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# 'Human rights and democracy are not self-evident': Finnish student teachers' perceptions on democracy and human rights education

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**Abstract:** This article discusses democracy and human rights education (DHRE) in Finnish teacher education, drawing on existing literature, curricula and a survey of student teachers' perceptions. Earlier studies suggested that DHRE in Finnish teacher education is unsystematic, implicit, and dependent on the teacher's individual interests. These studies highlight a sense of national exceptionalism, where DHRE is assumed to be self-evident. In 2019, we conducted a survey of student teachers (n=300) in one university. Data content analysis reveals that student teachers now see DHRE as relevant and timely, and by no means self-evident. Student teachers believe that DHRE needs to be explicit and part of their professional education. Although the Finnish national curriculum addresses DHRE explicitly, there is a lack of implementation and explicit DHRE teacher education. We contend that the data reflects societal change, and that the notion that democracy and human rights are self-evident needs to be challenged in Finland.

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**Abstract:** This article discusses democracy and human rights education (DHRE) in Finnish teacher education, drawing on existing literature, curricula and a survey of student teachers’ perceptions. Earlier studies suggested that DHRE in Finnish teacher education is unsystematic, implicit, and dependent on the teacher’s individual interests. These studies highlight a sense of national exceptionalism, where DHRE is assumed to be self-evident. In 2019, we conducted a survey of student teachers (n=300) in one university. Data content analysis reveals that student teachers now see DHRE as relevant and timely, and by no means self-evident. Student teachers believe that DHRE needs to be explicit and part of their professional education. Although the Finnish national curriculum addresses DHRE explicitly, there is a lack of implementation and explicit DHRE teacher education. We contend that the data reflects societal change, and that the notion that democracy and human rights are self-evident needs to be challenged in Finland.

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### **Introduction**

Societal issues such as the rise of autocratisation (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), the number of hate crimes (Rauta, 2017, p. 8), racism (FRA, 2017) and children’s climate activism create an urgent need to address such controversial matters in teacher education. There is a potential for democracy and human rights education (henceforth, DHRE) to increase teachers’ readiness to handle such topics.

Previous Finnish studies, published in 2014, show that DHRE is unsystematic in teacher education; it is dependent on individual teachers. It is also the case that human rights education (HRE) is detached from its judicial basis (Human Rights Centre [HRC], 2014; Rautiainen, Vanhanen-Nuutinen & Virta, 2014). The central finding of these studies was that although human rights and democracy were generally seen as central principles and values for teacher education, on the practical level they did not have a central role in curricula, teaching and culture. On the other hand, connected topics were included in all teacher education units and the operating culture included forms of participation. The main issue for further development was

to make human rights and democracy a more visible part of curriculum texts and the operating culture (Rautiainen et al., 2014). After these studies were carried out, there have been national core curricula reforms which have made human rights and democracy thoroughly explicit (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE], 2014; 2018; 2019).

Human rights education (HRE) research in Finland is scarce (Lehtomäki & Rajala, 2020). In the previous studies teachers perceived HRE as 'obvious yet alien' (Matilainen, 2011) and human rights problems like racism, the treatment of indigenous people, and violence against women in Finland have been neglected (Toivanen, 2007, p. 41). We would argue that the ideas that democracy and human rights are self-evident and that DHRE belongs somewhere else belong to the notion that scholars have termed 'national exceptionalism' (e.g. Sirota, 2017).

We wanted to compare the 2014 results (HRC, 2014; Rautiainen et al., 2014) to the situation in 2019 and examine student teachers' perceptions of DHRE. The hypothesis is that if teacher education has considered the recommendations of previous research and national curricula reforms, this should be visible in student teachers' answers. In this article, we 1) briefly introduce conceptions of DHRE, 2) present the Finnish context, 3) summarise international research results and 4) examine student teachers' perceptions through content analysis of questionnaire data (n=300).

### **Conceptualising democracy and HRE: Theoretical, legal and practical observations**

In this section we introduce some conceptual, judicial and practical observations that can help us to understand democracy and HRE as intertwined theories and practices. We acknowledge that democracy education or citizenship education (CE) and HRE have been perceived as separate educational fields (Osler & Starkey, 2010, p. 125; Toivanen, 2009), and one practical problem has been that governments have stated they have fulfilled their commitment to HRE through CE (Osler & Starkey, 2010, p. 113). However, we would claim that for educational and societal reasons, democracy and human rights are interdependent: democracy needs human rights to achieve its inclusive aims (ibid., p.116–127) and human rights need democratic processes to be actualised (cf. Benhabib 2011, pp. 77–94).

From the legal perspective, DHRE is justified, since democratic government is a human right. The right to participate is guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, Article 21), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, Article 25) and in the Constitution of Finland (1999/731, 2 §, 14 §). Today, the Council of Europe's Charter for Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE) outlines the common ground of EDC and HRE, but also identifies important ways in which these two complementary fields differ (CM/Rec(2010)7, Section I, 2, 3). The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (United Nations [UN], 2011, A/RES/66/137) states that HRE is education about, through and for human rights (UN, 2011, Article 2.2a–c.).

Our study uses the terms 'explicit' and 'implicit' to describe how HRE is practiced in the classroom (Müller, 2009, pp. 8–9): explicit HRE focuses on canonical international norms and mechanisms; implicit HRE focuses on human rights problems, and social relations and actions that embody the spirit of human rights. Studies suggest that in Finland HRE has been implicit (HRC, 2014; Matilainen, 2011). The question arises as to whether implicit HRE (which neglects human rights legal

instruments) is problematic if schools adopt a pedagogy that promotes human dignity and implicitly adopts 'human rights values and encourages students to act to protect human rights' (Müller, 2009, p.9) or whether HRE must necessarily engage with human rights legal frameworks. Neglecting any explicit reference to human rights systems or legal aspects may produce a discourse which is detached from the actual societal international political structure, and the lack of clear definitions makes human rights mere opinions. These factors may produce an inability to recognise human rights problems in one's own context; teachers should understand that human rights are binding by law and not just empty rhetoric (Toivanen, 2007, p. 43).

Forms of CE and HRE have been critiqued. CE has been critiqued for number of things: advancing exclusion that is connected to citizenship status, nationalist agendas and identity construction; failing minority groups; and for being uncritical of governments (Osler & Starkey 2010, pp. 114, 116, 125–126; Toivanen, 2009). HRE has been perceived as an opportunity to recognise a cosmopolitan perspective, a shared humanity and the notion that human rights principles should underpin the content and practice of EDC (Osler & Starkey 2010, p. 127). On the other hand, HRE has been criticised for producing orthodoxies of heaven-hell binaries representing some countries as 'hellish' and others as morally superior (Okafor & Agbakwa, 2001), and for being declarationist, uncritical, ahistorical and apolitical (Zembylas & Keet, 2019).

We conceptualise DHRE as having the potential to raise societal consciousness, including judicial knowledge and critical, political and historical learning. DHRE can be grounded in a more holistic approach to democracy (Biesta, 2006)—as opposed to reducing democracy and citizenship to voting and obedient citizenship—and holistic rather than ahistorical or uncritical conceptualisations (Zembylas & Keet, 2019). Without reducing the judicial aspects of HRE to 'declarationism' (Keet, 2012, p. 7), we see it as part of a democratic society and HRE as a form of 'democratising' judicial knowledge. This is important in Finland, where teachers have perceived HRE as a matter for experts from outside of the school (Matilainen, 2011). Our conception of DHRE as a pedagogical practice emphasises the ethical complexity of teaching (Adami, 2017) and the critical analysis of power structures. It includes international human rights and domestic law, and concepts of democracy that are not reductionist simplifications. One's ethical stance is crucial in pedagogical practice, and a moral rejection of inhumane treatment is not merely a matter of conventions (Gaita, 2002; Todorov, 1996).

### **The Finnish context: Curricula and DHRE in teacher education**

Finnish legislation is based on human rights and democratic values and principles. The Constitution of Finland (1999/731) includes fundamental and human rights (§6–21) and §22 states that 'The public authorities shall guarantee the observance of basic rights and liberties and human rights'. Thus, the core curricula for early childhood education (ECE) (FNAE, 2018), basic education (FNAE, 2014) and upper secondary school education (FNAE, 2019) refer to human rights and democracy as basic values, binding obligations that apply to both learning and educational content. HRE is not explicitly mentioned as an education area or as a separate subject, but DHRE contents are found in different subjects (e.g. history, social sciences, secular ethics and religious education). For example, the aim of social studies in grades 4-6 is that 'The pupils are guided to act in a pluralistic society that understands diversity

and respects human rights and equality in accordance with the values and principles of democracy.’ (FNAE, 2014, Section 4.4.9.). However, the impact on teacher education has not been as strong as it has been in schools.

The main characteristics of teacher education in Finland are autonomy and research-based teaching, a consequence of the large-scale reforms at the end of the 1970s. In practice, this means that all qualified teachers have a Master’s degree, and teacher education follows academic principles in its developmental work (Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen, 2006). There is no single national curriculum for teacher education in Finnish universities; all units develop their own curricula. The 1970s reforms have had long-term consequences for DHRE in teacher education, because curricula, staff expertise and operational culture have been mainly grounded in disciplines based on didactics and the psychology of education (Rantala & Rautiainen, 2013). Discipline-based teaching does not focus strongly on integrative topics like human rights, and social sciences and democracy are marginal themes in Finnish teacher education (Männistö, Rautiainen & Vanhanen-Nuutinen, 2017). This has crucial consequences for schools if teachers do not help students to become critical, democratic citizens (Fornaciari & Rautiainen, 2020). The lack of HRE research in Finland (Lehtomäki & Rajala, 2020; Matilainen, 2011, pp. 65–68) has consequences for research-based teacher education.

In the 2000s the Ministry of Education and Culture has supported DHRE in teacher education by funding developmental projects (e.g. Männistö et al., 2017). Based on the 2019 curriculum analysis carried out by the authors of this article, democracy and human rights are a general basic value in teacher education. The phenomenon is approached mainly by societal knowledge building, especially from the perspectives of educational sociology and philosophy. Democracy and human rights occasionally occur as concepts in curricula. Democracy is mentioned in several curricula as a part of courses that deal with the relation of schools and teachers to society. Human rights are sometimes connected to the notion of inclusion. Compared with the situation reported in 2014 (Rautiainen et al., 2014), DHRE has been strengthened. However, it is still mostly based on individual teacher educators’ work rather than on an institutional strategy to strengthen DHRE.

### **Research review: Common implementation problems**

After the UN Decade for HRE in 1995–2004, Mahler, Mihr & Toivanen (2009) made a six-country study analysing the results: they found implementation gaps, projects that were short-term, a dependence on individuals, and a lack of national strategies (Mahler et al., 2009, p. 31, 38). Later, Finland adopted systematic promotion measures, such as adding explicit references to national curricula (FNAE, 2014; 2018; 2019). The government has also adopted National Action Plans (NAP) (Ministry of Justice, 2017a; 2017b) that have included DHRE, and there are many ongoing processes, such as the National Steering Group for Democracy and HRE established by the Ministry of Education and Culture 2020-2023. The problem that researchers found, in their evaluation of the NAPs, was that they were perceived as a list of short-term projects (Rautiainen, Sinkkilä & Keinänen, 2020).

Teachers have been seen as central actors in advancing DHRE, but there is an ongoing weakness in the way in which they are prepared (Ahmed, Martin & Uddin, 2020, p. 216; BEMIS, 2013, p. 10; Decara, 2013; Edling & Mooney Simmie, 2020; HRC, 2014). Educational systems where schools have a high degree of autonomy, such as in Finland and Switzerland, emphasise the importance of the teacher’s

understanding and professional expertise. It is this that is considered to be the determining factor in the successful implementation of HRE (Rinaldi, 2017, p. 87).

Teachers' responses to HRE have been manifold. Pre- and in-service teachers have raised a number of concerns: HRE is too abstract, biased and controversial (Struthers, 2016); there is a lack of knowledge about age-appropriate teaching (Decara, 2013, p. 3; Struthers, 2016); and rights are represented without obligations (Cassidy, Brunner & Webster, 2014; Waldron et al., 2011, p. 31). Teachers have found difficulties with the political or controversial sides of HRE (BEMIS, 2013, p. 26–27; Cassidy et al., 2014; Rinaldi, 2017, p. 92; Struthers, 2016) and democracy education (Waage, Kristjánsson & Björnsdóttir, 2016, p. 116). At the same time, human rights have also been perceived as useful in teaching complex issues (Decara, 2013, p. 31).

The deficit in advancing democracy education has been studied in a variety of European countries (Raiker, Rautiainen & Saqibi, 2020; Waage et al., 2016). In Finland, the teacher has historically been constructed as the 'model citizen' (Rantala, 2020). This has led to anxieties about introducing politics in school, and to an emphasis on an imagined 'neutrality' in teaching that effectively disregards or minimises societal questions or context in teacher education. This notion was reinforced when school democracy experiments in the 1970s failed and became political power battles. The praxis of Finnish teacher education has been criticised for its lack of societal content, and its failure to promote greater participation in a democratic society. (Fornaciari & Männistö, 2015, p. 78.) Democracy education in Finland has been strongly based on representative democracy and has followed the existing democratic models, e.g. school student council boards (Raiker & Rautiainen, 2017, p. 11). Teachers in Finland emphasise education for social responsibility at school, rather than civic activity and participation in society (Fornaciari & Rautiainen, 2020, pp. 196–199). This emphasis is in line with other research which finds teachers viewing HRE as a mere tool for social cohesion rather than as education for empowerment or activism (BEMIS, 2013, p. 24).

Icelandic research into teachers' attitudes towards democracy education found a lack of implementation, as well as views that the subject was self-evident and about abstract value goals rather than concrete insights (Waage et al., 2016, p. 114, 115). Similar views of human rights were described in Norway: democracy and human rights were seen as an abstract values basis for education or as a part of political discourse, but there was a general need for political, critical or legal analysis (Vesterdal, 2019, p. 7, 12, 15–17).

One way of analysing the obstacles to the implementation and overall recognition of DHRE is to investigate the concept of 'national exceptionalism'. Exceptionalism in relation to DHRE may manifest itself in the perception that democracy and human rights are 'self-evident' and that it is other countries that need DHRE. This has been found to be the case in the United States (Sirota, 2017, p. 13), Finland (Matilainen, 2011), Norway (Vesterdal, 2019, p. 17), and Iceland (Waage et al., 2016). In Finland, teachers viewed HRE as 'self-evident', even though they could not recognise human rights norms or mechanisms (Matilainen, 2011). In the Nordic countries, human rights and democracy are somehow perceived as part of the 'national identity', which is problematic and encourages othering (Osler, 2016, pp. 71–73).

To conclude, DHRE's advancement has been very dependent on active individuals (Mahler et al., 2009; Müller, 2009, p. 15), and this has led to the sporadic or unsystematic realisation of DHRE (BEMIS, 2013, p. 11, 28; Decara, 2013, p. 32, 38;

HRC, 2014; Rautiainen et al., 2014; Vesterdal, 2019). There is a need for more explicit (Decara, 2013; BEMIS, 2013, p.24), critical (Zembylas & Keet, 2019) and holistic approaches (Vesterdal 2019, p. 17) and this is also the case in Finland.

### **Methodology and material**

The research data was collected in Spring 2019, as part of the Human Rights, Democracy, Values and Dialogue in Education project (2018–2021). In the course of two lectures (duration 1h 45min) we collected student teachers' anonymous written answers to a semi-structured questionnaire. The students were taking a compulsory pedagogical course at Finland's biggest teacher education unit, in the University of Helsinki. Usually, DHRE is not a compulsory course. The lectures were interactive, so students could discuss the topics, and write their answers in class. There was time reserved (10 min) at the end of the lecture to respond to the questionnaire.

The semi-structured questionnaire included open and closed questions, but the closed questions also included space to elaborate. The self-determination of participants was respected: answering was entirely optional, students gave a varied number of answers to questions, and only those who gave permission for research were analysed. Answering was entirely anonymous to encourage honest responses and, in line with the data minimisation principle of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016/679), background information was not systematically collected as it was not necessary in this study.

We received 300 answers from two groups. Group 1 had 178 respondents, mainly early childhood education and care, elementary school, special education, handicraft and home economics student teachers. Group 2 had 122 members, mainly specialist subject teachers (e.g. secular ethics, philosophy, psychology, biology, geography, English, physics, mathematics, Finnish, religious education, history and social studies) and adult educators. Students were at all levels of their studies. Their answers produced mainly qualitative data, but there was also some quantitative data (frequency of mentions of concepts, percentages in closed questions). The qualitative data was analysed by content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018; Weber, 1990).

The setting was interesting: because the course was obligatory, we assumed that we would get answers from students who would not normally choose a DHRE course. However, because answering was entirely optional, it is possible that the most negative students did not answer. Data may often be biased because it is only respondents who are already interested that answer (cf. BEMIS, 2013). Semantic validity (Weber, 1990, p. 21) was enhanced by presenting the basic concepts to all participants.

The questionnaire took up various issues: What is the role of DHRE in teacher education? What topics are important? What kind of topics cause uncertainty? Closed questions (with Why? plus space to elaborate) and with a yes-no option were: 1) Should DHRE be a general part of teacher education? 2) Should DHRE be a compulsory part of teacher education? 3) Does anything in DHRE cause you uncertainty? Open questions in relation to DHRE were: What kind of support is needed? What topics should be taught in DHRE? What topics are important in your own and other teachers' work? There was also a free-response section.

Constructing themes from the material (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, Chapter 4.1.) was carried out by means of content analysis on several levels. The material was firstly read through carefully, so we could obtain a general overview and perceive categories. Coding and themes were then systematically established by coding terms

and all mentioned items into categories and sub-categories. Finally, all categories were carefully examined and combined into the most common themes found in the answers. Not all references included in the categories were unambiguous and sentences included overlapping themes. The reproducibility and reliability of the coding (Weber, 1990, p. 17) was controlled in research group discussions.

The limitations of the methodology include the possibility of bias because of the influence of the lectures and optional answering. The results are not generalisable for all students in different educational programmes or to student teachers in general as they were only obtained from students in one university. We also acknowledge the problem of not separating items on democracy education and on HRE in our questionnaire. However, the space to elaborate gave respondents the opportunity to clarify subjective meanings, and this also helped us to interpret answers.

### Findings

Student teachers were asked whether DHRE should be a *general* or a *compulsory* part of teacher education. In total, 89.2% (n=298) said it should be a compulsory part of teacher education and 96% (n=298) said it should be a general part of teacher education. 93% of group 1 (n=178) and 83.3% of group 2 (n=120) answered it should be compulsory. More students in group 2 mentioned that they had already studied the basics.

Students explained their negative responses in different ways. The notion of compulsory DHRE was criticised in some answers: 'compulsion does not increase the willingness to understand things'. It was also mentioned that the content of teacher education is already quite full, that general abstract 'values jargon' is not needed because it is self-evident, and that concrete approaches were needed. Some students wrote that they could not evaluate the role of DHRE in teacher education because they were at the beginning of their studies while others wrote that they were about to graduate, and that 'This far, the issues have been weakly presented and I'm at the Master's level already!'

A number of reasons were given for why DHRE should be part of teacher education: the current lack of teaching or insufficient teaching; the fundamental importance of DHRE in education; the fact that it is mentioned in curricula; and legal aspects. Many students wrote that compulsory studies were necessary because then every future teacher would have the same level of basic knowledge. Thus, DHRE would not only be for those who are already active and interested; those who are not interested would also gain knowledge. Some described that they would not have themselves participated in optional studies but were content that they had learned the basics in the lecture. Subject student teachers made a number of statements: 'If the meaning of fundamental rights is not understood, then teacher education ensures that everyone gets the knowledge'; 'Important topics and it's frightening how little many know about them' (biology and English student teacher); 'Every teacher's most important task is enhancing students' knowledge and skills of human rights and democracy, which are our societal orders' most important values. They are not emphasised enough' (history and social studies student teacher). Several answers mentioned that democracy and human rights are not self-evident. One adult education student put it this way: 'These issues are not self-evident in the end. You grow into them, they can be learned. If you follow public discussions, you can see that there is a need.'



The main content categories were constructed through qualitative content analysis of open answers (see Table 1). The most referenced important themes were 1) rights and responsibilities, 2) equality and equity, 3) democracy, agency and participation, 4) practical skills, 5) diversity and inclusion, 6) ethics, 7) discrimination and 8) encounters in general. The topicality of DHRE was mentioned several times. Sub-categories describe representational themes that were included in the main categories.

Table 1. Categories in student teachers' responses on democracy and human rights education

No. of references	Category	Sub-categories	Illustrative quote
174	<b>Rights and responsibilities</b>	Fundamental and human rights Law, curricula and norm base Children's rights	'Human rights are not actualised automatically' 'Knowledge of the law is weak'
171	<b>Equality and equity</b>	Equality & equity Gender and sexuality	'Problems in equality, their reasons and prevention'
157	<b>Democracy, agency and society</b>	Participation and active citizenship Changing society and topicality Relation to society Power relations	'Preparedness for democracy and to act in society' 'Diversity in society increases'
94	<b>Practical competences and everyday praxis</b>	Practical knowledge Real-life situations and challenges Age-appropriate teaching Lack of teaching Classroom management	'How should one act in problem situations?' 'Real-life situations' 'How to teach children these issues' 'Teacher as a role model'
69	<b>Diversity and inclusion</b>	Diversity Inclusiveness Minorities Special education	'Different groups and backgrounds' 'Good, non-discriminatory, individualised teaching'
40	<b>Ethics and values</b>	Values basis and ethics General all-round education and knowledge	'Important values basis' 'The most important substance for humanity and all-round education'
39	<b>Discrimination</b>	Discrimination Bullying Racism	'Structural racism' 'Bullying and preventing discrimination, and enhancing well-being'
31	<b>Encounters and relations</b>	How to treat other people Valuing everyone	'Equal encounters regardless of background'
17	<b>Other</b>	Co-operation with home Overall importance Cross-sectional role	'Everything is important' 'Families' and children's diversity'

The implications of topical societal issues handled in the media and in public discussions were often referred to: 'Nowadays there are several pressures put on it: racism, hate speech, etc. Democracy is in crisis.' Mentions were made of world politics, disinformation and debates about gender issues in schools. One student mentioned that 'understanding international treaties is increasingly important nowadays'.

A lack of DHRE in teacher education was mentioned several times as a cause for concern. Some students recognised that DHRE has been related to other topics, but not explicitly. Teachers' questions on age-appropriate teaching were also present in our data. This was especially the case with group 1 (n=178), which included early

childhood and elementary-level students. Respondents from this group brought up the need for handling children's rights, understanding democracy, and generally knowing how to teach and practise DHRE with different age groups, especially children in early childhood. Naturally, in these answers co-operation with home and caregivers was mentioned more than in group 2. Students made remarks about diverse families, caregiver's rights and one described 'the possible disagreements with parents if they don't, for example, accept some children's rights' as a cause for concern.

The understanding of the principles of democracy and human rights at school or in praxis was described as important in many answers. The importance of knowing how to apply DHRE to everyday teaching praxis was mentioned; this was often concretised with wishes for pedagogical tools and examples from real life. The interactive way in which lectures treated real-life situations was appreciated. When practical skills and concerns were reflected upon, many respondents brought up the issue that they lack knowledge and education: 'I feel like I'm not yet ready to teach these issues although the curriculum supposes I should be able to.' One student brought up the importance of 'bringing the issues to the level of everyday praxis so that they are not "somewhere out there" at the level of articles or are too self-evident to be visible'.

The previously mentioned suggestion that human rights problems are seen as belonging 'somewhere else' (Toivanen, 2007, p. 41) occurred in some answers: 'People don't have enough knowledge of human rights problems in Finland. Often problems are seen as "somewhere else".' Another response was that 'Finnish people know [about DHRE] already'. In relation to discrimination and practical skills, one student wrote: 'Our own society has structural discrimination and unequal practices e.g. towards some minorities. How should we address this in primary school?'

Ethical issues were highlighted in many answers and some saw DHRE as an 'ethical cornerstone', meaning that its ethical values and legal principles provided guidelines in difficult situations. In subject teachers' and adult educators' responses there were more references to the importance of the 'all-round educational' aspect of DHRE. In Finnish the word is *sivistys*; there is no direct translation, but it means a combination of ethical knowledge, wisdom, and general educational understanding. This was articulated in the idea that through DHRE 'ethical professionalism would develop with every future educator'.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

There are three main conclusions to be drawn from our research data: 1) there is a wide support for DHRE among student teachers—96% (n=298) state it should be part of teacher education; 2) there is evidence of societal change over the last ten years (cf. Matilainen, 2011; Rautiainen et al., 2014), since student teachers perceive DHRE as relevant and no longer regard it as self-evident; 3) although there is an official commitment to DHRE in Finland (FNAE, 2014; 2018; 2019), it is inadequately implemented in teacher education. We interpret the results in relation to international research, descriptions of implicit and explicit HRE (Müller, 2009, p. 9) and 'national exceptionalism'.

In Finland, explicit references to democracy and human rights in national curricula have not yet been transferred to university teacher education curricula. The national differences in teacher education have been growing, producing differences in the ability of graduate teachers to include DHRE in their work. The reasons for this

may be the government's project-based steering and the growing profiling of universities; these may, in the future, increase differences between Finnish universities. The results of this study are typical for an educational system based on autonomy. Developmental work is progressing slowly, because there is no strong tradition of DHRE and work is still based on the interest of individuals rather than on systematic institutional planning. In addition, tensions inside the educational system and universities hinder implementation, even though democracy and human rights are recognised as basic educational values.

Our results highlight the complicated relationship between international treaties and declarations, national curricula, and difficulties in the realisation of values principles. Previous studies concluded that there had not been the political will to improve the role of HRE in Finnish universities (Toivanen, 2007, p. 39), and that universities had not explicitly promoted HRE (HRC, 2014). We interpret our results through 'implicit' and 'explicit' lenses (Müller, 2009, p. 9); a lack of explicit reference to human rights instruments and legal knowledge in HRE is widely experienced (BEMIS, 2013, p. 24; Decara, 2013; HRC, 2014; Waldron et al., 2011, p. 4). Teachers cannot compensate for the lack of political will to institutionalise HRE (cf. Rinaldi, 2017, p. 99); and we see this in our data when student teachers say that their education does not properly prepare them to explicitly address HRE issues. The lack of explicit reference and the detachment of HRE from its judicial basis (HRC, 2014) also helps us to understand why the legal justification for HRE was the most referenced item in our data (Table 1). This contrasts with results from Germany, where the legal foundation was perceived as the least important item (Müller, 2009, p. 18).

Neglect of HRE legal standards, which we have characterised as implicit handling of human rights, relates to the lack of preparation of teachers (Ahmed et al., 2020), which teachers and student teachers have mentioned in interviews (BEMIS, 2013, p. 9; Decara, 2013, p. 2, 32). Our data bears out these results; student teachers see DHRE as important (cf. Waldron et al., 2012), substantial, topical and challenging. Students also see a number of challenges and causes for hesitation. These refer to issues of practical implementation regarding age-appropriate teaching (cf. Decara, 2013, p.3; Struthers, 2016) and a lack of teacher education (cf. BEMIS, 2013, p. 45) that makes them question their own competence. A fear of difficulties with families was also reported. This apprehension is similar to that expressed by Scottish student teachers who, even though they did not have any experience of encountering difficulties, noted that parents may be a barrier to teaching human rights, due to different cultural, religious and moral factors (Cassidy et al., 2014, p. 26). We suggest, in accordance with Cassidy et al. (ibid., p. 27), that students need greater clarity on the right to teach human rights. In our data, the need for training on democracy education in primary schools and ECE was apparent.

One thing that students were critical about was unnecessarily abstract 'values jargon'. In Scotland, some critical respondents perceived HRE as 'a meaningless add-on to the curriculum' (BEMIS, 2013, p. 40). A similar concern was present in our data; without any connection to 'reality' the issue remains 'somewhere out there', on the legislative level. This relates to what Müller (2009, p. 6) argues; that as long as democracy and human rights are merely represented as abstract values or judicial systems and their true meaning is not known or relevant to a large part of the population, they remain vulnerable to challenges.

Not surprisingly, wide references to the topicality of DHRE were made, given current societal issues such as the rise of autocratisation (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), public debates on controversial educational issues, and the questioning of international norms, including EDC/HRE (Muñoz Ramírez, 2018). The questioning of human rights norms can be read from a wider perspective as a counter-hegemonic distrust (Zembylas & Keet, 2019, p. 24) which poses a challenge to DHRE: teaching should include critical and ethical analyses of power relations. In our data, some students interpreted the knowledge of international norms as important in the climate of populist and nationalist agendas.

This sample of students overwhelmingly supported DHRE. However, this research is limited, and more precise research is needed to explore the barriers and orientations of Finnish teachers in general. As our study focused on initial teacher education, understanding the impact of the emphasis on DHRE in national curricula requires further investigation.

Finally, we interpret the general situation of DHRE in Finland from the perspective of 'national exceptionalism'. An interesting change (cf. Matilainen, 2011) that our data describes is that students do not see DHRE as self-evident. However, if we look at the official commitments to DHRE and various implementation barriers in teacher education, it leads to the question of whether attitudes in Finland are similar to those in Norway (Vesterdal, 2019, p. 16), where DHRE is seen as already implemented. If the realisation of HRE is analysed from the perspectives of teachers and teacher education, there would seem to be a critique of the abstract attachment to values, in a political discourse that may be interpreted as hypocritical (cf. Vesterdal, 2019). We would argue that notions of exceptionalism and self-evidentiality need to be challenged. Curricular commitments are not alone sufficient for implementation (cf. Rinaldi, 2017, p. 90) in teacher education in Finland; as is the case for other democratic and human rights policies, there is a need for comprehensive and long-term (Rautiainen et al., 2020, p. 51) promotion. We acknowledge that many processes concerning DHRE are ongoing in Finland and there is certainly a need for further research to fill the gaps between DHRE policies and investigate the realities of the educational field.

The situation in Finland is a good example of the case that even though national curricula can be explicit, implementation might well be inadequate. We conclude that DHRE will not be realised without democratising it so that children, teachers and educational professionals are properly involved in its actualisation, and that curricular or legal reforms do not seem to be enough if there is a lack of systematic, long-term and continuous teacher education. Further investigation is needed to understand the right measures to be taken for DHRE to have an impact and meaning in the educational field. One interesting aspect is the societal activity of students: because of climate change and the threats to democracy, young people have become activated. Are teacher educators facing a politically and socially more conscious, active and critical student generation in the near future? Will these students crucially change teacher education so that it is more strongly based on democracy and human rights?

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