachers remarked:

Then we also thought about what is in the best interests of the child. If we think, for example, that children should be with their parents or they should spend a lot of time with their parents, but is that in the best interest of every child? (Educator # 8.)

Freedom of expression and the right to one's own culture and language were also perceived as ambiguous from a practical point of view. It was difficult for teachers to tell the difference between what constitutes a mere expression of one's opinion and what constitutes a statement that violates the rights of others. Determining the difference was thought to be increasingly difficult because people are often easily offended. Teachers also felt before they started the workshop that the lack of clarity could have practical implications for their work. One of the pre-service teachers remarked:

Regarding Articles 12 and 13, we were thinking that we have freedom of speech in Finland and this is often used as an excuse to insult other people, but then the question arises where the line is drawn. (Educator # 11)



The right to one's own culture and language has been raised several times by primary school teachers, and its importance for ensuring fair and equal treatment of all children has also been emphasized. However, pre-educators have identified a possible conflict between a child's right to their own culture and language and the broader public interest, especially in cases where the child's cultural background and associated values and norms conflict with the values and norms accepted in mainstream society. It can also cause anxiety in a child who is forced to balance between two conflicting sets of norms. One of the pre-service teachers remarked:

How about if you're from a different culture and there are different rules about touching and so forth that physical punishment is allowed or something like that. And children learn this at home, and then when they come here, the family does not necessarily change their behavior. So what if a child is taught completely different values at home and at school? (Educator # 87)

The excerpts from the participatory discussions illustrated above, as well as the information presented on the pre-service posters prepared by the teachers, show that teachers prior to the start of the workshop held different ideas about children's rights and that they faced many challenges in applying these rights in practice. However, teachers' views on human rights components, such as cultural diversity and inclusive education, were rather narrow prior to the discussions. Cultural diversity was perceived through the right of every student to retain their language and culture and to have access to an inclusive educational environment. It is clear that the participants, as first-year teachers, lacked specific knowledge and concepts on these topics, which affected their understanding of human rights.

The Rights of the Child's connection to the educational context and the teachers' work

In general, the teachers felt before they started the workshop that, in general, the principles of the rights of the child are being effectively implemented in the Finnish school system. They believed that many factors contributed to the realization of the rights of the child in the educational context: the general education school in Finland is free, which provides access to education for all children, and the teachers and other school staff are well educated and most of them are competent in their work. Equality is also an important value in the Finnish school system.

However, most teachers, before they began their work, saw a clear connection between the realization of the rights of the child and the resources available in a particular municipality or school. The lack of resources, such as sufficient competent staff, suitable facilities or educational materials, was perceived as a risk and a problem that could lead to children's rights not being respected, especially when it comes to issues related to inclusion and minorities. Several teachers felt before they began work that the lack of classroom assistants made it difficult or even impossible for the teacher to provide quality education to all students, especially when there were several children with special needs in the class. The lack of qualified teachers and teaching materials was perceived as a possible risk to children's rights to learn their language, culture and religion in school. Language barriers can also prevent cooperation between the teacher and the child's family, thereby preventing them from working together to ensure the child's best interests. Two of the primary teachers noted:

Children should have the right to use their own language and receive education in their own language, which, unfortunately, is not implemented everywhere and is difficult to implement. (Educator # 45)

The challenge is to find competent teachers and quality learning materials, and the problems associated with the language barrier and so on are mentioned; so if we're talking about a linguistic minority, for example, it can be difficult to find a teacher who speaks that particular language. (Educator # 4)

It has also been observed that the lack of support for teachers compromises their ability to provide quality education to their students. The high workload of teachers due to large class sizes and students with special needs can lead to stress and even burnout, preventing them from providing the best possible education for children. One of the pre-service teachers remarked:

This is also related to the emotional burnout of teachers and, from this point of view, is it possible to implement quality education, how great is the load on teachers if there are children with special needs in the class. (Educator # 79)

While elementary school teachers felt it was sometimes difficult to uphold child rights principles due to the lack of resources, they also saw this as an opportunity to improve and enrich their teaching. For example, one group mentioned the possibility of incorporating the study of the religion and culture of ethnic minority students into the lesson plan for the whole class, which would allow everyone to learn about different cultures while respecting the rights of minority students to receive education related to their own religion and culture. Participants also felt that this could give them the opportunity to gain new perspectives as teachers. One of the pre-service teachers remarked:

Treat everyone equally and then you will have immigrants and other minorities, and that is also possible, in the sense that it gives you new perspectives for learning. (Educator # 68)

Other groups saw that the adherence to the principles set out in the *Rights of the Child* document could also provide clear guidance for decision-making. This is particularly evident in the case of Article 3, which states that the best interests of the child must always be considered. Some of the pre-service teachers noted:



The best interests of the child, and we think this should always be a priority when it comes to education. (Educator #38)

The best interests of the child should be the starting point in everything. (Educator #2)

It is basically related to all these others, all actions should be considered from the point of view that it is in the best interests of the child. Not in the interests of the teacher or the parents, but in the interests of the child at all these levels. (Teacher # 10 before the start of work)

When it comes to considering the best interests of the child, we thought of this as an opportunity: when a teacher knows that s/he should now be thinking about the best interests of the child, perhaps it helps her/him make consistent decisions in her/his teaching when there is a clear line. (Educator # 12)

The teachers emphasized before the start of the workshop that teachers should ensure that the principles of the rights of the child are observed in the education system, as well as that children need to understand their rights and learn to respect each other's rights. According to the participants, teachers can support the implementation of children's rights by teaching children about their right not to be touched against their will, or about their right to express their own opinion. This was considered especially important for the rights that could be ambiguous; for example, not all children know the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touching, or the difference between expressing one's opinion and insulting someone. In this way, teachers can support students by creating a safe and open environment for learning about a topic. Pre-start educators also noted that teachers serve as an example for students:

You must respect the child's right to privacy and teach others to respect each other's right to privacy as well. (Educator #6)

When there are children from different cultures in the class, it is important to explain to them the boundaries that everyone is allowed to have. In a sense, we as teachers are spreading the knowledge of what is right and what is wrong. (Educator # 11)

As a teacher, you must teach where the line is between insulting someone and expressing your own opinion; children need to be taught this. (Educator # 77)

The experience of teachers was considered vital to ensure the successful implementation of child rights principles in education. Teachers stressed before they started that teachers should know their students well to avoid situations in which they might offend or hurt them and to know when they might need help or support. This was found to be particularly challenging in sensitive areas such as being able to recognize when students are by themselves by choice and when they are being discriminated against, or when they agree to be touched and when they do not. Some teachers noted before they started that a large number of students in one class often means that it is difficult for teachers to notice and recognize each person. Sometimes they may be forced to make decisions under a lot of pressure. For example, one teacher expressed concern before starting work about the need to notify Child Protective Services in cases of suspected child abuse because it can be difficult to distinguish between a child telling a story to get attention and a child who is actually being abused. For example, some of the teachers noted before starting work:

As a teacher, you really need to know your students so that you can know that you are not hurting that student. (Educator #12)

Knowing your students is very important because some students just need a little guidance from you, while others don't like being touched. (Educator #44)

You need to constantly keep the tentacles at the top; there is a certain kind of emotional intelligence in this work. (Educator # 18)

According to the teachers before the start of the work, the concept of inclusion may have both positive and negative consequences. This concept was considered positive because it prevents discrimination by giving all children an equal opportunity to learn regardless of any special needs they may have. Inclusion also ensures that all children can belong to the same group as their peers. However, some teachers felt before they began that the practice of inclusion could result in not all children's rights being fully realized. One issue emerging from the data was the fact that inclusion practices can sometimes lead to discrimination, such as when a child with special needs is labelled as a troublemaker by other students. One group also indicated that sometimes measures taken to support students with special needs in an integrated classroom, such as isolating them from the rest of the class, may be perceived as discriminatory by the student. Another group also mentioned the fact that sometimes inclusion is practiced in the municipality to save money and not because it is in the best interests of the child. However, this is contrary to the spirit of Article 3, which states that the best interests of the child must be the most important factor in decision-making. Two of the primary teachers noted:

Does the student feel discriminated against if you put a screen in there and he can't see? (Educator # 76)

This should reduce discrimination, but, on the other hand, it may also increase discrimination from the point of view of the student with special needs, because that student may be stigmatized as a troublemaker and this may also highlight his/her ongoing need for additional support. (Educator # 68)



Previous research (Paksuniemi et al., 2022) has shown that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are mostly positive and they become even more positive as they progress through the program; however, prospective teachers may have many concerns about the implications of inclusion, and attitudes vary by child, teacher, and environmental variables. Teachers' attitudes before starting work are shaped by their personal experiences and personality traits, as well as demographics (such as age and gender) and sociocultural beliefs, values, and practices (Paksuniemi, 2022). It is encouraging to see that teachers seemed to be willing to take responsibility for linguistically and culturally diverse students before they started.

All children should have the right to be members of the school community without losing their culture and identity; in addition, their cultural, ethnic and religious roots should be respected in the school. This can be difficult, if the values the child receives at home conflict with the values of the school. Teachers, prior to starting work, did not know what they should do if a child's cultural background results in him/her behaving in ways that are contrary to school rules or broader social norms. For example, teachers before starting work noted:

The challenge is that you must meet people as people, but at the same time take into account their cultural differences. (Educator #89)

There is no way we can ignore differences in values and so on, because there are always differences. (Educator #19)

[According to the family values of the child], you should not listen to women, and women are inferior to men, so the child in question did not listen to her at all, and also told other students that I do not listen to [this woman]. How to eradicate such behavior in a class? (Educator # 78)

In general, according to participatory discussions and posters, teachers identified a strong link between the rights of the child, the educational context and the work of a teacher before starting work. It has been observed that the rights of the child make different, sometimes even conflicting demands on teachers and create different problems in their daily work. Most of these problems stem from a lack of resources. Participants were concerned that they would not be able to act in the best interests of each child due to a lack of resources such as time, support needed, enough helpers, or appropriate learning materials. Previous studies (Goddard & Evans, 2018; McCray & McHatton, 2011) have also reported similar pre-job concerns for teachers about inclusion. Pre-service teachers appear to be well aware of the disparities in Finnish education with regards to students' linguistic and cultural rights. However, child rights principles were seen as something that could enrich the curriculum and help teachers in their work by providing a clear basis for decision-making. In general, before the start of work, teachers identified adequate support and resources, the development of teaching methods and teacher education, as well as multidisciplinary cooperation as prerequisites for the full implementation of the principles of the rights of the child in schools. Teachers have identified their responsibility to act in the best interests of the child before starting work; however, they struggled to offer solutions to problems and act as active members of society to overcome barriers.

Conclusions and directions for further research

This article is based on the above-mentioned project discusses HRE in relation to pre-service teacher training from two perspectives. It discussed how educators perceive children's rights and identified the impact it has on their daily lives as teachers, namely how clear specific articles are and what problems they see in them. The teachers had different views on the meaning of children's rights and human rights in education, and were unsure of the practical value of some of the articles in terms of supporting children's development by ensuring their ability to cope with life's circumstances. The teachers also saw before they started work that these international conventions were a way to prevent children from being marginalized in society.

Pre-service teachers felt that some of the content of child rights was ambiguous. They were also unsure of the practical implications of certain articles, such as the right of a child not to be touched against his/her will, even if it is for his/her own benefit or for the protection of their classmates. The results also show that the pre-service teachers, prior to starting work, felt that the *Rights of the Child* lacked detailed information on how not to touch children in a harmful way, so they were unsure when it was okay to touch small children in their classrooms. During the workshops, participants discussed various aspects of touching or not touching children in connection with the changes in the Finnish rules on how teachers should behave in a situation where they need to protect themselves or when working with aggressive children or children with emotional problems. The teachers also discussed before the start of work how difficult it can be to provide equal support, for example, if one focuses on working with one child to the exclusion of others. The workshops served as an ethical review session for teachers prior to commencement, allowing them to consider second opinions during discussion. Their opinion and the right to children's own culture and language were also perceived as ambiguous from a practical point of view. According to the results, it seems that the prospect of a language- and cultural-sensitive education was challenging for prospective teachers. Some participants found the job of a teacher to be complex and difficult, as their task was to ensure the overall well-being of children and understand the future implications for their learning.

From the point of view of the connection of the rights of the child with the work of teachers, the impact on teacher education is clear. Every teacher needs a safe place to build their concepts and ideas about human rights before starting work. The functional café model used in



this study is based on the idea of gaining knowledge through focus group discussions. These discussions provide a controlled context in which pre-service teachers can learn more about various topics in teacher training programs before they begin work.

Based on our results, the opinions of the first-year students before the start of the work were rather narrow, based on the analysis of the posters they made during the workshops. While they were able to identify the issues, they approached human rights from a limited perspective. They concluded that the design and content of teacher training programs is necessary to address these issues and increase their knowledge of inclusion and cultural and linguistic diversity. For example, teacher training should include more topics concerning discrimination and prevention of bullying in schools. However, seeing that the teacher has an important role to play in advancing children's rights, pre-service teachers were unable to indicate before the start of the work how they could promote the realization of these rights, such as inclusiveness, in their teaching practice. The problem is that pre-service teachers need more guidance and help from educators.

Confirming the results reported by Boutros (2018), the findings suggest that the learning café method was a practical way to introduce future teachers to human rights, but it was not enough to help them learn how to apply this knowledge in teaching. In the future, it is important to think about how best to orient teachers before starting work so that they think about how to apply their knowledge of human rights with their students. Teachers need theoretical and practical knowledge of human rights and related topics such as inclusion before starting work. When teachers gain more knowledge before they start work and apply that knowledge into practice during a teacher education program, they gain confidence and their fears may fade over time. It is important to remember that pre-service teachers in the observation were freshmen in the teacher education program before they began work. At this stage, the approaches of the programs for elementary teachers tend to be descriptive and concrete, at the same time, they are promoting more analytical thinking.

As for the directions of future research, it should focus more on different aspects of pre-service teachers' knowledge of human rights to obtain more in-depth information about their views. It would be essential to also study the perceptions and ideas of the teacher educators who are responsible for designing teacher education curriculum.

As it was mentioned in the text, to study and share the Finnish (one of the leading democratic countries of the world) experience related to the professional development of teachers in the field of human rights and teaching them in schools, as well as the gradual dissemination and implementation of the concept of democracy and human rights in Georgian schools will have a positive impact on the political culture of young people in Georgia - the future generation of a country that intends to become a full member of the European family. In order to put this idea into practice, it would be important to organize appropriate training for school teachers in Georgia in the field of democracy and human rights, with a further perspective of teaching the basic principles of human rights to Georgian schoolchildren. As a result, representatives of the younger generation of Georgia will have relevant knowledge about their own and other social, political, economic, legal, etc. rights. In this regard, familiarization of representatives of the Georgian education system with the Finnish model will create a convenient basis for strengthening democratic institutions in the country in the medium and long term.

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