Educational aims of rights education in primary school – zooming in on teachers and pupils in two classes

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ABSTRACT
The role of education in upholding and spreading human rights is widely recognised, but knowledge about actual rights education is limited. Drawing on north European didaktik theory, this article examines human rights teaching and learning of 8–9-year-old pupils in two Swedish classes, with a special interest in what teachers and pupils consider to be the aim of rights education – what is to be achieved? Based on interviews with teachers and children and observed teaching and classwork, a shared conception between teachers and pupils focusing on knowledge about rights and ethical allegiance with rights is identified, but also some differences.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 5 March 2019
Accepted 19 June 2019

KEYWORDS
Rights education; children’s rights; HRE; primary school; educational aims

Introduction and purpose
In our contemporary era of changing political landscapes, in which anti-democratic and intolerant forces are gaining ground, efforts to equip the growing generations with values and principles that are foundational to the democratic society must increase. The human rights are a vital part of this value base, setting up a framework for human interaction and states’ responsibility that insists on equality, freedom and mutual respect. The role of education in upholding and spreading these values and principles is widely recognised. The Council of Europe (2010) and the United Nations (2011) have pointed to the importance of education about, through and for human rights, including the development of

- knowledge and skills – learning about what human rights are and being able to practise rights in everyday life,
- values and attitudes – understanding and embracing the values and attitudes inherent in human rights, and
- capacity for action – developing action capacity to sustain and defend human rights (UN 2006).

School’s responsibility for the development of human rights knowledge and values is probably commonly recognised, but responsibility for the third element – human rights action capacity – may be less obvious to different stakeholders. The importance that education promotes action capacity, has, however, been emphasised also in relation to other societal issues. In relation to education for sustainable development Mogensen and Schnack (2010) argue for an action competence approach and in relation to ethics education, Lilja et al. (2017) highlight that ethical competence includes practical capacity. Fostering an ability to act is accordingly accentuated as a part of school’s responsibility by several actors.
When the UN evaluated international and national efforts to expand rights education in formal schooling (UN 2010) the inclusion of human rights in national curricula were noted in several nations, but no conclusions could be drawn on whether, how and to what extent education about rights actually takes place. The evaluation pointed to a need for closer examination of concrete teaching of human rights in schools. That knowledge about actual rights education is limited was also demonstrated in a systematic review of scholarly work addressing educational content or teaching and learning processes in rights education (Brantefors and Quennerstedt 2016). Publications dealing with these issues were altogether few, and none of the analysed publications stated a research aim explicitly directed to issues of teaching and learning rights.

By exploring ongoing rights education, this study offers knowledge about actual rights education in primary school. The work thereby contributes towards two research fields; children’s rights research and research into human rights education. The study examines early years rights education for 8–9-year-old pupils, with a specific focus on why teachers and pupils in this age group believe that rights education should be provided in school. The interest is accordingly directed towards the educational aims of rights education as they are understood by the classroom participants. Insight into what is considered to be aims of the education in a certain field is vital for a deeper understanding of the teaching and learning within the field. A teacher’s choice of educational content and working methods are based on what the teacher wants to achieve, and the pupils’ learning is affected by what they see to be the reasons for learning.

Drawing on north European didaktik theory, in which educational aims are considered to be integral to the educational content (Ligozat and Almqvist 2018), this study addresses how teachers and pupils in two classes understand the educational aims of rights education. More precisely, the article investigates:

(i) the teachers’ perceived aims of rights education at different points in the process in which teachers transform their own ideas and curriculum standards into aims,
(ii) the pupils’ reception of the aims of rights education.

This study is undertaken by means of observations of ongoing class work and interviews with classroom participants in two Swedish schools. Observational research is time consuming and therefore restricts the number of observation sites, but fruitful in allowing close-up examinations of how teachers and pupils talk and act in practice. Since only two classes are included, the findings are not generalisable. However, the insights provided into teachers’ and pupils’ respective approach to early years rights education are valuable contributions to an understudied field. The Swedish example can also provide ground for comparison with other national contexts.

**Contextualisation and background**

**Research into rights education in formal schooling**

Research into the education of children about, in and through human rights mainly takes place within two research fields – educational children’s rights research and human rights education research. These fields are not the same but overlap in relation to rights education. Two aspects have been given particular attention in both fields as significant for rights education in formal schooling: curriculum requirements and teachers’ attitudes and knowledge. In the following, studies from both fields will be highlighted to develop these aspects.

Strong support in national curricula is pointed out as necessary if rights education is to take place. Several studies have demonstrated that human rights often is a cross-curricular issue (Cayir and Türkan Bagli 2011; Cassidy, Brunner, and Webster 2013; Phillips 2016; Robinson 2017). That the responsibility for education about human rights is thereby spread over several school subjects can be both a strength and a risk. If human rights are approached from the perspectives of different
disciplines, pupils can develop rich knowledge. However, the risk is that no specific school subject takes on the responsibility for rights education. In some countries, human rights only appear marginally in the national curriculum. For example, Bron and Thijs (2011) found that human rights are not mentioned at all in the Dutch primary school curriculum and are given only a cursory mention in the secondary school curriculum. Similarly, Phillips (2016) concluded that despite initial high ambitions, the first Australian national curriculum, developed from 2009 to 2015, only addresses human rights to a limited extent. These authors highlight that if national regulation is weak, rights education becomes a matter for the individual teacher. Quennerstedt’s (2015) examination of the Swedish national curricula shows that revisions in 2011 considerably increased the scope for human rights. The human rights were explicitly included in the value base that permeates and guides Swedish schools, and human rights as specified knowledge content were strengthened and more precisely described than earlier.

Parker (2018) addresses the slow pace in which rights education is introduced in schools by arguing that the main problem is a lack of ‘a disciplinary structure created in a field of specialists’ (4). Parker maintains that if education about rights is to be undertaken in schools, the subject matter and the learning goals (in other words, the what and why) needs to be elaborated and established by researchers and teachers. Further, Parker emphasises that this disciplinary structure must include a knowledge development trajectory: an idea has to take form about what constitutes a basic, intermediate and advanced level of knowledge and understanding of human rights.

Research that highlights the significance of the teacher for rights education has identified some obstacles for a successful rights education. One is that teachers’ knowledge of human rights often seems to be insufficient (Cassidy, Brunner, and Webster 2013). Teachers themselves express uncertainty about human rights teaching, largely because they see human rights as a complex and multi-layered issue and are unsure about what to include and focus on, and how to teach human rights (Cayir and Türkan Bagli 2011). Teachers have further shown to be hesitant to educate children about rights, worrying that classroom behaviour might be negatively affected and that parents might question the teaching of rights (Leung, Yuen, and Chong 2011; Struthers 2016). Explorations of teachers’ views of the aims of rights education are few, but the ones undertaken have found that teachers tend to hold forth the promotion of social relations and the installation of civil duties as main motives (Leung, Yuen, and Chong 2011; Waldron and Oberman 2016). The primary aim of rights education is then to develop responsibility for others and empathy for people in difficult circumstances. According to these authors, teachers rarely pronounce educational aims accentuating the ability to act to support or defend rights or to claim rights.

Rights education in the Swedish standards-based curriculum system

Educational policy in Sweden is highly influenced by international trends, including those focusing on competence, standards and assessment. The Swedish curricula are what Sundberg and Wahlström (2012, 348) call 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’. In a standards-based curriculum system, the teacher is responsible (or accountable) for organising an education that enables pupils to achieve the set standards.

The social sciences are in Sweden taught in four school subjects; geography, history, religion and civics. The four subject syllabuses all mention children’s human rights, but the main responsibility for rights education, in terms of central content and knowledge requirements being explicated, is placed on civics. For the 8–9 years age group studied in this article, the civics syllabus stipulates the following pertaining to human rights knowledge for years 1–3:

Educational content:

Basic human rights such as the equality of all people and also the child’s rights as laid down in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
Knowledge requirements at the end of Year 3:

Pupils have a basic knowledge of some human rights and the rights of the child, and show this by giving examples of what these may mean in school and home settings. (Lgr11, 191, 194)

Regarding human rights knowledge, the curriculum can be said to provide fairly developed guidance. The curriculum’s specification of which knowledge the pupils of this age are expected to develop guides the teacher in forming an idea about educational aims of initial rights education and in choosing content accordingly.

The standards expressed in the curriculum pertaining to value formation, and to the formation of action capacity, are mainly found in the introductory ‘Overall goals and guidelines’; for example:

Each pupil:
- can consciously determine and express ethical standpoints based on knowledge of human rights and basic democratic values,
- respects the intrinsic value of other people,
- rejects the subjection of people to oppression and degrading treatment and assists in helping other people.

The school should be open to different ideas and encourage their expression.

… pupils will develop their ability to exercise influence … (Lgr11, selections 10–14)

In the general aim for civics, there are indications that pupils are expected to develop action capacity:

The educational programme should also give pupils opportunities to develop their understanding of what it means to be an active, responsible citizen in a rapidly changing society. … pupils should be encouraged to get involved and participate in an open exchange of views on societal issues. (Lgr11, 227)

The formation of human rights values and development of capacity for human rights action are mainly described in a cross-curricular manner, thereby placing the responsibility on everyone. No educational content is pronounced and, further, the set goals are not broken down for different age groups. Compared to the guidance given for knowledge development, the curriculum provides limited support to the teacher in forming an idea about what initial rights education aims towards when it comes to values and capacity to act.

Research design and data collection

This study was undertaken by means of fieldwork in two school classes of children aged 8–9 years. The schools were both located in middle-class housing areas in a mid-sized Swedish city. There were just over 20 pupils in each class, both classes had an even gender distribution and few pupils of non-Swedish ethnicity. The two teachers differed somewhat in teaching experience – Teacher A had taught in primary school for about 20 years while Teacher B had 4 years of experience.

The researcher spent in total 60 h in each classroom, over a period of 4–5 weeks. Classroom activities and teaching in all subjects were observed and documented with fieldnotes or video recording. A part of the fieldwork was dedicated to direct teaching of children’s human rights. The teachers were therefore, before consenting to participate in the research, asked by the researcher if they were willing to plan and undertake classwork about children’s human rights, and both teachers agreed. The researcher did not give instructions for the work but emphasised that the teachers were free to decide on the time frame, content and working methods. This paper draws only on the data produced during the planned work.

Both teachers assigned two weeks for the class work, 6 lessons in class A and 5 lessons in class B, the lessons spanning between 30 and 60 min. The class work was observed and documented by means of video recording (Fitzgerald, Hackling, and Dawson 2013). The teachers were interviewed before the teaching started. They were invited to describe the planned work and explain why they had chosen this content and what they wanted to achieve. Interviews with the pupils – 18 pupils in class A and
23 pupils in class B – were undertaken when the class had finished the work. The pupils could choose to be interviewed in pairs or alone (most preferred in pairs), and they were asked what they had learned and why they thought that the class had worked with children’s human rights.

That the studied rights education is researcher initiated needs to be considered. The Swedish national curriculum has since 2011 included a requirement to teach about human rights. For both teachers, it turned out to be the first time they had planned and undertaken teaching about children’s human rights in this more regular way, similar to how other thematic topics are planned and taught (for example, ‘garbage disposal’ or ‘the space’). Human rights teaching had previously been dealt with in other forms, such as a gathering on United Nations Day with follow-up class discussions and work. The situation turned out to be the same for teachers of older pupils (this study is part of a larger project covering several age groups, see Quennerstedt 2019), and limited experience of more extensive human rights teaching might therefore be common among Swedish teachers. While aware that the observed teaching probably would not have taken place if the classes had not participated in the research, the design allows the study of two cases of actual rights teaching in primary education and thereby offers in-depth knowledge about teachers’ and pupils’ understanding.

The ethical considerations included a carefully designed process for informed consent in line with the Swedish regulations and the changing views of what constitutes sound research ethics in research involving children (Graham and Fitzgerald 2010; Harcourt and Quennerstedt 2014). All participants and guardians were given information about the purpose and design of the study and were told that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time, and written (children, guardians) or oral (teachers) consent was collected. As confidentiality is particularly difficult in video-documented research, the protocol for analysing and storing data and also for dissemination and future use was carefully designed and included in the information given to the participants (Fitzgerald, Hackling, and Dawson 2013). Two pupils in one of the classes and one in the other chose to not take part in the study. They were therefore not observed or interviewed, but they were fully included in the classwork with human rights. The research was designed to allow a restricted number of non-participants, for example by planning for filming angles not covering all classroom space and editing films when needed. Since so few pupils declined participation their presence in the classroom was easily managed, and the research was not affected in any significant way.

**Theoretical framing and analysis**

*Didaktik theory and educational content*

The design of the study and the analysis draw on north European didaktik theorising. Didaktik (German, Swedish) or didactique (French) is an established scientific educational approach in non-English-speaking continental and northern Europe, theorising the elements of the educational situation. Didaktik research particularly addresses *issues of content and processes* in education. The principal object of inquiry in didaktik research is the relations between the teacher, the learner and the educational content (e.g. Uljens 1997; Ligozat and Almqvist 2018). Didaktik theorising is less known in Anglo-Saxon countries (Gundem and Hopmann 1998; Hudson 2007; Meyer 2012). The kind of educational questions dealt with in the Didaktik-tradition are in English language contexts more discussed in terms of teaching and learning, pedagogy and curriculum.

Research within the didaktik tradition often works with the three so-called *didactic questions*: what, how and why. The first question ‘what?’ directs attention to the content used in the educational situation. The second question ‘how?’ highlights the processes and working methods and the third question ‘why?’ seeks motives for the selection of content and methods. The German educational theorist Klafki developed the questions into what he called *Didaktische Analyse* (1995). Even though an educational situation is seen as a whole, comprising content, processes and participants, didaktik analyses often foreground one of the didactic questions to achieve a more focused inquiry. In this
study, the question why is centred, but attention is paid also to the question what. The analysis does not address working methods (how).

In developing the understanding of educational content and how it is connected to educational aims, Klafki’s account of two dimensions of content (which he called Bildungsinhalt and Bildungsgehalt) is helpful (1995). The first dimension refers to subject matter (Hillen, Sturm, and Willberg 2011) or the content that is taught. The second dimension concerns the meaning of the subject matter (Hillen, Sturm, and Willberg 2011) or its educative value (Uljens 1997). The two dimensions are closely related to each other; the subject matter that is selected to be taught is chosen because it is considered to support the intended learning (the aims). The matter is accordingly chosen because it is seen to have an educative value (Uljens 1997). The teacher’s idea of the aims of the chosen subject matter can, however, differ from the pupils’ ideas, not be visible in the classroom teaching, or the aims might not be known to the pupils. Directing specific attention to the educational aims as they are understood by the classroom participants sheds light on the educative value of the content in the actual teaching situation, and is therefore a way to reach a deeper understanding of education within a certain area.

Analysis

The analysis started with the question: Why should education about rights be carried out in primary education? The instances in which motives for rights education were expressed by teachers and pupils, either in the interviews or in the ongoing teaching, were located and categorised according to five different types of educational aims: cognitive, ethical, emotional, social and bodily (see Table 1, where also examples of utterances seen to represent the different types of aims are given). The different types of aims were formulated by drawing on and expanding Lindström and Pennlert’s (2012) qualification of answers to the question why (see further Quennerstedt 2019).

The data categorised within each type of aim was then further analysed in order to distinguish and clarify the main objectives within it. Data from teachers and pupils were analysed separately. First, the teachers’ expressions of aims before the teaching situation and those in the teaching situation were analysed, resulting in images representing different stages of the teachers’ perception of aims. These were then related to each other and movements in the process were noted. Thereafter, the pupils’ expressions of aims were analysed, resulting in an image of pupils’ reception of the aims of rights education. Finally, the pupils’ reception of aims was related to the teachers’ perception.

Findings

In the following, after a brief description of the work undertaken in the two classes, the findings from the analysis are presented. Quotations from interviews with teachers and pupils and from observation transcripts are provided to illustrate and support the findings.

| Aim            | Meaning                                                                 | Example from data                                           |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cognitive aims | Developing knowledge and understanding, but also ability of cognitive application such as comparison or explanation | ‘You need to learn children’s human rights. You need to know them’. (Pupil school A) |
| Ethical aims   | Developing ability of ethical reflection and valuation, and embracing ethical principles | ‘Children must know when they become adults, so they don’t treat their children badly’. (Pupil school B) |
| Emotional aims | Developing ability to feel and identify with a situation                | ‘I want them to be people that care about others’. (Teacher A) |
| Social aims    | Developing ability to listen to and cooperate with others, but also ability to claim place | ‘If they hear something … or discuss at home, that they can take part in it’. (Teacher B) |
| Bodily aims    | Developing bodily ability and bodily application in practice           | Aim not expressed.                                          |

Table 1. Types of aims for rights education and examples.
The two classes’ work

In the pre-interviews, the class teachers described the plan for the coming work. In class A, the teacher decided to form the work around two themes: rights and forced migration. The rights theme was motivated by the curriculum requirements, whereas the forced migration theme related to the conflicts and refugee situations in Sweden and the world. In class B, the teacher decided to start and finish the work by introducing and summing up general facts about rights and the United Nations. Three rights themes were chosen for elaboration, with one lesson for each theme: rights and school, boys and girls and right to privacy (the latter added after the pre-interview). These themes were chosen because the teacher considered that they reflected children’s everyday lives.

The teachers’ perception of the educational aims of rights education

Below, the teachers’ initial expressions of the aims of rights education are displayed first, followed by the aims that they communicated to the pupils. The movements in the process in which the aims were transformed are thereafter clarified.

Teachers’ initial perception

In the pre-interviews, the teachers raise several aims for the coming work, see Table 2.

Cognitive aims for working with children’s human rights are expressed by both teachers. These aims centre on the requirement that pupils develop knowledge about rights and expand their insights into rights-related matters, such as life conditions for children in forced migration and gender inequality.

| Teacher A | Teacher B |
|-----------|-----------|
| Cognitive aims | Cognitive aims |
| • Having knowledge about rights | • Having knowledge about the rights themes school, and boys and girls |
| • Having insight into human life in other places than own | • Being aware of gender-based inequality |

Ethical aims

• Having ability to reflect ethically on the base of human rights
• Having taken stand for human rights as ethical framework

Emotional aim

• Empathising with people living in difficult circumstances

Social aim

• Having ability to listen to others
• Having ability to listen to others and express your view

Table 2. Teachers’ initial perception of the aims of rights education as expressed in pre-interviews.
ground for the ethical aims and also for the emotional aim of being able to empathise. Both teachers mention the social aim of being able to discuss and listen to others, although marginally.

TA: It says here that it is (reads from the curriculum) ‘a goal for school that each pupil can take and express conscious ethical standings based on knowledge about human rights’.

TA: I want them to become people who care about others, and about people in other parts of the world.

TB: … learn to discuss and listen to each other.

The two teachers’ initial perception of the aims for working with children’s human rights differs in some noteworthy ways. Teacher A’s perception includes a wide range of types of aims – cognitive, ethical, emotional and social, and she particularly views insight into the lives of children in difficult circumstances (in conflict, in forced migration, in starvation) to be central. These children mainly live outside Sweden. Teacher B’s initial perception is narrower in its focus on developing cognitive knowledge and awareness about rights. Teacher B places rights issues in a Swedish child context and aims for insight into rights issues that are close to an 8–9-year-old Swedish child’s everyday life.

**Teachers’ communication of the aims to pupils**

The aims that are communicated to the pupils during the introduction of the work and the following lessons are summarised in Table 3.

Teacher A introduces the work in the following way:

**Teacher A:** We are now starting new work in social science … human rights … and the goals with this work are (reads from paper) that you will be able to talk about some human rights, for example, that you have the right to believe what you want, to be in love with whoever you want and to express your opinion. These are examples of human rights. And you should also know about the Convention on the Rights of the Child. And you should be able to give some examples from the Convention … because it is about children’s rights. And you should be able to say what children’s rights could be … for you, at school or at home. So these are the three big areas that we will be working with. (Teacher pauses for a moment, then continues in a lowered voice) … And – human rights … it is about all humans having the same value … and I have thought about that … there are a lot of things going on in the world right now … have you heard about anything? What does it look like in the world right now, do you think?

Pupils raise their hands and suggest things that are happening, such as conflicts and wars, refugees etc. The lesson continues into the theme ‘forced migration’.

The goals teacher A points out for the coming work are the ability to talk about some human rights, knowledge about the Convention and the ability to express what children’s rights can be. These are all within the scope of the first cognitive aim expressed in the pre-interview on knowledge about rights and specify the knowledge aim. The wording is close to the knowledge requirements stated for this age group in the civics syllabus. The aims of insights into life conditions for children in forced migration (cognitive), ability to reflect ethically and taking a stand for human rights (ethical), ability to empathise (emotional) and listen to others (social), all raised in the pre-interview as central aims, are not mentioned to the class during the introduction. Teacher A’s initial perception

| Table 3. Teachers’ aims of rights education as communicated to the pupils. |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| **Teacher A**               | **Teacher B**               |
| **Cognitive aims**          | **Cognitive aims**          |
| • Having knowledge about some human rights | • Having knowledge about rights that children have in school and at home |
| • Having knowledge about the Convention on the Rights of the Child | • Having ability to take in information |
| • Having knowledge about what children’s rights can mean in school and at home | |
| **Social aim**              | **Social aim**              |
| • Having ability to engage in discussions and state own opinion | |
of educational aims is accordingly drastically reduced when it is communicated to the pupils, in that only cognitive knowledge about rights is specified. There is, however, educational content in the work in class A that does support the aims that are not explicitly declared to the pupils. And as can be seen in the transcript above, the theme forced migration, which in the pre-interview is connected to ethical and emotional aims, is introduced immediately after the presentation of explicit aims.

Teacher B, whose initial perception of educational aims more narrowly centred on cognitive aims, introduces the work to the pupils in the following way:

Teacher B: Now for about two weeks we will work a bit more with children’s rights. We talked last year about children’s rights and the United Nations … we talked about the Convention on the Rights of the Child and what it means. Now, we will work some more with rights … what is that? … and why do we need it? … As usual you will get a piece of paper that says what we will work with and what you should know when we finish (distributes the paper). Let’s look at the paper, what does it say? (Reads from the paper) In the work with children’s rights you should be able to give examples of rights that children have at school and at home (brief discussion about what this means). The second thing on the paper is that you should be able to look at, read or listen to information and talk about things that happen in society (brief discussion of what it means). And the last thing is that you should be able to ask questions, discuss and say what you think. This is what we will be working with. … So, what rights do children have? (The lesson continues by listing rights).

The aims teacher B clarifies for the work ahead are the ability to give examples of rights that children have at school and home, to take in information and discuss societal matters, and ability to ask questions and speak in discussions. These aims are fairly close to those expressed in the pre-interview, but the cognitive focus is decreased and less obvious rights-related matters are highlighted (take in information and take part in discussions). Another noticeable difference is that the aims that are communicated to the pupils are less specific than those stated in the pre-interview. The expression ‘rights at school and at home’ merges and obscures the two distinct rights themes school and privacy. Further, the rights theme boys and girls, which in the initial aims, is explicitly connected to a raised awareness about gender injustices in society, is communicated to the pupils as ‘things that occur in society’. In the course of the work, the chosen educational content does serve to highlight the three rights themes, both through the teacher’s introductions to the respective themes and in the educational material used. Also in class B, the curriculum wording is visible in the expression of the aims to the pupils.

**Constants and movements in the teachers’ perceptions of the aims of rights education**

Cognitive knowledge about rights is the most noticeable constant in the teachers’ transforming perception of aims. There are clear indications of a curriculum effect in the transformation, in that the expression of the aims move towards formulations in the civics syllabus. For teacher A, the influence of the syllabus on the initially vague ‘knowledge about rights’ specifies the knowledge aimed for, while for teacher B it leads to a reduced level of specification pronounced to pupils compared to her initial idea.

**The pupils’ reception of the educational aims of rights education**

In the following, the pupils’ reception of educational aims is presented and thereafter related to how the teachers perceive the aims. The pupils’ reception is summarised in Table 4.

Cognitive aims are stated in almost all the interviews, and having knowledge about rights is by far the aim most commonly raised by the pupils.

You should learn them – children’s human rights. You need to know them to understand what rights you have. (A1)

You should know that all children don’t have all these rights, even though they should. (A6)
Many of the pupils maintain that an essential educational aim is that children should know that rights exist and what they are. Several pupils mention that knowledge about the universal status of rights is important (that all have them), and that rights, despite this, are not always met. The pupils accordingly specify basic factual knowledge that they see as necessary, but also raise knowledge claims on complex issues, such as insight into the tension between the universality claim of rights and rights infringements.

Having knowledge about the lives of children in places other than Sweden is expressed as an educational aim in some of the interviews, proportionally more in class A than in class B. A number of pupils consequently express that gazing out towards rights issues in other places than your own context is an aim of the education.

That you know about what is happening in the world, and how big the difference is between them and us. (A2)

You should know how some children live, those in war and who are poor. (B4)

Ethical aims are expressed by the pupils in about half the interviews; somewhat more in class A than in class B. In almost all cases the pupils argue that education about human rights provides guidance for acting in ethically sound ways. The pupils have several suggestions for how human rights can guide action in the present:

Then you care about the rights, and don’t treat people badly, you know how to treat people. (A8)

You can tell your parents that this is a children’s right. Then parents can stop doing bad things. Children must learn that adults have rules, then they can defend themselves. (B7)

These pupils argue that human rights provide ethical guidance for your own actions, but also for those of others, that children’s knowledge about rights can be stretched out to ethically guide parents, for example. Human rights-based arguments that children raise to counteract adults’ wrongdoings could, according to these pupils, serve to inform adults’ ethical conduct. Several pupils also suggest that rights education provides ethical guidance for future action in adult life.

You need to know when you are an adult, otherwise you might wrong your children. (B5)

So that you know when you are older, so you can help other people with things. (A8)

A few pupils bring up emotional aims for education about children’s human rights, mainly in terms of being able to imagine what it would be like to live under difficult circumstances, but also that knowledge about your human rights could make you feel safer.

If you learn that some people live in war and have no food, you might feel how it feels, maybe. And then you can try to help them. (A3)
You should know your rights. It can make you feel safe, if you know. (A6)

Taken together, the pupils’ reception of educational aims of rights education is fairly similar in the two classes. Despite the differences in the teaching and learning they have experienced in their respective work, the same aims are declared as central in both classes. Also, the proportions between the three types of aims mentioned by the pupils are fairly similar. Cognitive aims – particularly knowledge about rights – dominate the pupils’ reception of what the aims of the education are. Ethical aims are raised in a large part of the interviews, even though neither of the teachers explicitly pronounce ethical aims. Emotional aims are brought up, but only in a few interviews.

The difference between the classes is instead how pupils elaborate on the principal aims they state, i.e. how they explain them. The theme forced migration in class A and the three specified rights themes in class B are rarely suggested as aims themselves (for example, ‘you should know about people in forced migration’ or ‘you should know about the right to privacy’), but are frequently used to exemplify or expand on the aims the pupils indicate. Life during forced migration is used to illustrate in 8 of the 11 interviews in class A, while in class B children talk about issues related to school, boys and girls and privacy in 7 of the 10 interviews. The themes chosen by the respective teachers have accordingly clearly been integrated into the pupils’ more abstracted thinking about aims of rights education and are activated by the pupils as relevant to these aims.

Pupils’ reception of aims in relation to teachers’ perception of aims
The dominant position and close correlation of cognitive knowledge about rights both in the pupils’ reception of what the work aims for and in how the teachers perceive the educational aims are striking. It is also noteworthy that the presence of ethical aims in the pupils’ reception does not correspond with the teachers’ communication of the aims to the classes, however with the educational content in class A. The children in class A identify ethical aims to a greater extent than those in class B. This variation may reflect that pupils in class A in the forced migration theme met content supporting the development of abilities to reflect ethically and use human rights principles as guidance in everyday actions.

The meaning of ethical aims the pupils express is also interesting, in that human rights as a means for ethical guidance – now or in the future – is not at all addressed in either of the classes (although teacher A emphasises this aspect in the pre-interview). There is, accordingly, little support in the actual teaching or material used for pupils to conclude that human rights offer guidance on how to act ethically.

Emotional aims are not communicated by either of the teachers to the classes as an aim of rights education (but expressed by teacher A in the pre-interview). Teacher A, however, speaks to emotion several times during the work – ‘How would you feel if you had to flee your country without your parents?’ or ‘How do you think that these children feel?’ Some of the pupils declare that an educational aim of the work is to engage emotionally with people who are suffering or living in difficult circumstances. These pupils see emotional engagement as a driving force for subsequent action.

Both teachers state social aims for the work, although somewhat weakly, indicating that the pupils should develop the ability to listen to others and take part in discussions. The social aims are communicated to class B. None of the pupils mention these aims or other social aims in the interviews.

Discussion
With the ambition of contributing towards a better understanding of early years rights education, this study has examined how teachers and pupils in two Year 2–3 primary school classes understand the aims of rights education. While there are clear limitations for how far the findings of this study can be drawn, since it builds on a small sample, important insights have been gained. Teachers’ and pupils’ respective answers to the question why children in this age group should receive education about
human rights provide knowledge about the meaning-dimension and educative value of the subject matter selected and taught in the two classrooms. In the following, the findings I consider to be the main contributions of this study will be highlighted and elaborated on.

The teachers’ and pupils’ understanding of the aims of rights education showed considerable similarities. It is therefore possible to distinguish a shared conception of the focus of rights education for 8–9-year-olds. Two predominant aims stand out as being acknowledged and emphasised by teachers and pupils alike: knowledge of human rights and ethical allegiance with human rights. These align well with the first two elements of rights education as called for by the UN – knowledge and skills, and values and attitude.

The knowledge perceived of as an aim of rights education includes basic factual knowledge (that rights exist, which the rights are, that the Convention on the Rights of the Child exists, what it says, that the UN exists, etc.) but also a comprehension of more intricate tensions and difficulties related to rights (that rights are universal but are nevertheless violated, that rights transgressions occur in Swedish society, in school, and at home, that life conditions around the world differ and affect one’s rights). Thus, the findings indicate that teachers and pupils agree that the initial development of rights knowledge should include complexities, and not only consist of facts and conflict-free basic understandings. The development of ethical allegiance with human rights is seen by teachers and pupils to include taking a personal stand for human rights and choosing to be guided by these in the present and future interactions with others. Both of these main aims can easily be distinguished in teachers’ and pupils’ respective understanding, but the knowledge aim has clearer contours and the subject matter tied to it is significantly more distinct than is the case for the ethical allegiance aim. The ethical aim, interestingly, stands out more clearly in the pupils’ understanding (particularly in class A) than in the teachers’, despite the fact that no ethical aims were explicitly expressed to the pupils. The insightful and nuanced understanding of the ethical aims that the pupils express has therefore been formed on occasions other than those in the observed teaching contexts.

A possible explanation to the more extensive attention paid to knowledge aims than to ethical aims, and to the movements in the teachers’ perception of aims towards prioritising knowledge development, might be found in the national curriculum. The risks of a cross-curricular assignment in the curriculum regarding value development, not being broken down to suit different age groups, were mentioned earlier in terms of an unclear responsibility placement and weak content selection support. It might be the case that when the actual teaching is planned and undertaken, the accountability placed on teachers through the standards for knowledge achievement stated in the subject syllabuses outmanoeuvres the vaguer responsibility for value development, expressed in the curriculum’s introductory sections. It can also be noted that few connections between these two main aims and the third element of rights education as called for by the UN, developing action capacity, are expressed by the participants.

The shared conception of the educational aims of rights education also includes emotional and social aims, but their presence is much weaker than the aims discussed above. Empathetic ability is indicated as a desirable result of rights education and it is (loosely) related to human rights action in the sense of being a driving force for helping people that are in troublesome life conditions. Interestingly, the restricted attention to empathetic ability as an educational aim in this study differs from findings in some earlier studies, which showed teachers tending to emphasise empathetic ability as a main aim of rights education (Leung, Yuen, and Chong 2011; Waldron and Oberman 2016). The teachers in this study (but no pupils) further articulate discussion participation ability as being an aim (social) of the education. These emotional and social aims lean towards the third element of rights education – action capacity. Helping people in need and holding a discussion with respect and self-confidence are concrete actions – if undertaken. However, neither teachers nor pupils elaborate on empathetic ability or discussion competence as aims of rights education, or how working towards these aims will promote human rights action capacity, and the connection is therefore uncertain. The meagre curriculum incentive and support to teachers for working with action capacity development as a part of rights education is also a matter worth considering.
Conclusions

The main knowledge contribution of this study is the identification of an overarching idea about the objectives of early years rights education that is shared by teachers and pupils in the two studied classes. This idea is dominated by cognitive knowledge and ethical aims. Emotional and social aims are present, but only marginally. Such ideas provide the foundation for the ways in which teachers select and present subject matter in rights education, and for how pupils receive the teaching and subject matter and construct meaning thereof. Knowledge about real, concrete rights education is much needed both for teachers in their work to develop and improve such education and for the continued academic study of children’s human rights education.

A question arising from the findings in this study that needs further exploration and discussion is whether certain types of educational aims or elements, such as the basic development of knowledge and values, should be prioritised in initial rights education, and more complex aims, such as being able to act to claim and defend rights, should be addressed at a later stage. An opposite idea could also be proposed – that the three elements of rights education should be discovered in parallel by children and young people, and therefore be continuously present in rights education for all age groups. These are important matters to tackle in future educational rights research. Parker (2018) maintains that rights education is in need of a disciplinary structure and that this must include an idea about what should constitute basic, intermediate and advanced rights education. More research is needed to confirm, complement or oppose the results in this study, but it is my aspiration to have provided some food for thought for a continued discussion about the trajectory of rights education.

Note

1. The national curriculum is currently being revised. The revised version is planned to be effective in August 2020.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by Swedish Research Council [Grant Number 721-2013-2129].

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