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CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Language use in the teaching of human rights

Ann Quennerstedt*

Abstract: This research seeks to increase the knowledge about the role of language in the teaching of human rights. The specific interest is to examine how language use extends and specifies the human rights learning situation. Drawing on John Dewey’s arguments for two main constituents of an educative language use—the extension of vocabulary and rendering it more precise, observational data from ongoing human rights teaching in six Swedish classes in Years 2–3, 5 and 8 are analysed. The findings show six focal points towards which the language use in the teaching extends the students’ vocabulary and generic understanding of human rights, and three objectives for an increased preciseness in students’ language. The paper highlights differences between the age groups concerning the focal points and precision objectives, and points out potentials and strengths in the observed teaching, as well as aspects of problematic character to consider further.

Subjects: Education; Educational Research; Education Studies; Primary/Elementary Education; Classroom Practice; Curriculum Studies;

Keywords: Language pedagogy; human rights teaching; HRE pedagogy; children’s rights education

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This research examines how the use of language in human rights teaching provides opportunities for students to extend their human rights vocabulary, and to make it more precise. When the language available to children and young people about a phenomenon is expanded, their ability to think and talk about it and connect it to societal issues increases. A more precise language benefits deep knowledge. Observations of ongoing human rights education were conducted in six Swedish school classes of varying ages. The study showed that the language used in the teaching extended the students’ human rights language towards six distinguishable areas; the UN, humans in forced migration, international history, ethical guidance, life conditions and democratic state and rule of law. Three ways of making the students’ vocabulary more precise were identified; designation (naming), elaboration and human rights crime demarcation. Expected and unexpected differences between the age groups were also identified.

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1. Introduction

In this era of changing political landscapes in which human rights and democracy are under attack from ethno-nationalist and anti-democratic forces, the role of education to equip citizens with resistance capacity is of vital importance. How education can address the growing divides in society and the increasing disillusionment with traditional democratic processes has been discussed by several international actors, both in academia (Taylor, 2017; Westheimer, 2019) and in policy (UN, 2006, 2010). The United Nations (2011) has pointed to democratic citizenship and human rights education as being of paramount importance in this endeavour. Among the international incentives supporting and calling for the expansion of Human Rights Education (HRE) the UN may be said to be the most central actor through its World Programme for Human Rights Education and the adoption of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011).

The UN calls upon nations to incorporate HRE in formal schooling, and many nations assign in their national curricula responsibility to education to ensure that children and young people develop knowledge about human rights and that they come to understand and embrace human rights values and attitudes (Phillips, 2016; Quennerstedt, 2015; Robinson, 2017). However, an evaluation of the effects of the World Programme (UN, 2010) showed that although HRE has been brought into a number of national curricula, no conclusions can be drawn regarding the progression of the concrete teaching of human rights. The evaluation pointed to a need for further examination of the degree and ways in which human rights are actually being taught in schools. This paper seeks to make a contribution by examining language use as a significant factor in the teaching of human rights, based on observational data from the ongoing teaching of human rights in six Swedish classrooms.

The view of education as being a fundamentally communicative process, in which participants together name, consider, reconsider and revise the topics or phenomena under deliberation has, over the years, been propounded by a range of renowned educational theorists (i.e. Dewey, 1929/1958; Freire, 1968; Vygotsky, 1986/1934). Paulo Freire (ibid.), for example, maintained that education through communication is the only option if students are to develop a capacity for critical thinking. The significance of dialogue for fruitful human rights learning has also been emphasised by HRE scholars. Tibbitts and Katz (2017) argue that HRE pedagogy has to engage the participants in joint critical reflection on social realities. Thus it is considered to be vital that HRE pedagogy builds on participatory teaching methods and draws on students' experiences and reflection (Bojaj, 2011). Despite this common conviction of the value of communication, almost no attention has been paid to language aspects in the teaching of human rights.

In order to increase the knowledge about the significance of language in the communication that surrounds the teaching and learning of human rights, this paper examines ways in which language use in teaching practices extends and specifies the human rights learning situation. Particularly, the analysis aims to shed light upon:

- how language use in teaching offers an extension of students’ vocabulary within the field of human rights, and which understandings of generic relations are made possible through this extension,
- how the language use provides possibilities to make the vocabulary more precise, and how nuances of meaning emerge through such precision of terminology.
The study further seeks to illuminate differences in the extension and precision of vocabulary in human rights teaching for students of different ages.

2. Teaching and learning human rights

Being a human right in itself, access to education for all is proclaimed in rights treaties (UN 1966, 1989). These treaties, however, also emphasise that the right to education encompasses content claims; it is, for example, a right to receive education about human rights (UN, 2011). Sweden is a country that has largely observed the UN’s call for human rights education. The Swedish national curriculum for compulsory school (Lgr11) emphasises human rights as a central value base for Swedish schools and specifies in the curriculum the knowledge which students are expected to develop about human rights. Teachers are expected to undertake HRE, and Sweden is thereby an interesting setting in which to examine the actual teaching of human rights.

Research that investigates the concrete teaching and learning of human rights in school is surprisingly limited (Quennerstedt, 2015, 2019). Observational research examining actual teaching situations is virtually non-existent. How teachers understand education about human rights, and their attitudes to such education has however been studied, and some patterns and general insights can be discerned. A number of barriers and difficulties in human rights education have been identified. Many of these seem to be connected to teachers’ lack of developed own knowledge about human rights and how to teach the same (Cassidy, Brunner, & Webster, 2014; Osler & Yahya, 2013; Rinaldi, 2017; Struthers, 2015, 2016; Waldron & Oberman, 2016; Wing Leung, Wai Wa Yuen, & Kwong Chong, 2011). Previous research consistently shows that many teachers find human rights to be difficult and complex, that they do not fully understand them themselves and that they are not comfortable with the terminology. This makes them insecure about what to teach, and how to teach it. Teachers report on no or little training for HRE, and state that they need training opportunities. A further effect of teachers’ limited knowledge is that they become highly dependent on externally produced teaching material. However, good material, and other tools and strategies for teaching human rights seem to be inadequate.

Another barrier that has been identified is that some teachers see human rights issues as being too complex and controversial to be taught to school students, particularly in the early years (Struthers, 2016). Further, support for HRE in policy framework is not in place in all nations (Rinaldi, 2017).

Research that addresses language aspects in the teaching of human rights is lacking. Struthers (2015) mention how rights education is not couched in human rights terminology in primary classrooms. The language used only loosely connects to broader human rights concepts.

3. The role of language in educational processes

Language use in learning situations and the role of language in processes of learning has been extensively studied from a range of perspectives. Here, a brief account of a couple of insights from previous research on the function of language in knowledge development will be given and connected to HRE. The studies discussed below demonstrate how aspects of language are intrinsic to teaching and learning, and that teachers who are aware of language aspects in learning can be supported in their classroom instructional practices. Such insight has earlier been labelled “teacher language awareness” (Lindahl, 2016).

Within mathematics and science, a range of studies have demonstrated how language use affects the development of mathematical cognition (i.e. Donlan, Cowan, Newton, & Lloyd, 2007) and the understanding of scientific phenomena (i.e. Anderberg & Åkerlund, 2011). Malmström, Mežek, Pecorari, Shaw, and Irvine (2017) set out from a wide scholarly agreement that exposure is central in the development of vocabulary. They examined how teachers draw students’ attention to the central vocabulary, and they identified a range of different techniques used to emphasise a term; for example: repetitive use, non-verbal emphasis (pointing), code switching (i.e. repeating the term in several languages), phonologic emphasis (slow pace or pronunciation
syllable by syllable), and content emphasis (definitions, explanations). The research pointing out the significance of exposure is of direct relevance to the current study, which can be said to examine the exposure to human rights terminology (in a wide sense). The topic of human rights includes a highly specified terminology, and increasing familiarity with this vocabulary is essential for developing knowledge and understanding. With the findings from HRE research as a backdrop (teachers’ terminology insecurity) the question is whether or not students are exposed to human rights vocabulary in the teaching, and if they are, what learning this vocabulary supports.

Kern and Ohlhus (2017) explorations of how language fluency can demonstrate qualities in learners’ knowledge development are also of interest to the examination of language use in human rights teaching. With fluency, the authors mean speech rate and continuity. The basic assumption is that a successful learning process is observable in a growing degree of fluency. As fluency increases, repetition, hesitation, pauses and other signs of monitored speech decrease. Fluent speech is characterised by lengthy talk with few pauses, and coherent and semantically dense sentences. The authors argue that attention to students’ developing levels of fluency can support the teacher in the continuous construction of the learning process. In the case of HRE, both teachers’ and students’ fluency levels can give insights into the teaching and learning processes—are teachers comfortable and fluent in human rights vocabulary, and do students use the terms?

4. Theoretical framework: the educational bearings of language
This study draws specifically on John Dewey’s theorisation about the essential role of human language as the means of conveying knowledge and assisting thought (1910, 1929). Dewey saw human experience and knowledge as collated in language, and language as the main tool for communicating these to others. From such a viewpoint, humans structure the world with language: similarities, differences and distinctions take form through and in language. This in turn affects perception—knowing about and being able to verbalise both general patterns and specific details generate, according to Dewey, the capacity to distinguish relevant from irrelevant aspects, thus providing increased options for action. Accordingly, Dewey (1929) viewed language as a crucial driving force for the development of thinking, mind and the capacity to act.

Dewey (1910) takes a specific interest in how the designating and meaning conveying functions of language work in the development of the intellect. He insists that it is essential that the close relation between language and the growth of intellect is acted upon in education: language use needs to be transformed from the practical to the intellectual. This includes qualification of everyday language. Such transformation of language use encompasses, according to Dewey, two main endeavours: (i) the extension of students’ vocabulary, and (ii) rendering the vocabulary more precise and accurate.

The extension of vocabulary is firstly about increasing the number of words and concepts known to the student in the area of inquiry. Equally important is the creation of generic relations between new concepts and aspects outside the specific inquiry. To achieve this, the words and concepts need to be placed in a wider context, connecting the concept to other areas of society. In the case of human rights, the extension of vocabulary would consequently include both expanding the number of concepts that are available to the student for talking and thinking about human rights, and connecting human rights concepts to societal values and laws, to international conflicts and violations against human rights, etc. The second educational endeavour, increasing the preciseness of the vocabulary, is in Dewey’s view as important as extension. When an initially vague perception of the meaning of a concept evolves into precise comprehension of meaning, a significant progression in intellectual resource has been achieved. In relation to human rights, a precise vocabulary supports the student in discovering shades of meaning within the area of human rights—and such awareness of subtle differences and nuances will advance perception and understanding of human rights in all its complexity.
The Deweyan framework, with two crucial constituents of an educative communication in the teaching and learning of human rights, provides the base for analysis in this study. The extension of students’ human rights language is explored by defining extension focal points, and the examination of how human rights language is made more exact is done by investigating what the purposes of language precision are—precision objectives are determined.

5. Research design, data collection and analysis
Since the interest in this study is concrete teaching and classroom work with human rights, the research was undertaken by means of qualitative observations of ongoing educational practice. Observational research is fruitful in allowing close-up examinations of how teachers and pupils talk and act in practice, but is time consuming and therefore necessarily restricts the number of observation sites. Observations in two classes in each age group was decided to provide sufficient data to enable examination of human rights teaching in the different ages targeted. Since this is a restricted data set, general claims cannot be made on the base of the research, but a certain generalisation is possible by transferability of the findings to similar settings.

Gaining long-term access to school classes for research purposes can be challenging, and several contacts were made in order to find schools interested in being part of the research. The six teachers and classes who agreed to participate in the study came from six different schools, representing a variation of urban/rural and socio-economic surroundings, but with an overrepresentation of schools with mainly students of Swedish ethnic background. The participants were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2–3 (8–9 year olds)</th>
<th>Class 2-3a</th>
<th>18 students</th>
<th>1 class teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class 2-3b</td>
<td>23 students</td>
<td>1 class teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5 (11–12 year olds)</td>
<td>Class 5a</td>
<td>22 students</td>
<td>1 class teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class 5b</td>
<td>22 students</td>
<td>1 class teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8 (14–15 year olds)</td>
<td>Class 8a</td>
<td>26 students</td>
<td>1 civics teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class 8b</td>
<td>24 students</td>
<td>1 civics teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teachers in Year 2–3 and 5 were class teachers responsible for large parts of the teaching, and in Year 8 the teachers were subject teachers in civics/citizenship education.

The teachers were asked to plan and undertake class work about children’s human rights. The researchers did not instruct the teachers, but emphasised that they were free to decide on time frame, content and working methods. The classes’ work with children’s human rights was documented by means of video recording (Fitzgerald, Hackling, & Dawson, 2013). This documentation method was chosen to facilitate detailed analysis through repeated viewing of the classroom work. To intrude as little as possible, one film camera was used and the researchers’ continuous selection of what to document was based on the ambition to capture significant teaching and learning situations in the classroom. During teacher talk to the class, the teacher was in focus, and during student work, groups of children were in focus. The total amount of film data varied in length in the classes, between 5 to 9 hours of filmed classroom work.

The ethical considerations included a carefully designed process for informed consent in line with Swedish ethical regulations and scholarly arguments for sound research ethics in research involving children (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Harcourt & Quennerstedt, 2014). The teachers were informed about the purpose and design of the study, that participation in the research was voluntary, and they gave their oral consent. Students were orally informed about purpose, design and voluntary participation in an age-appropriate way, and they gave their written consent. Guardians were informed in writing about these matters, and written consent from all guardians of students under age 15 was collected. As confidentiality is challenging in video documented research, the protocol for analysing...
and storing data and also for dissemination and future use was carefully considered and included in the information given to the participants (Fitzgerald et al., 2013).

For the examination of language use in the teaching, certain sequences of the larger material were selected for analysis: teaching sequences targeting the whole class, either led by the teacher or by a media chosen by the teacher. These included instances when the teacher talked to the whole class in the form of lectures, discussions, summaries or repetition, and instances when the teacher had replaced her/his own action and voice with, for example, films. All selected teaching sequences were transcribed focusing on the verbal communication. To some extent, other communicative means that were considered important to the construction of meaning were noted, such as teachers’/film voice’s facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, or music.

The analysis drew closely on Dewey’s theorisation and the two educational endeavours of language use: the extension of vocabulary and making the vocabulary more precise and accurate. To differentiate these two dimensions, the transcribed teaching sequences underwent qualitative analysis by posing two sets of analytical questions to them—one for each of the constituents of educative communication (Dewey, 1910). The three different age groups were separated in the analysis, with the aim of distinguishing differences and similarities in the extension and precision of language in the teaching of students of different ages.

The analytical questions concerning the extension of vocabulary were:

- Which human rights concepts are used and emphasised in the teaching?
- With which societal areas/topics are human rights concepts related?

The analytical questions concerning the making of vocabulary more precise were:

- What kinds of precision of human rights vocabulary occur?
- What nuances and shades of meaning concerning human rights are clarified through the detailing of concepts?

Terms and themes that answered the questions were continually noted, and gradually thematised. With regard to the extension dimension, the analysis identified a number of areas around which the enlarged vocabulary congregates. These were labelled extension focal points. The account for focal points below demonstrates both the content of the extended vocabulary, i.e. the terms and concepts introduced and emphasised, and the generic relations that are constituted when central concepts cluster around a phenomenon. Concerning the precision dimension, the analysis distinguished differing purposes of moving initially vague ideas and uses of a term towards a more accurate and precise use. These were labelled precision objectives. The account for precision objectives shows what the purpose of detailing is and how it adds depth and nuances to the understanding of human rights.

6. Findings
The six extension focal points and three precision objectives identified in the analysis are shown in Table 1.

The central meaning of each extension focal point and precision objective is in the following clarified, and the terminology used in the respective age groups to communicate and support the extension and precision activities are highlighted and considered. To illustrate how this may play out in concrete practice, exemplary quotes from the observed teaching situations are presented. Teachers and the age group they teach are designated by T (for teacher) and 2-3/5/8 (for the school year). Students are designated by S.
Teaching human rights through the extension of vocabulary—six focal points

7.1. The United Nations
The United Nations is a focal point for the extension of human rights in all six classes, and a strong relation between human rights and the UN is established in the teaching. The UN is presented to the students as the initiator, advocator and guardian of human rights. Concerning the role of the UN for human rights a certain difference between the student age groups is visible: to the Year 2–3 students the UN is portrayed as the patron of human rights, while the Year 8 students meet a more complex image of the UN as a historical player with power but a present actor with curtailed capacity to make any real change. The terminology used and emphasised supporting a strong link between human rights and the UN is for the respective age group:

The range of terms used by the teachers to establish the link between human rights and the UN increases with students’ age, providing them with a successively broader and more qualified vocabulary with which to think and talk about rights and the UN. It can also be noted that in the creation of this relation, the word and concept “rights” is used frequently and explicitly in all age groups. The teaching in all six classes creates, through the extension of language, a generic relation between human rights and the United Nations. With the rising age of students, the generic relation comes to include indications of problematic features, verbalised with specific terms.

Example:

T8b: Well yes, the UN does care, but they also get criticised ... but then they can't force anyone, they can only say that “we think you should see over this, bring it into your legislation”.

S: But it feels as though the UN ... does nothing. It doesn't help.
T8b: I see what you mean. But what does the UN organisation look like again?
S: Security Council ... and they vote, and veto and all that.
T8b: That's right. And, in order to act, the UN often needs a decision in the Security Council, but then there's the right of veto that gets in the way.

7.2. Humans in forced migration

Humans in forced migration is an extension focal point in the teaching of human rights in all age groups. The need to flee your country is tied to conditions that threaten your life, or at least make life hard and burdensome—for example war, severe poverty or religious persecution. Also in this focal point, age differences are distinguished. The youngest age group mainly centres on children—what life can be like for a child in war or in forced migration, or how a child refugee can experience coming to Sweden. The Year 5 students are presented with a more general, but very brief, image of forced migration and the difficulties facing both the individual refugee and the receiving societies. In the oldest age group, the difference between voluntary and forced migration is clarified and explicitly connected to human rights, in terms of asylum and the conditions required for asylum status. To the Year 8 students, global security issues, terrorism and extremism are further connected to conflict and forced migration. The terminology used and emphasised supporting the establishment of a link between human rights and forced migration is for the respective age group:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2–3 students</th>
<th>Year 5 students</th>
<th>Year 8 students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* children in war</td>
<td>* war</td>
<td>* forced migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* children in forced migration</td>
<td>* forced migration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* child refugee</td>
<td>* boarder control</td>
<td>* asylum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* asylum</td>
<td>* open boarders</td>
<td>* refugee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* IS</td>
<td></td>
<td>* refugee reception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* Swedish Migration Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* residence permit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* global security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* persecution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* terrorism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* terror organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* radicalisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* extremism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* nazism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, the terminology the teachers use to establish the link expands with the age of the students, both with regard to the number and difficulty of words. Particularly for the oldest age group the growth in available words adds several qualifying dimensions to the relation. However, it is worth noting that the generic relation between human rights and forced migration is created without the explicit use of the term “rights”. With the exception of the clarification made to the Year 8 students of what is required for a legitimate claim to seek asylum, the word “rights” is basically absent as a concept with which to talk and think about humans in forced migration. The link is instead implicitly established by the topic being brought up under the wide banner of human rights. This means that a concept-supported relation between human rights and forced migration is not made in the two younger age groups, and only in the case of asylum for the older students.
Examples:

T2-3a: So many things are happening in the world right now. We can read about it in the papers and watch it on TV. Have you heard about anything ... What does it look like in the world right now?
S: It’s bad. Because some attack those that don’t believe in the same religion.
S: It’s refugees who flee from their countries.
T2-3a: Yes, they flee from their countries, and then they become refugees. We’re going to watch a film about a girl from Syria, who lives in Sweden now.

T8b: Have you thought about the difference between migrants and refugees before? If you've been forced to flee because of race, ethnic belonging, religion, all those things, then you become a refugee. If you have chosen to leave your country, then you're a migrant.
S: I still can’t see the difference.
T8b: Migrants choose to leave their county, without risk ... I mean, they don’t risk being tortured, killed or persecuted if they stay. They leave of their own free will. But refugees have a real threat to their lives; if they stay there’s a big risk that they’ll be tortured, killed or imprisoned. And it’s a human right to seek asylum if you flee from war and persecution.

7.3. International history
In the teaching of human rights for the older age groups international historical developments form an extension focal point. Human rights are in this way given a historical background and thereby provided with context and explanation. Historical starting points held forth are the French and American revolutions. The teachers point out the persecutions and Holocaust of the Second World War as the direct catalysts for the establishment of human rights as we know them today. This focal point is not visible in the teaching of year 2–3 students. The terminology used and emphasised supporting the establishment of a link between human rights and international history is for the respective age group:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2–3 students</th>
<th>Year 5 students</th>
<th>Year 8 students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen</td>
<td>* American and French revolutions</td>
<td>* American Declaration of Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Second World War—persecution and killing</td>
<td>* American Declaration of Independence</td>
<td>* Second World War—persecution and killing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* United Nations—the Universal Declaration</td>
<td>* United Nations—the Universal Declaration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The size and level of difficulty of the vocabulary does not to any significant extent differ between the two age groups. In the creation of a generic historical awareness about the development of human rights, there is accordingly no visible progression. The term “rights” is explicitly used in teaching that sets the historical background.

Examples:

T5a: Even if more than 200 years has passed since the French revolution, it still affects our lives. That we have the rights and responsibilities we do today mostly depends on what happened then. Now, I’d like us to compare these two texts ... the UN declaration of human rights and the French declaration of human rights from 1789.

T8a: Why do you say the Second World War? Did it have anything to do with human rights?
S: Yeah, the Jews didn’t have as many human rights.
T8a: Was there any other group than the Jews that didn't have rights? That were exposed?
S: Black people, maybe?
T8a: Yes, people of colour, homosexuals, Roma and disabled people. The ones that some people felt didn't belong in our society. This is the background to the human rights that we have today.

7.4. Ethical guidance in human coexistence
In the teaching of human rights for the Year 5 students, an extension focal point is that human rights provide ethical guidance. A number of principles and values are pointed out as guidelines for how to treat fellow humans. For example, the equal value and human dignity of all people is strongly emphasised, and non-discrimination and the reciprocity of rights and responsibilities (or duties) is mentioned. These matters are connected to the students' coexistence in school—bullying and unkind treatment in school are examples of actions that go against the guiding values. This focal point is detectable also in the oldest age group, but not to the same extent as in both Year 5 classes. For the Year 2–3 students, no extension towards this focal point is observed. The terminology used and emphasised supporting the establishment of a link between human rights and ethical guidance is for the respective age group:

The findings for this extension focal point show that the establishment of a relation and providing the vocabulary that supports it does not have to follow a trajectory of increasing scope and difficulty with age. Concerning the generic relation between human rights and ethical guidance for human coexistence, it is the Year 5 students that receive the most far-reaching and detailed extension.

Example:
T5a: We've talked a lot about our norms and values, and about bullying and harassment. This has to do with our value base that we work with in school. We need to know how to behave towards each other and understand each other's differences. It's a small part of our human rights.

7.5. Life conditions
An extension focal point most visible in Year 5, but to some extent also in Year 8, is the significance of life conditions. Your place of birth is pointed out as being vital in the determination of the kind of life and the chances you will have. A main message communicated in the teaching concerning place of birth is that being born in Sweden almost guarantees wealth, education and security, while being born in poor and/or war-affected regions will have severe negative effects for these matters. Difficult circumstances in Sweden are also mentioned, albeit vaguely and with less definiteness. The terminology that supports the establishment of a link between human rights and life conditions is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2–3 students</th>
<th>Year 5 students</th>
<th>Year 8 students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* equal value</td>
<td>* equal value</td>
<td>* equal value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* freedom</td>
<td>* respecting the rights of others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* justice</td>
<td>* take a stand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* solidarity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* equal treatment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* discrimination</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* human dignity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* democracy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* bullying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* respecting the rights of others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* denounce oppression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A generic relation between human rights and life conditions is created, although it is weak and, in Year 5, without references to rights.

Examples:

T5b: So, depending on which country we’re born in, we have different living conditions. Right? Is it fair that we have differing living conditions?
S: No, we’re all equal.
T5b: Yes, we all have equal value, that’s the basis of it all.

T8b: Let’s look at central Africa, where we find most of the poor countries. How is the situation there with human rights?
S: It’s worse than in Europe.
T8b: Ok ... can you give an example?

7.6. The democratic state and rule of law

The last extension focal point that has been observed concerns the significance of the governance of state. This extension is only made for the Year 8 students. Respect for human rights is connected to democracies, while disrespect for or even direct and severe crimes against human rights are related to totalitarianism and dictatorship. Furthermore, this extension includes perceptions of national wealth in the sense of linking general prosperity to democracies, and general poverty to totalitarian states. In this way, the triads of human rights-democracy-wealth and no rights-totalitarianism-poverty are created in the teaching. The rule of law is also brought into this with the notion that well-functioning societal institutions, maintaining the rule of law without corruption, are decisive for the upholding of human rights. The terminology that supports the establishment of a link between human rights and democratic states and the rule of law is:
The generic relation between human rights and the governance of state is of a qualified character, and it is no surprise that it is only made in the oldest student group. References to rights are explicit when rule of law is discussed, and the extended vocabulary provides the students with important means of talking and thinking about human rights.

Example:

T8a: And I want you to write about what consequences for a society you think that death penalty, torture and a failing rule of law would have, for the whole society and for its development. ... Failings in the rule of law—what does that mean? ... In Sweden we have a solid rule of law—why can I say that? Well, because the man first thought to be a terrorist was released yesterday. Why? Because they didn’t have sufficient evidence. And then you can’t detain someone. That’s rule of law, that you can’t just be arrested without evidence. If I try to bribe a policeman, then we have a failing rule of law. How would that affect a society? How would people be affected?

8. Teaching human rights through the precision of vocabulary—three precision objectives

The teaching of human rights in the six classes also included efforts to qualify the students’ knowledge by making the vocabulary more precise. Initially vague ideas and uses of a term were elaborated towards a more accurate and precise use. In the following, the three precision objectives are presented.

8.1. Designation

One objective of making vocabulary more precise evident in all six classes is that of designation. By introducing and displaying a technical human rights language, the students are offered a range of accurate and specific human rights concepts. The most widely employed designation technique is the naming of rights—i.e. explicitly assigning names to a range of children’s/human rights. The legitimising document referred to when naming rights is the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The naming of rights is an important precision of vocabulary, making the students aware of the range and scope of rights, as well as of which the rights are—several students were surprised when reading through the list of rights. Such awareness makes initially vague perceptions significantly more precise.

However, an aspect of designation through the naming of rights that should be considered is the use of simplified versions of the respective documents in the teaching. In these, correct/precise terminology is replaced with easier words, perceived to match the capacity of children and young people. Examples from the observed classes are replacing freedom of religion with the right to believe in whichever god you want, or the right to education with the right to go to school. These simplifications deviate only slightly from the fuller meaning—freedom of religion also includes the right to not believe in a god, and the right to education includes a right to certain content in education. But in other instances such language simplification not only reduces the level of precision, but actually displaces the right in question. In the adapted material used in one of the Year 2–3 classes, the right to “access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources” (UN 1989) is replaced with “you have the right to listen to the radio and to watch TV”. The central aspect of the right—access to information—has been removed, and “a diversity” has been reduced to “radio and TV”. Simplified versions of human rights treaties may therefore actually reduce the level of precision by giving partial or even inaccurate information.

Besides the naming of rights, an exposition of a wide range of technical human rights vocabulary appears in all classes:
The lists of words display how the students, through the teaching, are offered an increasingly broader human rights terminology. The terms introduced and used by the teachers represent core values or principles of human rights, and phrases for UN bodies, treaties and processes. These are frequently used in media reporting, and becoming familiar with the vocabulary is an important resource for enabling students to follow international and national societal discussions, and to discern when such discussions are connected to human rights.

8.2. Elaboration

A second objective of the precision of vocabulary is to dig deeper into a specific phenomenon or concept, in order to elaborate the knowledge and meaning about this particular matter. Elaboration takes place in all ages, but more in the oldest age group. It is further noticeable that significantly less time and scope is spent on elaboration compared with designation. In all classes, a few of the rights designated in lists are briefly elaborated, often by the teacher asking the class if anyone knows what the right means and a student answering cursory. However, some more thorough elaboration occurs, the amount and depth increasing with age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2 students</th>
<th>Year 5 students</th>
<th>Year 8 students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• children’s rights</td>
<td>• human rights</td>
<td>• human rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• (human rights)</td>
<td>• children’s rights</td>
<td>• (children’s rights)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• equal value</td>
<td>• freedom</td>
<td>• universal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
<td>• equal value</td>
<td>• freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• article</td>
<td>• human dignity</td>
<td>• equal value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• United Nations</td>
<td>• declaration</td>
<td>• equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Unicef</td>
<td>• convention</td>
<td>• peace</td>
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<tr>
<td>• asylum</td>
<td>• article</td>
<td>• ratify</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
<td>• The Universal Declaration of Human Rights</td>
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<td>• The Universal Declaration of Human Rights</td>
<td>• The Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• ratify</td>
<td>• The Universal Declaration of Human Rights</td>
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<td>• The Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
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<td>• The Refugee Convention</td>
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<td>• United Nations</td>
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<td>• veto</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• human rights crimes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• adequate standard of living</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2–3 students</th>
<th>Year 5 students</th>
<th>Year 8 students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• content and meaning of some rights—briefly</td>
<td>• content and meaning of some rights—briefly</td>
<td>• content and meaning of some rights—briefly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the universality of children’s rights</td>
<td>• grounds for equal treatment: ethnicity, gender, religious belief, disability</td>
<td>• grounds for equal treatment: race, ethnicity, religious belief, sexual orientation, cultural background, skin colour, disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• exact meaning of right to seek asylum, and how this connects to the difference between migrant and refugee</td>
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</table>
In year 5 and 8, elaboration is also undertaken by presenting dilemmas between rights. Drawing on utterances by American president Donald Trump about Mexicans being criminals and rapists, the Year 5 students discuss the dilemma between the rights to freedom of expression and opinion and the rights to non-discrimination and equal value:

Example:

T5a: When Trump says this—does he violate human rights?
S: Yes.
T5a: In what way does he violate human rights?
S: That all people have the same value.
S: Well, you have the right to say what you want as long as you don't offend people. And he does say what he thinks, but in a way that makes people sad. You are allowed to think what you want, but not to make people sad ...
T5a: Yes, you're allowed to think what you want. But it's kind of a double standard ... that you can express your opinion and think what you want, but you can't discriminate or harass, and you should treat all people equally. It's so strange.

In Year 8, a couple of recent situations in Sweden including human rights dilemmas are discussed—the example shows a piece of the conversation around the dilemma between the right to freedom of religion and to non-discrimination.

Example:

T8b: There's this discussion about a male politician, he was being interviewed by a female reporter and refused to shake hands with her. He referred to freedom of religion and said that this had to do with his religious beliefs—he felt that it's too intimate to shake hands with a woman. And we need to understand this, because we have freedom of religion. But if you want to be someone that represents Sweden in policy, shouldn't you treat women and men equally, and shake hands with everyone?

Elaboration of meaning deepens the knowledge about a specific human rights concept or phenomenon, which is highly important in order to understand the often complex nature of human rights matters. The dilemma approach holds great potential to uncover not only the limits of a certain right or a principle, but also reveals that the system of human rights is not without friction. Dilemmas display very clearly to the students that human rights do not offer an easy solution to all conflicts; instead judgements have to be constantly made. An important base for making such judgements is precise knowledge.

8.3. Human rights crime demarcation

The third and last objective of precision of vocabulary that was identified in the teaching relates to human rights crimes. A clear and explicit line condemning human rights crimes is drawn in the oldest age group, articulating a range of crimes that the international community has pronounced as unacceptable. These are torture, slavery, genital mutilation and persecution or being killed because of race, ethnicity, religious belief, political conviction, sexual orientation or cultural belonging.

Examples:

T8a: And this is something that I find so awful ... genital mutilation of girls. It exists in some African countries.
S: Why do they do that?
T8a: A woman that had performed female genital mutilation was interviewed on the news, and she said that the reason for this is that a woman isn't supposed to feel sexual lust, and she might do if she has a clitoris.
T8b: Slavery in all forms is forbidden. But what would you call it when you’re paid almost nothing … would you like to work for a few coins a day? Could that be called a form of slavery?

S: Yes.

S: I think slavery is if you don’t have a choice. If you say that you don’t want to continue working, but are forced back. To me, that’s a kind of slavery, if you’re not allowed to choose.

T8b: But if the “choice” is that your family will starve, do you really have a choice?

By devoting attention to human rights crimes in the teaching, by naming and explaining them, as well as accentuating the absolute position of the international community, these crimes are pointed out as particularly severe. The students are thereby provided with means to see differences between crimes, for example to distinguish when a crime has streaks of discrimination, and to judge the severity of crimes from a human rights base. In the two lower age groups, human rights crimes are not brought out in the open in an explicit way, and the crimes are not specified.

9. Discussion

By examining the extension of language, it was possible to identify the societal areas and phenomena to which generic relations with human rights were established in the teaching. These were history, the international community, the current refugee situation, differing life conditions in the world, human coexistence, and government and the rule of law. All these are highly relevant for human rights, and seem to be well chosen by the teachers. But this finding also provides us with an opportunity to reflect on areas that are missing. One such area is human rights at home, in Sweden, for the students themselves in their own context. The generic relations created through the extension of language place, to a large extent, human rights far away from the students.

It was also possible to identify age differences, as expected, where the younger students were provided with opportunities to develop insight into generic relations to fewer areas, and older students to more. The identified terminology that supported the generic relations further indicates how teachers may qualify the establishment of generic relations with increasing age—the two focal points observed in all age groups differ substantively between the ages concerning the generic relation’s level of complexity. A more extended vocabulary in higher grades was accordingly an expected result. However, the progression trajectory observed was partly uneven, with a large difference between the extension in Years 2 and 5, and little difference between Years 5 and 8. This finding highlights an area that requires further consideration: What might a reasonable progression across the ages in the teaching and learning of human rights be?

Another central finding, which echoes results in earlier research (Struthers, 2015) that rights education is not always couched in human rights terminology, is that three of the six extension focal points were communicated to the students without the use of explicit rights terminology. The focal points of forced migration, ethical guidance and life conditions were placed under the wide banner of human rights by being included in the work with children’s human rights. However, as rights terminology was almost absent from the teaching of these topics, the question is how the generic understanding is affected. Drawing on findings in earlier classroom communication research, which points to the significance of exposure and teachers’ techniques to emphasise central terminology (Malmström et al., 2017), the lack of human rights terms in the teaching may be seen as providing less support for establishing a generic relation between these topics and human rights.

Concerning the precision of human rights vocabulary, the two main objectives identified in all age groups were designation and elaboration. Designation is, as mentioned earlier, highly important and works to qualify and add nuances to the knowledge and understanding. However, the low occurrence of elaboration is noteworthy and deserves further consideration. Few instances of elaboration were observed, and only very brief elaboration occurred in the youngest age group. Elaboration is necessary in order to reach deeper layers of meaning, and
the few times human rights dilemmas were used by the teachers to elaborate, the potential of these to throw light on areas of friction between rights was clear. The observed teaching mainly stayed at a shallow level of precision in all age groups.

10. Conclusions
This research has offered a contribution to the knowledge about the role of language in the teaching of human rights. Six focal points for the extension of students’ vocabulary have been identified: the UN, humans in forced migration, international history, ethical guidance, life conditions and democratic state and rule of law. Awareness of what teachers connect to in their human rights teaching provides both a map of what language extension to support thinking and intellectual development may be, and shows how generic relations can be made in teaching between human rights and other societal aspects and circumstances. Three precision objectives have been found: designation, elaboration and human rights demarcation. The insight that precision primarily is done by means of designation, and that elaboration for deeper understanding is rare, is an important finding to consider further.

The study has highlighted language use as an essential aspect of human rights education. Considerations of a communicative pedagogy for a successful HRE need to include attention to language, and it is the author’s aspiration that the findings will provide grounds for further research about the role of language in HRE, and inspiration for the development of education about human rights.

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Correction
This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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Note
1. The fieldwork in this research was conducted during the most intense period of the 2015–16 refugee situation. The extraordinary circumstances might have impacted on the teachers’ decision to include the theme in the teaching.

References


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