NORDIC PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

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CHAPTER 7

FROM INFORMATIVE TO TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE? ADDRESSING CHALLENGES OF HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION IN NORWAY

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Introduction

What are the main challenges of human rights education (HRE) in Norway, and how can these be addressed? International educational discourses have identified HRE as a sustainable practice for developing active citizenship and protecting human dignity (Mihr, 2009). HRE promotes the empowerment of individuals and vulnerable groups and the development of human rights mechanisms in local, national and international contexts (Cardenas, 2005). Moreover, international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the Council of Europe and the European Union impose a number of obligations on their member states regarding HRE (Decara, 2013). These encourage incentives to conform to global educational standards and to respect international law and norms which, if ignored, may lead to sanctions or, at least, a loss of reputation and criticism from 'the international community' (Risse et al., 2009). However, the ideal purposes of HRE and the embracing of the concept as a way to develop human rights-friendly societies and democratic citizenship do not fully explain why it is in the interest of a state to promote it and how it is implemented in practice. As Bajaj (2017, p. 8) argues, 'nation-states and policymakers have diverse reasons to support human rights education – that may or may not include a transformative vision' and points to a tension between the state as the guarantor of human rights, and as the entity that usually violates those same rights. As the main agent mandated to incorporate and implement human rights conventions, the state may also (mis)use its power to deny or limit the rights of specific minority groups and individuals rather than restricting majority or state power and include HRE to protect *from* state repression (Donnelly, 2007; Osler, 2016). Moreover, HRE can lead to awareness among the population

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of the state that may undermine the legitimacy of the political leaders and its regime. If people are aware of their rights, are they not more likely to demand that those rights be protected? Following this logic, Cardenas (2005, p. 364) asks an essential question: '*Why would states, most of which violate human rights to one degree or another, encourage dissent and run the risk of undermining their very legitimacy?*' Hence, the role of the state has a paradoxical component in relation to HRE, as such education aspires partly to end and prevent the abuses committed, perpetuated or tolerated *by* states (Cardenas, 2005, p. 365), and additionally promotes a more cosmopolitan rather than a national notion of citizenship. Toivanen (2009, p. 39) claims that 'this is why human rights education may prove to be incongruous with other educative goals'. This ambivalence is also present in Norway, where human rights are included and explicitly referred to in different educational steering documents. HRE is included in the Education Act (2010) as well as in the new overarching curriculum and the renewed curricula of different subjects, particularly in social studies and religious studies (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). Nordic and other countries, however, share several challenges concerning the implementation of HRE despite promoting this educational concept (Decara, 2013; Kasa et al., 2021; Vesterdal, 2016). In this chapter, I will discuss how Norway's image as peaceful and human rights-oriented may impede teachers from addressing human rights issues sufficiently, and how a comprehensive HRE model may contribute to meeting these challenges in practice.

Schooling and HRE as a component in national identity construction

The role of the school as the main arena for nation-building has been emphasized in the works of Telhaug and Mediås (2003), with a focus on steering documents in Norwegian education from 1739 to the early 2000s. Lorentzen (2005) also emphasizes the role of the school as a crucial arena for nation-building, through his study of history textbooks (and more recent social studies textbooks) and how these have presented and reproduced the 'grand narratives' of Norway and Norwegians in different periods. Børhaug (2019) also argues, as Tvedt (2018) does in his analysis of Norway's national 'do-gooder's regime', that the image of Norway as a promoter of peace and development has become prominent in the textbooks. Osler and Lybæk's (2014) analysis of educational policy 'identifies a tension in policy between recognition of diversity and concerns about social cohesion' (Osler & Lybæk, 2014, p. 15). They propose instead a curriculum that genuinely integrates minority perspectives and narratives to develop 'the new Norwegian we', based on Osler and Starkey's concept of education for cosmopolitan citizenship (Osler & Starkey, 2010).

My own study explored and discussed relations between national identity, foreign policy and HRE in Norway, finding that the image of a human rights-oriented and peaceful country contributes both to state-branding in foreign policy as well as to the construction of national identity (Vesterdal, 2019). The different national reports, statements and steering documents that shed light on HRE and human rights in this study gave an overview of how these topics are constituted in Norwegian educational policy, where human rights are essential components of the self-image as well as a component in Norwegian foreign policy. Here the message to the international society is that HRE is sufficiently implemented (ibid., 2019).

Challenges for human rights education

Norway's image as a peaceful and human rights-oriented state may influence teachers' approaches to HRE. This image is not necessarily negative *per se* and could even contribute to strengthening the human rights culture if carried out adequately. The explicit references to human rights in policy documents and curricula integrate and legitimize education. According to the Purpose Clause of the Education Act, education should be based on values 'rooted in human rights' (Education Act, 2010, sec. 1–1). The new Core Curriculum explicitly mentions the Convention on the Rights of the Child and HRE: 'Education and training given must comply with human rights, and the pupils must also acquire knowledge about these rights' (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 5). Although these explicit references in the curriculum may raise HRE among teachers, they might still be insufficient. Research on Norwegian HRE in recent years seems to reveal a gap between rhetoric and practice, between (self)-image, the political will to implement comprehensive HRE, and its purposes (Lile, 2019; Sørumshagen, 2017; Vesterdal, 2016). Osler and Skarra's study (2021) explores whether the Norwegian curriculum supports transformative HRE, empowering learners to defend others' rights and build solidarity across difference. Their findings suggest that 'HRE is frequently implicit, restricted, and dependent on teachers' individual perceptions of rights. Teachers may lack legal knowledge and are unsure how to tackle everyday injustice or racism' (Osler & Skarra, 2021, p. 191). They recommend that education policy explicitly address shared HRE principles and recognize social and racial injustice, not least in teacher education to strengthen the teachers' competences: 'Current policy and practice risks complacency about human rights at home and undermining the explicit commitments to democracy and inclusion that this same official policy espouses' (Osler & Skarra, 2021, pp. 206). This resonates with Lile's argument: 'In a nutshell, one might say that the Norwegian legal commitment is like a fine-looking Ferrari, that looks strong and good on the surface, but there is no engine, no real commitment under the hood' (2019, p. 143).

In my qualitative PhD study on the roles of HRE in Norway (Vesterdal, 2016), I discuss that although there is a consensus on its importance among Norwegian teachers in upper secondary school, HRE tends to be conceptualized as a self-evident imperative and as a set of values rather than learning *for* human rights. Some teachers argue that human rights are taken for granted in a country that scores quite well on human rights records and considers itself an international promoter of democracy and peace, and thus give less attention to substantial aspects of the topic – it is apparently not considered as necessary in Norway. Nevertheless, there are some evident patterns concerning teachers' way of approaching human rights in the classroom practice: teachers communicate human rights issues to a large degree through a 'lens' of violations. Moreover, human rights are basically interpreted as *international* issues, only to a smaller degree and with other lenses is this talked about in a Norwegian context (ibid.).

The teachers argue that it is first and foremost *violations* of rights that engage the students and motivate them to go deeper into the topic. To a great number of the sample in the 2016 study, this implies the gravest violations, like genocide, ethnic cleansing, torture and other massive crimes against humanity, and for the teachers such cases coincide with events occurring in what was referred to as the Orient and the Third World (Okafor & Agbakwa, 2001; Said, 1978). Nevertheless, the focus on *only* the worst atrocities of history may distort our understanding of what we consider a human rights violation and not, reducing those abuses not included in the 'horror narratives' to events *outside* the human rights discourse. To discuss human rights issues exclusively through the ultimate evils – genocide, massacres, slavery, ethnic cleansing and mass deportation and the like – may obstruct the students' ability to deliberate and recognize categories of rights that do not fall into the worst-case scenario described above. These include for instance articles affecting the everyday lives of people within the categories of social, economic and cultural rights. This point is not intended to relativize the gravity of the ultimate atrocities, but to stress HRE practice as a holistic concept (Mihr, 2009) underlining the indivisibility, interrelatedness and interdependence of rights (Donnelly, 2007). When some teachers downgrade the significance of violations in their own country, they may implicitly construct the conception of human rights as a distant phenomenon and accept the existence and continuing of other structural or subtler forms of discrimination and oppression of interdependent human rights principles. The magnitude of the Rwanda genocide, the brutality of the war in Syria or the Russian war on Ukraine, the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia or the Holocaust make discrimination on a smaller scale secondary, or in the words of a teacher – 'peanuts' (Vesterdal, 2016).

Having said that, it is plausible to present such cases; it would be rather peculiar to leave the students unaware of these reference points of human suffering of the 20th century to illustrate the necessity of a human rights

regime, given the perspectives discussed above and the importance of context and purpose. Nonetheless, the downgrading of domestic human rights violations represents an obstacle to HRE practice for several reasons; dichotomization is problematic both as practice and consequence. In this context the focus is on the construction of the Norwegian human rights record versus other countries' human rights records in HRE discourse, which is present both at policy level and at the teacher level. Here Norway represents the harmonious, stable and liberal-democratic human rights defenders, promoting and respecting human rights both nationally and internationally, while a sample of unstable, war-torn, repressive and authoritarian states represent the image of the human rights violators outside the Norwegian border (ibid.). This dichotomization comes close to the problematic orthodoxies of international human rights education as discussed through the postcolonial analysis of Okafor and Agbakwa (2001). Their 'heaven-hell' binary distinction between the respective human rights societies of the West and the violative societies of the Third World is a particularly recognizable approach to HRE. First, a pure heaven-hell narrative gives the notion of the world out there as dangerous, chaotic and violent, leaving less space for more complex, nuanced narratives where rehumanization and realization of human rights are also included. This signals that the worst human rights abuses occur only in so-called non-Western societies, where uncivilized and barbaric acts not only flourish, but are an ongoing everlasting problem that defines these societies as such (Okafor & Agbakwa, 2001).

Moreover, in an allegory to the argument on foreign policy as shaping the production of national identity (Campbell, 1998; Vesterdal, 2019), this heaven-hell dichotomy marks the frontier to the threats from outside – outgroups of states that threaten the existence of a universal human rights culture. People migrating from the 'hellish' countries can consequently fall into the same category of outgroups representing the Other, understood as a threat to the human rights-based image of Norway, carrying a 'baggage' of non-democratic, repressive norms and values that contrast with the liberal-democratic, 'harmonious' state. In this setting, HRE practice focusing exclusively on authoritarian regimes and brutal conflicts far away can be counterproductive, reproducing the contrasting image of the We and the Other (Vesterdal, 2016). In light of this, a qualitative study on global citizenship education by the same author (2022) shows that Norwegian upper secondary school teachers regard international issues and global conditions as a source to an expanded, 'cosmonational' understanding of citizenship. At the same time, the study indicates a 'soft' charity-based approach to global learning in schools (Andreotti, 2006), while the critical-structural and participatory perspectives on global citizenship are less visible (Vesterdal, 2022).

In spite of states promoting and adopting the rhetoric of such human rights education, several European countries including the Nordic face common challenges on the practice level, and it is not carved in stone that HRE is

sufficiently implemented (Kasa et al., 2021). These common challenges are particularly visible in terms of sporadic and implicit HRE, as part of a civic education that basically focuses on voter education and where there is a compliance with the nation-state and its political institutions at the expense of a holistic approach to HRE (Decara, 2013; Kasa et al., 2021; Osler & Skarra, 2021; Toivanen, 2009). Additionally, the focus on *citizens'* rights rather than *human* rights seems to be an obstacle in several countries where different minorities are excluded from human rights narratives. These approaches also tend to be disciplining rather than empowering, where the emphasis on democracy and citizenship also can lead to downgrading the human rights dimension, while these are complementary rather than identical concepts (Toivanen, 2009; Vesterdal, 2016).

From informative to transformative practice

There is a need to develop practice that responds to the obligations under international law and the current challenges in Nordic societies. Figure 7.1 shows a model that illustrates relevant components in the learning process which can contribute to structure and clarify HRE in a Nordic context. It

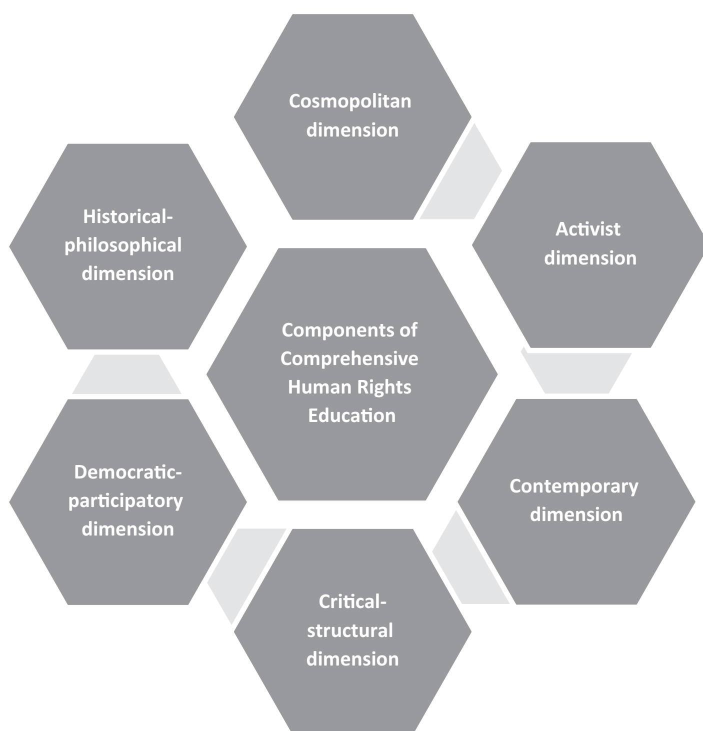

FIGURE 7.1 Model for comprehensive human rights education (Vesterdal, 2021)

does not present specific exercises and methods, but structures practice along six didactic dimensions (Vesterdal, 2021). These dimensions do not necessarily have to be present at the same time but can also be combined. The model can also take different forms and the learning should consider the specific context in which it takes place, and its specific purposes (Bajaj, 2011). Nevertheless, there are some basic components that seem fruitful for developing a holistic approach to human rights education, where there is a connection between content, methods and purpose.

The cosmopolitan dimension emphasizes the close connection between local, national and global perspectives on human rights in order to develop an inclusive human rights culture and solidarity beyond national borders. This dimension recognizes the notion of equality, which on the other hand recognizes diversity and defines humanity (Banks, 2009; Osler & Starkey, 2010). The MeToo movement against sexual abuse and harassment mirrors the local, national and global narratives of rights' struggle and exemplifies the influence of these connections. The cosmopolitan dimension also challenges established notions of the state's role in society, where it is recognized that international agents, global institutions and transnational companies also affect the living conditions of individuals, while at the same time challenging states' operational space (Dobson, 2005; Vesterdal, 2022). In this perspective, our human rights obligations do not end at national borders, but indicate moral obligations within and beyond national citizenship (Pogge, 1992). The asymmetric distribution of vaccines between rich and poor states during the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, questions the ability of states to deal with this human rights issue in times of global crisis. Without relativizing the severity of various forms of human rights violations, both local and international narratives of human rights struggles are relevant in order to develop a human rights culture. Narratives of massive violations of human rights far away can be balanced by identifying violations and discrimination also in our own societies, at local and national level. This also involves including the stories about the *realization* and improvement of human rights situations in different regions, in order to emphasize that social change and positive development are possible (Landman, 2013; Mihr, 2009; Neier, 2012). This approach is essential for empowering students and rehumanizing people, developing solidarity with 'the Other' both within and outside our own society (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2002; Mihr, 2015).

The historical-philosophical dimension contributes to illuminate the nature and legitimacy of human rights as well as its historical development. Events such as the French and American revolutions, 'non-Western' philosophical contributions to human rights, the brutal experiences of World War II and other conflicts, phases of decolonization and the implementation of rights in international and national legislation exemplify reference points that reflect the necessity of human rights as well as its philosophical basis (Ignatieff, 2001). The historical perspective also reflects that rights are dynamic, that

they develop over time and are adapted to the social conditions in which they operate, with room for interpretation (Høstmælingen, 2007). Black Lives Matter (BLM), partly rooted in the American civil rights movement of the 50s and the 60s, illustrates the essence of the component. This dimension also reflects how philosophical justifications in various political, religious, cultural, temporal and social contexts are of high relevance for HRE (An Na'im, 1992). The use of past events to illuminate the topic is frequently used in schools, with excursions and visits to memorials and museums that link the past to present perspectives, also in the light of HR and democracy (Lenz et al., 2016; Mihr, 2015). This can also be linked to different uses of history where agents may have different needs and motivations for putting historical cases in context with human rights-related themes, and these connections can serve several functions. The use and abuse of history can also be linked to how discourses of rights such as the BLM challenge established notions of power and hegemony over time, which groups are included in history, who are excluded, and how this has affected the status of minorities in society at large. The treatment of indigenous people and national minorities throughout history are relevant cases in the Nordic countries, but also the treatment of other marginalized groups in recent times, where the human rights framework has played a significant role for inclusion (Brandal et al., 2017).

The democratic-participatory dimension describes the importance of learning through human rights, where teaching should be carried out in line with democratic principles – the learning process must reflect the values and norms to be learned – 'practice as you preach'. It will require asking relevant questions for our own teaching: Is this method in line with human rights principles? How can I include all students? Do the students contribute to and in the learning strategies? To what extent does the exercise encourage critical thinking? Do different perspectives emerge in the way we work? How can students explore the topic, participate and develop independent opinions through dialogue? This involves anti-authoritarian communication and teachers who are aware of their position as role models, their power vis-à-vis the pupils and how to encourage the students' critical view of what is presented (Freire, 1970; Spring, 2008). The learning process is also inquiry-based and non-discriminatory, where students experience a safe environment and an open classroom climate based on mutual trust between the actors (Dewey, 1990, 2008; Gutmann, 1999). Learning through human rights sees the learning strategies in connection with the students' lifeworld and can be linked to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children are rights holders both in general human rights instruments and specifically in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This legally binding convention is universally recognized, meaning that it has 'a legitimacy that is often lacking in other school-based frameworks' (Covell, 2013, p 40). Studies in which individual schools and municipalities in Canada and England have made the Convention on the Rights of the Child their pedagogical framework suggest

that HRE empowers students to develop greater skills to promote and protect the rights of others, and they become more engaged in creating measures for social justice. It also helps to reduce structural inequalities and create transformative processes that benefit both the schools and the local environment, and the approach establishes better relationships between students and between teacher and student, and between majority and minority groups (Covell, 2013).

The critical-structural dimension gives students the opportunity to identify power structures in society and to influence and challenge asymmetric power relations (Andreotti, 2006). In this context, HRE critically questions the roles of powerful institutions such as state authorities, transnational corporations and international organizations with the aim of holding them accountable in line with the principles about human rights (Spring, 2008; Toivanen, 2009). Within this dimension, human rights are treated as a political and legal tool for examining structures and mechanisms that affect the human rights situation in various parts of the world, including the student's own lifeworld. Basic questions along this dimension can be: What historical, economic, social and political conditions have contributed to oppression, inequality and injustice? What cultural, social and political conditions have promoted the struggle for rights? How have economic and political structures globally affected human rights in different local contexts (Shiva, 1998)? Who are the agents who undermine and influence negatively, and which agents have created positive change in people's living conditions? Why is my fellow student being discriminated against, and how can this be changed? Freire's liberating pedagogy illustrates this approach, where learning is inquiry-based and the oppressed must 'reveal the world of oppression in which they live' and engage in its transformation – becoming subjects in their own lives (Freire, 1970). When HRE remains a representation of abstract human rights norms, such learning may come close to a secular religion, a set of universal truths that pretend to be self-evident. Here, rather, human rights represent a counterforce to both national and global institutions that reproduce inequality and injustice both locally and globally (Ignatieff, 2001; Magendzo, 2005).

The contemporary dimension reflects that human rights issues are part of our society here and now, and the awareness of this presence creates proximity, relevance and an incentive to get involved. The historical perspective's most important goal is to develop an understanding of the development of human rights, often through empathy towards the historical agents and their room for action, where students are often left with the moral imperative 'Never again!'. However, it provides few options for how they can prevent present or future violations of human rights (Eckmann, 2010; Mihr, 2015). The notion of human rights as a distant, vague concept in time and space with a spotlight on massive violations in other countries can make it problematic for students to identify and recognize human rights challenges in their own neighbourhood, and rather create distance, disillusionment and a lack of

commitment (Eckmann, 2010; Mihr, 2015). This requires attention to current violations and the struggle for *the protection of* human rights in local, national and international contexts. Focusing on challenges in the present helps students to explore how the rights movement works, and may encourage change and empowerment, also in so-called stable democracies. Key questions in this perspective include: Which human rights debates can we identify in the media today? Which types of rights stand against each other and are in tension? Which HR-related topics can be linked to the student's everyday life here and now? How do different organizations and groups work with HR issues in ongoing conflicts, and what are their options? The contemporary dimension also emphasizes that learning takes place in recognizable arenas, through the student's own experiences and 'lifeworld' (Mihr, 2015). This may involve exploring social media, computer games and other digital spaces where children and young people interact and may experience violations and discrimination, but also in the neighbourhood, in leisure activities and in close relationships. However, this requires that they have basic knowledge of the HR framework and are able to relate it to the context of where they live. It also indicates that learning does not take place as 'a stunt' in connection with 'international week' or the UN Human Rights Day, but as a continuous perspective on various themes throughout the school year.

The last, but equally important, is **the activist dimension** where skills to create change and take measures to protect others' and own rights are emphasized – learning for HR. If students know and can identify rights issues, and know the tools to uphold and protect them, they are also more likely to challenge injustice, inequality, power and oppressive institutions and develop an inclusive human rights culture (Magendzo, 2005; Mihr, 2015; Spring, 2008). This dimension is in many ways the most challenging and controversial, but at the same time an indicator for the scope of active citizenship. Here the most relevant didactic questions are: How can students be empowered to defend human rights? Which tools and skills should students know, and how can these be practiced? What does it mean to defend and promote HR? Which learning arenas can contribute to active citizenship? Why/why not should the school develop students' skills to defend human rights?

This approach does not necessarily equate to creating activists who stand on the barricades against all the world's injustices at all times. One important aspect is to make students familiar with different channels of influence and discuss how and why they are used, and how they work in practice. The purpose is to make students aware that there are different ways of influencing and promoting human rights, not only through the electoral channel, but also, for example, the organizational channel, the action channel and the media channel, which are the most used (Børhaug, 2019). Knowledge of how various HR instruments can be activated and the role of human rights organizations as watchdogs involves doing it in practice, outside the classroom, in the society. On an individual level, activism can also mean recognizing injustice

and having the ability and power to stand up against bullying, racism, discrimination and harassment in everyday life, at school and in the community. The UN Children's Committee has also pointed out to Norway and a number of countries that combating bullying in schools is an obligation that follows from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2010; Lindboe, 2015). Studies in the US (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2021; Fry & Bentahar, 2013) show a connection between active citizenship and exploratory and participatory approaches to HRE and democratic learning. Students in such studies explored discrimination, inequality and human rights issues in their own society or internationally, and they developed alternative solutions and made proposals to local or national authorities to solve the problem. The findings indicate that students become more politically aware and develop knowledge and skills to become active citizens. The studies also point to the students' ability and confidence to create changes in local communities and influence public policy in relation to the specific questions they examine (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2021; Fry & Bentahar, 2013).

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed challenges to human rights education in the Norwegian context, and how these challenges could be addressed in Nordic countries through different dimensions structuring HRE practice. In Norway within human rights education, there remains an emphasis on international rights violations, the downgrading of domestic violations, and national identity construction in both policy and classroom practice. The Norwegian human rights discourse acts as a reservoir on which teachers draw to stress human rights. In doing so, they may also reinforce a sense of superiority and complacency as well as compliance to the state and corporate power. The HRE model presented here is intended as a contribution to structuring educational thinking.

At the same time, HRE is an interdisciplinary topic that can be integrated into several subjects and in connection with other interdisciplinary topics, such as in the new curriculum (LK20) in Norway. In the core curriculum it is stated that 'the school shall facilitate for learning in the three interdisciplinary topics *health and life skills*, *democracy and citizenship*, and *sustainable development*'. These topics are integrated because they are considered 'prevailing societal challenges which demand engagement and effort from individuals and local communities, nationally and globally' (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). Human rights are downplayed as an explicit concept in this context, and there is a risk of HRE being less prioritized at the cost of the main topics, as previous research indicates. Here I will underline that HRE represents the 'glue' that binds these topics together, addressing legal, political as well as ethical issues related to democracy and citizenship, health and life skills and sustainable development, and is as such a *necessary* component and prerequisite

to these topics, which are insufficient frameworks without the human rights dimension. In this didactic space there are opportunities to explore connections between the topics and to explore how active, critical citizenship can be developed for a sustainable society based on human rights principles.

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