

NORDIC PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

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CHAPTER 13 NATIONAL CURRICULA AS PROMOTERS OR OBSTRUCTERS OF HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION – THE EXAMPLE OF SWEDEN

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NATIONAL CURRICULA AS PROMOTERS OR OBSTRUCTERS OF HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION – THE EXAMPLE OF SWEDEN

Ann Quennerstedt

Introduction

From the outset, the UN World Programme for Human Rights Education (HRE) (UN, 2006) focused on provision in formal schooling. A series of UN activities was launched to define and refine what is meant by HRE, and to spur governments to include it in their school systems. One aspect that was emphasised was that a requirement for education about human rights should be present in national-level school governing documents, for example the national curriculum. A curriculum presents a selection of knowledge and skills that teachers are expected to plan for and teach, and that students are expected to learn and master. A curriculum agreed upon at the political level is therefore an important tool for both state governance of formal education and teachers in their professional role. This chapter seeks to elaborate on the role of the curriculum in realisation of HRE in formal schooling. Taking Sweden as the example, the chapter will offer further insight into how curricular aspects may promote or obstruct whether and how HRE takes place in school.

Curriculum research has shown large differences between countries' national curricula in terms of how requirements for HRE are expressed. For example, HRE is clearly present in the Swiss context (Rinaldi et al., 2020) but has limited visibility in the first national Australian curriculum, despite initial high ambitions when it was first introduced (Phillips, 2016). The incentives to teach about and for human rights accordingly seem to differ significantly between nations (Gerber, 2008; Parker, 2018; Tibbitts & Kirchschräger, 2010). Research that has examined HRE in formal schooling has strengthened the concern raised in the UN's own evaluation that, if HRE occurs at all, it does not match the broad scope envisaged in the UN's definition (Struthers, 2015; UN, 2010, 2011).

Parker (2018) takes the view that the main problem is *a lack of a HRE curriculum*. In Parker's observation the term curriculum does not denote national school governing documents, but instead refers to 'a disciplinary structure created in a field of specialists' (p. 4). Parker maintains that although in its World Programme the UN calls for a curriculum that includes knowledge, values and action, it does little to help developing one. He argues that if HRE is to be included in schools, it is essential that the subject matter and the learning goals are elaborated. Further, Parker emphasises that such a disciplinary structure must include a knowledge development trajectory: an idea about what constitutes basic, intermediate and advanced levels of knowledge and understanding of human rights. For Parker, it is not enough merely to state a requirement to provide HRE in national curricula.

Swedish preschool and school curricula might be exceptions to the scarce presence of HRE across national contexts, and are therefore interesting examples to study more closely. International treaties that Sweden sign are normally transformed into national legislation, rather than being made part of domestic law (exceptions being the European Convention on Human Rights, which was incorporated in 1994, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was incorporated in 2020). To bring in central aspects of the UNCRC Sweden adopted in 2010 the national *Strategy to Strengthen the Rights of the Child in Sweden* (S2010.026, 2010), which influenced the revised version of the Education Act (SFS, 2010). The national curricula for elementary and upper-secondary school that were subsequently introduced significantly expanded human rights and basic principles from the UNCRC as educational content and goals to be achieved.

It is clear that a focused child rights policy has augmented the presence of human rights in Swedish curricula. But it is uncertain to what extent the governing documents for the Swedish school system now live up to the expectations placed on governments to provide children and young people with a full HRE. Further, it is unclear whether the curricula offer an idea of a concrete educational content for HRE and an idea of learning progression. This chapter presents an analysis of the direction and guidance for HRE given in Swedish curricula for all educational stages – from early childhood to the final years of upper secondary school. The analysis will clarify whether a distinct *subject content* and a *development trajectory* are discernible in the curricula for the following HRE elements:

1. *Human rights knowledge and understanding* – what human rights are and mean
2. *Human rights values and attitudes* – the values and attitudes that are inherent in human rights
3. *Capacity for human rights action* – ability to claim and practise rights in everyday life and capacity to act to sustain and defend human rights.

How the formulation of these aspects in curricula may promote or obstruct the realisation of HRE will be considered.

Framing children's human rights

This research is based on the perspective that children have *children's human rights*. This conception brings together children's rights scholars' focus on children as a particular group of humans in particular life conditions having *children's rights* with human rights scholars' claim for the universality of *human rights*. To operationalise this standpoint, mainstream UN human rights terminology is used to understand and articulate rights for children, who are thereby seen to have civil, political and socioeconomic rights. Setting out from the position that children have children's human rights includes also an ambition to bring *human rights education* and *child rights education* together. These have largely been approached in research as different things. Human rights education research has connected to central human rights treaties, used a human rights vocabulary and only to a limited degree addressed children and formal schooling. Child rights education has been based on the UNCRC, employed a children's rights vocabulary and rarely connected to general human rights (furthered developed in Quennerstedt, 2022). This research instead merges these into *children's human rights education*. The focus on children as a specific group of humans is then combined with connections to the legal frameworks of human rights education (UN, 2011) and of children's rights (UN, 1989).

Taking children's conditions into consideration means that their human rights, and their human rights education, need to be understood within their various and particular contexts. In this, both rights promoting and rights obstructing aspects should be identified and considered. Preschools and schools are central parts of children's lifeworlds; apart from supporting growth in knowledge and values, they are the main locations for children's and young people's everyday life – it is where they spend their days, meet peers and learn about friendship and love. But although these institutions are built to promote children's wellbeing and development, they simultaneously reflect the problems of the larger society. The Swedish crime prevention agency (BRÅ, 2018) and the Swedish police (NOA, 2016) have reported that school is the most common place for children and young people to be affected by violence and sexual harassment. Serious violence is unusual but does happen, minor forms of violence, such as pushing or hitting someone, or pricking someone with a sharpened pencil, are however very common. School is similarly the public environment where the most physical acts of sexual molestation take place. Upper secondary school students have described (SVT, 2017) how sexual harassment is a normal everyday experience. They have had to get used to physical and verbal harassment, and young LGBTQIA+ persons suffer more such discrimination than heterosexual youth. Human rights problems outside school are present also in schools – children and young people

witness or are subjected to violations of rights within the walls of the school. They may have their human dignity ignored or even violated, sometimes due to hard rooted power asymmetries in school, subordinating children. Educating children and young people about their human rights is therefore a question both for their present and their future; providing them with means to claim rights and identify and challenge rights transgressions in school, and giving them incentives and tools to uphold democratic and rights respecting societies.

The approach formed through the above perspective of children's human rights, and children's human rights education, provides the analytical entrance point for this curriculum analysis. It offers a means to distinguish human rights aspects in the curricula, and the content and goals expressed therein are understood as guidance for the experience offered to children and young people during their time in formal education.

Previous research about curricula and rights education

There is limited research that has examined curriculum aspects of human rights education in formal schooling. A study of 12 countries' general implementation of the UNCRC (Lundy et al., 2012) found that rights education for children and young people was not considered to be an important element in the implementation of the Convention. Although most countries had included some aspects of human rights and children's rights in their curricula, this was often unsystematically expressed and rarely compulsory for schools. No real rights education therefore took place. The researchers also emphasised that if national regulation is weak, HRE will depend on the interests of individual teachers and school leaders. In line with this, Gerber (2008) and Lapayese (2005) found that HRE tends to be carried out on a small scale and locally on the initiative of one or more enthusiasts. Another important finding in studies of curriculum documents is that human rights education is often expressed as a cross-curricular matter (Cassidy et al., 2014; Çayır & Bağlı, 2011; Phillips, 2016; Robinson, 2017). The fact that the responsibility of education for human rights is thereby spread across school subjects can be both a strength and a risk. If human rights are approached from the perspectives of different school subjects, students are given opportunities for rich experiences. The absence of a responsible party however also brings the risk that human rights education will not be carried out by anyone. In summary, previous research presents a troublesome picture of the state of HRE in schools, and of curricular support for this educational assignment.

The Swedish education system and national curricula

The Swedish education system for children and young people consists of three school phases. First, the non-compulsory *preschool* where children aged from one to five receive care and education (78% of one- to three-year-olds

participate, 95% of four- to five-year-olds). Second, the ten-year compulsory *elementary school* for six- to 15-year-olds, which is divided into four stages: preschool class year, years 1–3, years 4–6 and years 7–9. Third, the three-year non-compulsory *upper secondary school* for 16- to 18-year-olds, with programmes oriented towards different academic or vocational areas (about 85% of 16- to 18-year-olds participate). The majority of people in Sweden therefore receive education from one to 18 years of age.

Each of the three phases is governed by its own national curriculum. The preschool curriculum comprises two parts, (1) fundamental values and task of the preschool, and (2) goals and guidelines. The preschool curriculum does not contain subject syllabuses or specify required knowledge achievements. Instead, it defines the areas, topics and goals that children are to be given opportunities to develop understanding of. The school curricula are also each divided into two parts. The first part states fundamental values and overall goals and guidelines. The second part contains subject syllabuses, which declare the aims and content of the respective subject, along with requirements of knowledge achievement for different grades. For elementary school, content and knowledge achievements are presented for each of the three compulsory stages. For upper secondary school they are presented for each subject course (which typically lasts either a half or a full academic year).

Sundberg and Wahlström (2012) label the Swedish curricula as *standards-based*, i.e. ‘a curriculum framework that gives precise accounts of the knowledge and skills that students are to achieve; [and] a focus on assessment criteria that are aligned to this framework’ (p. 348). National governance of educational content in schools is thereby seen as performed by policy actors who formulate the educational objectives. The teacher’s role is then to transform these objectives into practical teaching (Alvunger et al., 2017). In a standards-based curriculum system such as in Sweden, the teacher is thereby responsible (or accountable) for providing an education that enables pupils to achieve the set standards.

Methods

This study is a text analysis of the Swedish national curricula for preschool, elementary school and upper secondary school. The preschool curriculum was analysed in whole, as were part 1 in both school curricula. For the more extensive subject syllabuses in school curricula, a selection of text was made. A digital search of all syllabuses, with the terms *right*, *rights*, *freedom*, *equality* and *influence*, identified syllabuses that address rights issues. These were read. The syllabus for Civics/Social Studies¹ was found to be where HRE is most extensively elaborated. Single mentions of rights or rights-related topics in other syllabuses did not add anything not already covered in Civics/Social Studies. The decision was therefore to analyse only the syllabuses for Civics/Social Studies.

The reading of the curriculum documents searched for both explicit and implicit mention of human rights. Explicit references to human rights or children's rights are few; more often a content or goal may be clearly connected to human rights but the term itself is not used. For example: 'No one shall in school be subjected to discrimination...' (Lgr22, 2022). Here, rights are not mentioned, but the statement reflects a basic human right. The use of the term *right* was therefore not decisive in identifying a piece of text in the curriculum document as relating to HRE. This openness in the analysis brought about some difficulties in deciding on the limits for interpreting content as connecting to human rights, for example when the content or goal relates to democracy. To deal with this, the essence of rights in terms of civil, political and socioeconomic rights provided parameters for the analysis.

When specific phrases and goals had been identified, these were mapped onto the three elements of HRE by posing the question 'what does this expression aim for?' Phrases and goals were categorised according to whether the answer was:

- That students achieve human rights knowledge or understanding
- That students develop and come to embrace human rights values and personal attitudes in line with human rights
- That students acquire the ability to act to claim and defend human rights.

Some phrases and goals were found to relate to more than one HRE element, and these were placed under both. The findings were thereafter collated by age to examine whether a qualification trajectory over school phases and ages is visible.

Findings

The following presents the presence of HRE-related content in the three curricula and shows whether a progression line can be detected.

Preschool curriculum

The content description and stated goals of the preschool curriculum (Lpfö18, 2018) cover all three elements of HRE. An assessment of the aspects included shows that a range of key human rights principles are identified. The curriculum therefore does require HRE to take place already at this early age. Table 13.1 shows content and goals that relate to human rights, mapped onto the three elements: understanding, values and attitudes, and capacity for human rights action.² It should be noted that the preschool curriculum does not set goals that children are expected to achieve, and against which children are evaluated. Instead, the goals

TABLE 13.1 HRE content and goals in the preschool curriculum

<i>Element of HRE</i>	<i>Content/goals</i>
Understanding	Has an understanding of the equal value of all people and human rights. Has knowledge about own rights. Understands rights and obligations. Is aware of the right to own physical and personal integrity. Can discover, reflect on and work out own position on different ethical dilemmas.
Values and attitudes	Respects the equal value of all people and human rights. Feels empathy and consideration for others and is willing to help others. Respects different opinions and ways of living. Develops openness, respect, solidarity and responsibility.
Action capacity	Can express thoughts and opinions, and thereby influence own situation. Can make own choices. Can assume responsibility for her or his own actions. Can assume responsibility for the environment of the preschool.

function as guidance: preschool education is intended to offer opportunities for children to develop towards the goals.

In relation to the element *knowledge and understanding*, the term knowledge appears only once in the statement of content and goals. The term understanding is largely used instead of knowledge in the preschool curriculum. This could be seen to indicate an ambition to approach equal value, rights, obligations and integrity as areas that children are to meet and begin to understand in early education. The formulations of educational content and goals related to the development of understanding are rather abstract and, if understood literally, express quite high expectations for this young age group, for example ‘has understanding of human rights’ or ‘is aware of the right to own personal integrity’. What such understanding or awareness might be more concretely for a child of preschool age is not explicated in the curriculum.

The *values and attitudes* that children should be given opportunity to develop in preschool capture core aspects of human rights values. Here, too, however, the formulation lacks concrete explanation, to varying degrees. The content and goals for *action capacity* stand out in relation to the former as they are formulated in terms that are closer to the everyday situation in preschool, and are significantly clearer.

No progression line for HR teaching and learning during preschool is indicated. Although children’s cognitive and social growth during the early years is extensive, the curriculum does not provide any guidance on differentiation between initial HRE for one- and two-year-olds and how this can be built on as they progress through preschool.

Elementary school curriculum

In the elementary school curriculum (Lgr22, 2022), the presence of HRE content and goals increases significantly compared to the preschool curriculum. This is particularly the case for the element *knowledge and understanding*, but for the other elements, too, more aspects are covered and with sharper formulations. Goals for knowledge and understanding are achievement goals that schools have to ensure that students reach. In contrast, though the goals for *values, attitudes* and *action capacity* development should be striven for, their attainment is not evaluated.

Guidance for the element *knowledge and understanding* is mainly given in the subject syllabus for Civics, although a few mentions can be found in overall guidance sections. In the specification of the aims of Civics, human rights are placed at the centre of knowledge development; familiarity with human rights is depicted as a vehicle to understand democracy and active citizenship. The educational content, achievement goals and grading criteria are thereafter specified in the syllabus. For *value formation* and *development of action capacity*, content and goals are expressed in the introductory cross-curricular section of the curriculum. Table 13.2 shows the content and goals in Lgr22 that relate to human rights, mapped onto the three elements knowledge and understanding, values and attitudes, and capacity for human rights action. Text in *italics* is from the Civics syllabus (requires achievement), whereas the text in normal font is from the introductory cross-curricular section.

The curriculum formulates an expansive requirement for *knowledge*. The rights of the child and human rights are stipulated, central principles are specified and essential concepts, such as discrimination, equal treatment and freedom, are used. In years 7–9 more complex content is introduced, such as national and international tensions around human rights, and dilemmas between rights. The content and goals are fairly concrete, with clear guidance towards a specific topic or issue.

The content of and goals for *values and attitudes* education include important, core human rights values. Values that emphasise respect and empathy towards others dominate, while valuing one's self as a right holder and a self-competent attitude is absent. This is also the case for action capacity: most capacities identified are directed towards others, e.g. respecting them and having ability to intervene when others are subjected to human rights violations. The only action capacity in which action in one's own interest is explicated is exercising influence.

As can be seen in Table 13.2, a clear line of progression through the elementary school years is provided for the element *knowledge and understanding*. Both expansion and qualification of content and goals are expressed in detail. A corresponding progression trajectory for the development of *values, attitudes* and *action capacity* does not appear, however. One set of educational content and goals for these elements is to be

TABLE 13.2 HRE content and goals in the curriculum for elementary school

<i>HRE element</i>	<i>Central content/goals</i>		
	<i>Preschool class year³ and Years 1–3</i>	<i>Years 4–6</i>	<i>Years 7–9</i>
<i>Knowledge and understanding</i>	<i>Human rights, including the equal value of all people. The child's rights as laid down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. What freedom of opinion and expression can mean in school and society. Knowledge about own rights. Ability to consciously determine and express ethical standpoints based on knowledge of human rights.</i>	<i>Human rights and their meaning, including the child's rights as laid down in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The principle of equal treatment, including protection against discrimination. Rights of national minorities and indigenous people in Sweden. Knowledge about own rights. Ability to consciously determine and express ethical standpoints based on knowledge of human rights.</i>	<i>Violations of human rights in different parts of the world. International work to promote human rights. The situation of national minorities in Sweden. The Sami's position as an indigenous people. Freedoms, rights and obligations in democratic societies. Dilemmas linked to democratic rights and obligations, for example the boundary between freedom of expression and abuse in social media. Knowledge about own rights. Ability to consciously determine and express ethical standpoints based on knowledge of human rights.</i>
<i>Values and attitudes</i>	<p>Values the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all, gender equality and solidarity between peoples. Is open to and respects differences between humans. Has conscious and human rights-based ethical standpoints. Has respect for the intrinsic value of other people, and for their bodily and personal integrity. Rejects the subjection of people to violence, oppression, discrimination and offensive treatment. Has ability to empathise with and understand others' situation and develops will to act with their best interests at heart.</p>		
<i>Action capacity</i>	<p>Respects the intrinsic value of other people, and their bodily and personal integrity. Actively rejects that people are subjected to violence, oppression, discrimination and offensive treatment, and contributes to helping other people. Can express ethical standpoints based on knowledge of human rights. Can gradually exercise increasingly greater influence over their education and the internal work of the school. Shows respect and consideration for school staff and other students.</p>		

applied to all age groups. Additional issues to consider are the placing of direction for the school's work with values, attitudes and action capacity in the cross-curricular section in the beginning of the curriculum and the status of the goals as 'soft goals' that are not evaluated.

Upper secondary school curriculum

As with elementary school, the goals for *knowledge and understanding* for the upper secondary school phase are found in the subject syllabus for Social Studies (Gyllsp, 2011), while the goals for *values/attitude* and *action capacity* are placed in the curriculum's introductory section (Gyll, 2011). Again, like elementary school, only goals related to knowledge are subject to assessment. Table 13.3 shows the content and goals for upper secondary school for the three HRE elements.

The one-year basic course in Social Studies is common for all programmes. HRE content and achievement goals are limited, and only briefly formulated.

TABLE 13.3 HRE content and goals in the curriculum for upper secondary school

<i>HRE element</i>	<i>Central content/goals</i>
Knowledge and understanding	<i>Human rights: what they are.</i> <i>How human rights relate to the state and the individual.</i> <i>How people can enforce their individual and collective human rights.</i> Ability to consciously determine and express ethical standpoints based on knowledge of human rights.
Values and attitudes	Values the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all, gender equality and solidarity between peoples. Is open to and respects differences between humans. Has conscious and human rights-based ethical standpoints. Has respect for the intrinsic value of other people, and for their bodily and personal integrity. Rejects the subjection of people to violence, oppression, discrimination and offensive treatment. Has ability to empathise with and understand others' situation and develops will to act with their best interests at heart.
Action capacity	Respects the intrinsic value of other people, and their bodily and personal integrity. Actively rejects that people are subjected to violence, oppression, discrimination and offensive treatment, and contributes to helping other people. Can express ethical standpoints based on knowledge of human rights. Can actively exercise influence over their education and the internal work of the school. Shows respect and consideration for school staff and other students.

Note: Text in *italics* is from the Social Science syllabus (requires achievement), text in normal font is from the introductory cross-curricular section.

Somewhat surprisingly, knowledge about human rights is again a goal. Content with a very high level of complexity is also found however, e.g. rights as related to the state and the individual, and the distinction between enforcement of individual and collective rights. Goals for the HRE elements *values/attitudes* and *action capacity* are almost identical to those found in the elementary school curriculum; the only real difference is a sharper formulation of the capacity to exercise influence expressed in the curriculum for the oldest students in the school system. As the course is only one year long, a progression line does not appear (and is not to be expected).

Discussion: HRE in Swedish curricula – the whole picture and its consequences

This curriculum analysis has shown that the provision of HRE relating to all three HRE elements is required and elaborated in the Swedish curricula. In line with the idea of a standards-based curriculum system, the Swedish state governs by communicating the validity of HRE for children and young people of all ages, and by placing expectations on preschools, schools and thereby teachers to provide this education (Alvunger et al., 2017). A first conclusion from this study is therefore that the Swedish preschool and school curricula do, on a general level, promote a full HRE.

The analysis has however exposed some troublesome differences between the formulation of content and goals for *knowledge and understanding* on the one hand, and for *values/attitudes* and *action capacity* on the other. The degree to which the curricula provide schools and teachers with an idea of concrete educational content and a progression trajectory differs. In the following, these differences will be summed up and possible consequences of the situation will be discussed.

The guidance given for human rights knowledge development includes concrete identification of content and a progression line from the early years to the final years of upper secondary school. The successive widening and deepening of human rights knowledge make sense, and the concretisation of what the teaching and learning should focus on is, in most cases, sufficient. The support thereby given to teachers constitutes an important component in the realisation of the knowledge element of HRE.

The guidance and support provided in relation to the other two elements of HRE are very different. The wordings in the elementary and upper secondary school curricula are nearly identical, so the only visible progression is therefore between preschool and school. That the same goals for value development and development of action capacity are stated for children and young people from the ages of six to 18 years old does not seem reasonable, and the consequence is weak guidance. Setting goals for such a wide age range allows, or even necessitates, formulations to remain abstract: broad wording without concrete aims and examples is the only way to encompass the education to be provided over

the 12-year period. In the absence of curricular support, teachers must themselves transform abstract aims into age-appropriate goals, and decide what educational content would support these for each age group. This is demanding and requires developed human rights knowledge. The lack of a professionally held and shared idea of a human rights education curriculum (Parker, 2018) is here significant; teachers do not have the tradition of a field of knowledge to fall back on when the curriculum fails to provide guidance. The consequence may be an ad hoc education in relation to human rights *values*, *attitudes* and *capacities*, or – potentially worse – no education at all.

Another problematic difference between the elements is the unequal status of the goals. The goals set for the development of human rights knowledge and understanding are goals that must be reached, while goals for values and action capacity development are not: this has critical consequences. If the school and the individual teacher can be held accountable for not providing an education that meets the requirements, attainment goals will be prioritised. If the goals for values and action capacity take the form of recommendations, albeit strong ones, rather than assessed goals, the incentive to give space for values and capacity development is significantly reduced. The effect of this difference can be devastating for a full HRE.

The final difference to draw attention to concerns where the responsibility for providing HRE is placed. Here, again, the knowledge and understanding element benefits from being assigned to a specific subject and therefore also to a certain teacher. The responsibility held by ‘everyone’ for arranging teaching and activities that will enable students to develop values and capabilities to act, however, may result in very little such education taking place.

A real risk for HRE in Sweden accordingly seems to be that, in reality, it becomes restricted to the knowledge and understanding-element. In order to grow as holders, practitioners and defenders of human rights, children and young people need concrete, tangible experiences of all the parts of a full HRE – knowledge, values and action capacity. An education system that wishes to ensure that a complete HRE is planned for, and actually undertaken, cannot downgrade some elements by reducing the requirements set out in national governing documents.

As argued in the beginning of this chapter, school as a main lifeworld of children and young people reflects the injustices and power structures in the society it is a part of. If children and young people do not come to understand the connection between human rights values and the democratic and free society, and therefore want to embrace these values themselves, and if they do not get to practice and experience defence of their own and others’ human rights, they will be insufficiently equipped both in the present and in the future. Human rights knowledge, values and action capacity is a powerful package that, if properly used, can make a real difference in children’s and young people’s everyday school life. The power structures that often operate in schools, signalling that children have less a say in matters than adults, can

be addressed in a full HRE. Making children and young people aware that all members of the school community have the right to state their opinion and influence the decisions taken will provide them with fundamental human rights *knowledge*. But being aware does not suffice if the students are to be fully educated about the right to be included in the formation of opinion and decision making, they also have to *experience and practice various forms of action* in this matter. A school that offers students a range of situations in which their views are sought, and that get to practice the making of joint decisions, makes it possible for the students to continuously grow in capacity to speak up and claim influence.

The matters of violence and sexual harassment in schools are also burning examples of areas where a full HRE could improve children's and young people's everyday life. A HRE that takes on the frequently occurring violations of rights relating to violence and harassment would provide specified knowledge about *what human rights are being violated* and *which basic human rights values are being breached*. This would strengthen students' ability to identify when the rights in question are infringed. But the HRE would also include opportunities to discuss and practice how students as individuals and in group can *act to prevent* violence and sexual harassment, and how they can *act in defence* when they witness these rights transgressions.

The HRE element that seems to be most missing in the Swedish curriculum is capacity for action. If students' ability to take action when they realise that a human rights is being violated is not given room in formal schooling, children and young people that want to engage in social justice issues have to turn to contexts outside formal education to be included in the joining of forces with others to affect change in an undesirable situation. Commitment to organisations' protests and grassroots movements for social justice may become the only option available for young people who wish to engage and channel their feelings into action. But most young people will not join such activities, and so will miss out on important HRE experiences. Further, children and young people may then not be made aware of other ways of taking action for human rights than grassroots action, for example through the ordinary political system, or in small ways such as intervening in instances of bullying. Formal education then abdicates its responsibility to provide *all* members of the growing generation with possibilities to experience human rights knowledge and values being transferred into action. Various ways of acting for human rights is left unaddressed. This is a loss not only for individual students, but also for society at large.

Conclusion

The Swedish curricula for preschool and school prescribe that HRE be included for all age groups, and express educational content and goals for all HRE elements. In one sense, then, the Swedish curricula are good examples of the

incorporation of HRE in national curricula. The demonstrated absence of concrete content and lines of progression for some elements of HRE, and the differences in the extent to which achievement is required, has simultaneously demonstrated disparities in curriculum steering/guidance that will have a troublesome effect on the realisation of HRE. The understanding offered in this analysis of how central characteristics of a curriculum both can promote and obstruct HRE highlights the importance of looking closely at curriculum documents and considering their effects.

Teachers have been identified as the key persons for HRE to take place. If the teachers are not aboard, governing in curricula may make little change. This contribution is hopefully helpful for current or incoming teachers, and for teacher educators who hold an important role in providing future teachers with the knowledge and competence needed to give students a full HRE. Awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the guidance that teachers might or might not get from the curriculum may be vital for how they provide HRE to children and young people. The capacity to identify voids in the curriculum can set teacher creativity in motion and, in the long run, even prepare the ground for curriculum revision.

Notes

- 1 The official English translations of the syllabuses use ‘Civics’ for elementary school and ‘Social Studies’ for upper secondary school.
- 2 Text excerpts from the curricula are not exact quotations since there is no English language version of the preschool curriculum. The translation to English changes sentence construction and terminology slightly. The wording has been kept as close as possible. Some text passages have been condensed, and clarifying words have occasionally been added.
- 3 The first content area below does not apply to preschool class year, only to years 1–3.

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