



# **Human Rights Education in Iceland**

Learning about transformative pedagogies from  
upper secondary school teachers' stories

Susan E. Gollifer

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of an Ed.D.-degree



**UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND**  
**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**



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***Learning about transformative pedagogies***  
***from upper secondary school teachers’***  
***stories***

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## Abstract

### **Human Rights Education in Iceland: Learning about transformative pedagogies from upper secondary school teachers' stories**

Daily, we witness human rights violations linked to poverty, forced migration, discrimination and right-wing xenophobia, perpetuating positions of subordination and marginalisation. Human rights violations are also evident in schools. Human rights education (HRE) is a right, as articulated in human rights instruments, internationally and nationally. Yet in Iceland, HRE is not a recognised field of social justice education and research; human rights are addressed or assumed in multicultural, inclusive, sustainability, democracy and citizenship education. Democracy and human rights are one of six curriculum pillars in the 2011 national curriculum guides, suggesting a commitment to human rights. An interpretive narrative inquiry approach draws on ten upper secondary school teachers' life stories, analysed using grounded theory and reflexive thematic analysis, to inform and extend understandings of transformative HRE. Professional knowledge from the researcher's own narrative and analysis of human rights, HRE literature, education policy and the school context in Iceland, are used as additional data sets to inform analysis of the empirical data. Findings on teachers' reasons for working with human rights, their practices, and perceptions of systemic challenges are used to inform teacher education. Findings suggest that teachers' moral and political convictions, informed by cross-cultural experiences, are diluted by tacit knowledge of what human rights and HRE are. Teachers' practices are reflective of learning *through* human rights rather than *about* and *for* human rights. Human rights risk being trivialised as teachers revert to familiar discourses and practices. Teachers report insufficient professional support, creating tensions and contradictions between their own human rights commitments and systemic expectations. The study argues that it is currently problematic to discuss HRE as transformative pedagogy in the context of conservative upper secondary schools. First, attention should be placed on human rights in teacher education. The study conceptualises an HRE teacher education framework aimed at developing teachers' human rights and HRE knowledge and skills to generate human rights praxis as a counter-narrative to systemic constraints. The study contributes to international and local HRE scholarship by highlighting the responsibility and role of teacher education in sustaining human rights cultures.



## Ágrip

### Mannréttindamenntun á Íslandi: Lærdómur um umbreytandi menntunarfræði af sögum framhaldsskólakennara

Á hverjum degi verðum við vitni að mannréttindabrotum sem tengjast fátækt, flóttu, mismunun, útlendingaandúð, kúgun og jaðarsetningu. Mannréttindabrot eiga sér einnig stað í skólakerfinu. Mannréttindamenntun er réttur sem tilgreindur er í mannréttindaskuldbindingum, bæði staðbundnum og alþjóðlegum. Samt sem áður er mannréttindamenntun ekki skilgreind sem hluti af réttlætismenntun eða rannsóknum á félagslegu réttlæti en þó unnið með mannréttindi í fjölmennigarmenntun, menntun án aðgreiningar, sjálfbærnimenntun og borgaramenntun. Lýðræði og mannréttindi eru einn af sex grunnþáttum menntunar í aðalnámskrá frá árinu 2011 sem gefur vísbendingu um mikilvægi mannréttindamenntunar. Þessi túlkandi frásagnarrannsókn byggist á lífssögum tíu framhaldsskólakennara, þar sem grunduð kenning og þemagreining eru notaðar til að kryfja og víkka út skilning á umbreytandi mannréttindamenntun. Fagþekking sem byggist á reynslu rannsakandans sjálfs og greiningu hans á mannréttindamenntun, menntastefnu og skólastarfi á Íslandi, er notuð sem viðbótargögn til að dýpka greiningu viðtalsgagnanna. Niðurstöður um ástæður kennara fyrir því að vinna með mannréttindi, aðferðir þeirra, og upplifun af kerfisbundnum áskorunum eru notaðar til að leggja til umbætur á kennaramenntun. Niðurstöður benda til að siðferðileg og pólitísk sannfæring kennara, sem byggist á þvermenningarlegri reynslu, verði veikari vegna skorts á meðvitaðri þekkingu á mannréttindamenntun. Aðferðir kennaranna endurspeglar áherslu á að læra *í gegnum* mannréttindi frekar en *um* mannréttindi eða *fyrir* mannréttindi. Þegar kennarar taka upp vanabundna orðræðu og vinnulag hættir þeim til að gefa mannréttindum lítið vægi. Kennarar segja frá ófullnægjandi faglegum stuðningi, sem veldur togstreitu á milli þeirra eigin skuldbindinga um mannréttindi og kerfislægra væntinga. Í rannsókninni eru færð rök fyrir því að í dag sé vandkvæðum bundið að ræða mannréttindamenntun sem umbreytandi kennslufræði innan hefðbundins framhaldsskóla. Beina þarf athygli að mannréttindum í kennaramenntun. Rannsóknin skilgreinir ramma fyrir mannréttindi sem viðfangsefni í kennaramenntun sem hefur það markmið að efla þekkingu og færni kennara í mannréttindamenntun og mannréttindastarfs sem andsvar við kerfislægum hindrunum. Rannsóknin er framlag til mannréttindamenntunar sem alþjóðlegs og staðbundins fræðasviðs og undirstrikar ábyrgð og hlutverk kennaramenntunar í því að viðhalda mannréttindamenningu.





## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Abstract .....   | i   |
| Table of Contents .....  | v   |
| List of figures .....  | x   |
| List of tables .....   | x   |
| Acronyms.....  | x   |
| Acknowledgements.....  | xii |
| 1 Introduction to an epistemological journey .....   | 1   |
| 1.1 Justifying engagement with HRE as a potential tool for<br>transformation.....                                  | 2   |
| 1.1.1 Engaging with its critics .....  | 4   |
| 1.2 Human Rights Education.....  | 6   |
| 1.3 Life stories as an epistemological journey.....  | 7   |
| 1.3.1 An emerging epistemology: From England to Cambodia .   | 8   |
| 1.3.2 An emerging epistemology: From Cambodia to Iceland   | 13  |
| 1.4 Justifying the need for Human Rights Education in Iceland .....  | 16  |
| 1.5 Research purpose and questions.....  | 21  |
| 1.6 The structure of the thesis.....   | 22  |
| 2 Human Rights Education: A field of education and a right .....   | 25  |
| 2.1 The evolution of universal human rights .....  | 26  |
| 2.2 The problematic nature of universal human rights .....   | 29  |
| 2.3 Human rights in relation to social justice .....   | 34  |
| 2.4 The evolution of Human Rights Education .....  | 39  |
| 2.5 Conceptualising transformative education.....  | 40  |
| 2.6 The role of international organisations in the implementation<br>and monitoring of Human Rights Education..... | 42  |
| 2.7 Defining Human Rights Education .....  | 44  |
| 2.7.1 The United Nations definition .....  | 44  |
| 2.7.2 Different models of Human Rights Education .....   | 47  |
| 2.8 Human Rights Education in formal school contexts: International<br>and Nordic perspectives .....               | 50  |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 2.8.1 Accountability mechanisms .....   | 51  |
| 2.8.2 Teachers' knowledge of human rights and Human Rights<br>Education .....               | 54  |
| 2.9 Summary of chapter two .....  | 58  |
| 3 Situating Human Rights Education in the Icelandic context .....                           | 61  |
| 3.1 The Icelandic formal education system .....   | 62  |
| 3.1.1 The upper secondary school system .....   | 63  |
| 3.2 An overview of social justice responses in the Icelandic education<br>system .....      | 65  |
| 3.3 The 2008 Education Act and 2011 National Curriculum Guides. ....                        | 71  |
| 3.4 Human rights in the curriculum: A core or peripheral concern? ....                      | 74  |
| 3.5 Accountability to human rights as a core educational aim.....                           | 77  |
| 3.5.1 Teacher education and accountability to human rights. ....                            | 80  |
| 3.6 Summary of chapter three .....  | 84  |
| 4 Life stories and narrative inquiry .....  | 87  |
| 4.1 Research purpose, questions, and contributions .....                                    | 88  |
| 4.2 The complementary nature of narrative inquiry and life story to<br>understand HRE ..... | 90  |
| 4.3 Data collection stages .....  | 92  |
| 4.3.1 The grounding and pilot stage .....   | 92  |
| 4.3.2 Selecting the teachers .....  | 93  |
| 4.3.3 Life story as a data collection method.....   | 95  |
| 4.3.4 Informed consent, reflections, memo writing and data<br>storage .....                 | 97  |
| 4.4 Data analysis .....   | 97  |
| 4.4.1 The audit trail.....  | 98  |
| 4.5 Methodological and ethical challenges and limitations .....                             | 101 |
| 4.5.1 Language issues .....   | 101 |
| 4.5.2 The researcher as an insider or outsider .....  | 102 |
| 4.5.3 Reciprocity .....   | 103 |
| 4.5.4 Grounded theory or grounded theory-lite? .....  | 104 |
| 4.5.5 The (ir)responsible researcher.....   | 104 |
| 4.5.6 Confidentiality and anonymity .....   | 106 |
| 4.5.7 Working with a select group of teachers.....  | 107 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| 4.6 Summary of chapter four.....   | 108 |
| 5 What do teachers' life stories reveal about why they work with human rights? .....                                     | 109 |
| 5.1 Introduction .....   | 109 |
| 5.2 Moral and political convictions underpin teachers' reasons for working with human rights .....                       | 110 |
| 5.3 Cross-cultural experiences shape teachers' moral and political convictions about schooling .....                     | 115 |
| 5.4 Teachers draw on tacit knowledge to explain their reasons for working with human rights .....                        | 122 |
| 5.5 Discussion: Teachers' tacit knowledge versus critical awareness of their moral and political convictions .....       | 126 |
| 5.6 Summary of chapter five.....   | 130 |
| 6 What do teachers' life stories reveal about how they work with human rights? .....                                     | 131 |
| 6.1 Introduction .....   | 131 |
| 6.2 Teachers' resistance to exclusive school practices that reinforce social reproduction .....                          | 132 |
| 6.3 Encouraging democratic processes and citizenship skills.....   | 136 |
| 6.3.1 Student-centred practices are a dominant response to undemocratic processes.....                                   | 137 |
| 6.3.2 The absent legal dimension when addressing democracy and citizenship skills .....                                  | 141 |
| 6.3.3 Developing empathy as a democratic disposition.....  | 144 |
| 6.4 Trivialisation dilutes the transformative potential of learning for human rights.....                                | 147 |
| 6.5 Discussion: Learning about human rights and HRE can develop the transformative potential of teachers' practices..... | 151 |
| 6.6 Summary of chapter six .....   | 158 |
| 7 What do teachers' life stories reveal about the systemic challenges that they face? .....                              | 161 |
| 7.1 Introduction .....   | 161 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 7.2 Teachers' understandings of the purpose of schooling conflict with stakeholder expectations.....      | 162 |
| 7.2.1 Subject specialisation pushes democracy and human rights to the periphery of the curriculum.....    | 166 |
| 7.3 Self-regulation dilutes teachers' moral and political convictions                                     | 171 |
| 7.4 Discussion: Individual teacher responsibility versus a whole school approach.....                     | 177 |
| 7.5 Summary of chapter seven .....  | 182 |
| 8 A counter-narrative: Conceptualising human rights education praxis as a teacher education approach..... | 185 |
| 8.1 Introduction .....  | 185 |
| 8.2 Returning to my epistemological beginnings.....   | 186 |
| 8.3 Transformative human rights education praxis.....   | 191 |
| 8.3.1 Principle one: A content and context-based approach   | 193 |
| 8.3.2 Principle two: Social justice as the core of the education approach.....                            | 194 |
| 8.3.3 Principle three: Developing critical consciousness.....   | 195 |
| 8.3.4 Principle four: Providing the pedagogical space for multiple and diverse perspectives.....          | 196 |
| 8.3.5 Principle five: The educator and learners as knowledgeable subjects .....                           | 197 |
| 8.4 Proposed content and contexts for a human rights praxis.....  | 198 |
| 8.4.1 The purpose of education as content.....  | 198 |
| 8.4.2 Capabilities as content.....  | 199 |
| 8.4.3 Narratives as content and context .....   | 200 |
| 8.4.4 Community-based interactions as content and context   | 202 |
| 8.5 Concluding my epistemological journey .....   | 203 |
| References.....   | 207 |
| Appendix 1.1: Invitation letter .....   | 245 |
| Appendix 1.2: Interview guidelines .....  | 247 |
| Appendix 1.3: Informed consent.....   | 249 |
| Appendix 1.4: Persónuvernd .....  | 251 |

Appendix 1.5: (Re-) constructing the teachers’ stories..... 253

## **List of figures**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Figure 1: A problematic exchange .....   | 18  |
| Figure 2: The structure of the thesis .....                                      | 23  |
| Figure 3: The core concepts of the Universal Declaration of Human<br>Rights..... | 33  |
| Figure 4: Conceptualising transformative HRE praxis .....                        | 191 |

## **List of tables**

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Table 1: Profile of participating teachers ..... | 95 |
|--|----|



## Acronyms

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| ActSHEN | Action for Sustainability in Higher Education in the Nordic countries |
| CHRE    | Critical Human Rights Education                                       |
| CoE     | Council of Europe   |
| CRC     | Convention on the Rights of the Child                                 |
| DFID    | Department of International Development                               |
| ECHR    | European Convention on Human Rights                                   |
| EDCHRE  | Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education       |
| EFA     | Education for All Goals   |
| ESD     | Education for Sustainable Development                                 |
| EU      | European Union  |
| GANHRI  | Global Alliance of Human Rights Institutions                          |
| GT      | Grounded Theory   |
| HRE     | Human Rights Education  |
| HREA    | Human Rights Education Association                                    |
| ICESCR  | International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights       |
| ICCPR   | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights                  |
| JustEd  | Justice through Education in the Nordic Countries project             |
| LSP     | Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice Project              |
| MDGs    | Millennium Development Goals  |
| MIPEX   | Migrant Integration Policy Index                                      |
| MT      | Master's in Teaching  |
| NGO     | Non Government Organisation   |
| NHRIs   | National Human Rights Institutions                                    |
| ODA     | Overseas Development Association                                      |
| RTA     | Reflexive Thematic Analysis   |
| SDGs    | Sustainable Development Goals   |



|         |   |
|---------|---|
| SUS     | Stop and Search   |
| TA      | Thematic Analysis   |
| UDHR    | Universal Declaration of Human Rights                             |
| UNDHRET | United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training |
| UNESCO  | United Nations Education Science and Culture Organisation         |
| UNICEF  | United Nations International Child Education Fund                 |
| UK      | United Kingdom  |
| UN      | United Nations  |
| USA     | United States of America  |
| UNHRC   | United Nations Human Rights Council                               |
| WJP     | World Justice Project   |

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# 1 Introduction to an epistemological journey

*One of the few certainties is that understanding human rights will be essential to understanding the world that we live in for a long time to come. (Freeman, 2002, p. 13)*

The Intrigue of human rights, which has led to this research on human rights education (HRE), is an educator's attempt to make sense of the complex nature of human suffering and the role of education to engage with the complexities. Daily we witness human rights violations in the form of poverty, forced migration, acts of discrimination and right-wing xenophobia that perpetuate positions of subordination and marginalisation. Sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg has made visible our complacency and failure to act to halt the collapse of an ecosystem with dire consequences for human wellbeing. We are constantly reminded of the inequities in our education systems that reproduce social stratification. As educators we are in a privileged position; we have the opportunity to act to address human suffering in our work if we choose to do so.

This study is an effort to better understand how teachers respond to the ethical dimension of education and the role HRE can play in supporting teachers' commitment to addressing social injustices. My research is located in the reality of Iceland and based on the life stories of ten upper secondary school teachers teaching different subjects. Their stories suggest similarities with teachers worldwide who draw on moral and political convictions to stop injustice, making my work internationally relevant.

This interpretive narrative inquiry explores why and how teachers engage with human rights and social justice concerns, and aims to better understand their perception of the systemic challenges they face. The overarching research question that guides my study is: *How do the life stories of ten upper secondary school teachers in Iceland inform and extend understanding of human rights education as a transformative pedagogy?* Given that HRE is not an established field of practice or research in Iceland, the purpose of this study is twofold: to advocate for HRE as a valuable contribution to other forms of social justice oriented education in the context of formal schooling and to develop my practice when working with teachers to engage with human rights concerns. The purpose suggests that HRE acts as a potentially

transformative tool that can create more equitable and just forms of human co-existence. Such a claim requires justification given the controversies associated with human rights. Monaghan et al. (2017) point out:

Declaring human rights a policy act of the values citizens should hold, or by celebrating the impressive compendium of laws and rights in various international conventions and constitutions, is woefully inadequate and illusory given the increasing number of people who live in oppressive, violent, and unequal conditions throughout the world. (p. 22)

Enforcing compliance, executing wars in the name of human rights (Moyn, 2019) and the problematic concept of universality (Brown, 1997) are common critiques of human rights. A question that I have been asked repeatedly during the process of working on this study is, “Why human rights?” In response to this question, it is important to state that I am not advocating for HRE as a replacement of other forms of social justice education. I am advocating for recognition of its valuable moral, legal and political contribution and potential to generate transformative pedagogies. This introductory chapter allows me to elaborate on my response to this question. I draw on personal childhood experiences and my work as an educator in multiple locations to justify HRE as a potentially transformative tool that can challenge social injustice both in schools and more broadly.

## **1.1 Justifying engagement with HRE as a potential tool for transformation**

Making claims about HRE as a potential tool for transformation towards a more equitable and just way of human coexistence should not be confused with blindly and idealistically accepting human rights as absolute truths or assumed inherent values. The starting point for this claim is that human rights provide a familiar language; it is difficult to avoid coming across the concept as a form of discourse applied in multiple contexts and for diverse purposes. Dembour’s (2010) four human rights schools is a useful model to illustrate different interpretations of human rights; as given entitlements by natural school scholars, as fought for political claims by protest scholars, as agreed upon laws by deliberative scholars and as existing because of linguistic representation by discourse scholars. The concept is not only familiar but also contentious. Hopgood (2013) points to the elitist nature of human rights understood as a set of codes and norms. Daily struggles for justice suggest codified human rights cannot address the multiple social,

historical, and political complexities that arise within specific sociopolitical and cultural contexts (Donnelly, 2013). Yet, it is the familiar and contentious nature of human rights that create the potential for a transformative form of education; an education that develops recognition of the way rights language can be complicit in maintaining inequalities and human suffering. Yet, that also provides concrete examples of how the legal and political dimension of human rights have been successfully used to hold individuals, systems, and institutions, including states, accountable.

December 10th, 2018 marked the 70th anniversary of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations, n.d. -a). The declaration was endorsed by 48 United Nations (UN) member states as an international response to the atrocities committed during the Second World War (United Nations, n.d. -b). In signing the declaration, member states were making a moral and political commitment to ensure that all human beings would be protected universally. Understanding the historical location of the drafting process raises awareness of the contentious nature of human rights and the need to understand the UDHR as part of an ongoing project aimed at making sense of human rights. 70 years ago, the world was a vastly different place. Colonial rule meant that a number of African countries were unable to participate in the drafting process. The denial of civil liberties and Jim Crow laws in the United States of America (USA) led to the country's withdrawal of direct support to the international human rights system in the fifties; and South Africa abstained from signing the declaration because it challenged the practice of racial discrimination and segregation (Morsink, 2010). These violations of human rights by member states of the United Nations (UN) challenge the claims made in the UDHR as regards "the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" (United Nations, n.d. -a, preamble). Yet, history has also shown the transformative power of universal human rights as expressed in the declaration in supporting struggles for justice, self-determination, civil rights, and against apartheid. Colonised countries drew on human rights discourse to fight for independence and anti-apartheid activists generated global solidarity against the South African government in the name of human rights. After the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed, Malcolm X argued that civil rights were meaningless without human rights (Osler, 2016). Historical struggles for justice have shown how human rights can enable global solidarity for justice in the name of a common humanity. Analysis of the familiar, the contentious, and the capacity for solidarity that make up characteristics of human rights can generate a powerful form of education. Claims made by different scholars about the individualistic nature of human rights as entitlements,

about the need for rights to be exercised in community and guaranteed through human solidarity, as agreed upon legal norms or as a discourse, create the necessary criticality for such an education. The criticality lies in challenging complacency towards human rights; engaging with the moral, legal and political dimensions of human rights; and understanding human wellbeing as a concrete curriculum concern that addresses injustice beyond the school. Whilst many forms of social justice education focus on the wellbeing of the student in the school context, HRE engages with local, national and global injustice.

Human rights exist as legal and political standards that help to make sense of our moral response to suffering and injustice. HRE therefore has much to offer other forms of social justice education. It focuses on the state of being human as the starting point for a shared identity; it offers a broader scope beyond the school and rights to, and in, education; and it has an internationally recognised and endorsed moral, legal and political status. It, therefore, assumes a greater degree of accountability as regards ensuring government obligations towards learning *about, through* and *for* human rights. The fact that human rights are both familiar and contentious lends itself to an educational practice with great potential for transformation towards social justice, despite the critiques.

### **1.1.1 Engaging with its critics**

Although not legally binding, the UDHR forms the moral base of international human rights and is legally defined by two binding covenants, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966) and the International Covenant on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights (International Covenant on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights, 1966), both formally approved by member states in 1966. The Human Rights Council (UNHRC), an inter-governmental body within the UN system made up of 47 States is responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe. The UNHRC can monitor, investigate, and make recommendations; however, they cannot lay down the law at the country level or force states to change policies. The universal application of human rights has therefore come under considerable criticism given the relative weakness of the UNHRC in terms of law enforcement and curbing the power of individual states.

Donnelly (2013) explains human rights in terms of contradictions and tensions that he describes as the "possession paradox" (p. 9): we have rights, and we do not have them, simultaneously. In 2015 Faisal bin Hassan Trad,

Saudi Arabia's ambassador at the UN in Geneva was appointed as the head of the UNHRC, opening up important questions on the legitimacy of the Council as protector of universal human rights. Saudi Arabia has never been condemned by a UNHRC resolution or been made the object of a special rapporteur mandate, commission of inquiry, or special session, despite its negative human rights record (Brooks-Pollock, 2015). There are a number of countries on the council that enact laws that oppose the UN's official stance, including making it legally acceptable to sentence people to death and execute them each year (Ingraham, 2015, paras. 5–6). The USA, where capital punishment remains legal in some States, has not ratified many important conventions including the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989), the 1965 international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1965), and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979). The legal authority of the international human rights framework is therefore disputable. Its political value is also called into question in the face of increasing national and global socioeconomic inequalities worldwide. Samuel Moyn, professor of law and history at Yale University, argues that human rights have been kindest to the richest with profound consequences (Moyn, 2019). He refers to the rise of current populism as the result of humanitarian interventions and internationalism in the nineties that promoted and exported human rights rhetoric while prioritising the development of global markets over ensuring the necessary conditions for human wellbeing; increasing economic inequality, nationally and globally, is a consequence (Moyn, 2019). These are serious accusations that a human rights educator needs to address.

The World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index 2019 indicates a decline over the past four years in fundamental rights in 70% of the 126 countries surveyed. The signs of rising authoritarianism based on scores that indicate a significant decline in constraints on government powers (World Justice Project, 2019)<sup>1</sup> are a concern in a global context of increasing economic disparities. While these findings may question the legal and political power of human rights, they emphasise the importance of its moral dimension. The UDHR has been referred to as a common conscience for humanity that has

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<sup>1</sup> The rule of law index is based on eight factors: constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, open government, fundamental rights, order and security, regulatory enforcement, civil justice, and criminal justice.

endured over time and that continues to be used as a tool to combat injustice (Brown, 2016). The moral dimension of human rights becomes important when understood as a common conscience that “legitimizes the concept that all human beings are equal and holders of human rights” (Kirchschlaeger, 2014, p. 116). This consciousness makes us aware of the “constant challenge of a legal and a political reality which neither realizes nor respects human rights completely” (Kirchschlaeger, 2014, p. 116). Understood in this way, human rights offers a collective moral position towards injustice that allows us to question legal and political mechanisms that allow human vulnerability.

A number of times during the writing of this thesis, I have questioned the legitimacy of the legal and the political dimension of human rights. I recall in October 2019 the Turkish government preparing to move into Kurdish strongholds in northeastern Syria. The risk of starting an offensive that could lead to yet another Kurdish genocide was real; history was indeed repeating itself in a way that reflected Donnelly’s (2013) “possession paradox” (p. 9); we have rights, and we do not have them, simultaneously. Yet my questioning always led me to examples of struggles for justice that depended on the notion of universal human rights as a moral, political, and legal tool against oppression, revealing its potential for transformation. Human rights are universal in the sense that they apply to all human beings. However, they are not unproblematic. Universal application has been used to foster complacency towards injustice and promote dominant notions of morality that may conflict with local cultures, as I discuss in chapter two. My point here is that my claim that HRE offers a potentially transformative education calls for recognition of and engagement with the tensions inherent in the multiple interpretations of human rights, and indeed HRE. This engagement is an inherently educative process.

## **1.2 Human Rights Education**

This study is premised on the belief that HRE is a process that can engage with the gap between human rights ideals and realities. HRE should be understood in terms of the “when” (the duration of the educational process), the “why” (a profound examination of the justification of human rights), and the “how” (the educational context and methodological approach) (Kirchschlaeger, 2014, p. 122). I agree with the understanding of HRE as lifelong-learning “which accompanies the process of education beyond the boundaries of individual subjects” (Kirchschlaeger, 2014, p. 122). Yet, I also believe that schools have a responsibility towards the teaching of human



rights and to provide space for critical exploration and development of new ways and different spheres of human rights protection in schools and more broadly. HRE is a right as articulated in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011). It is also a response to our moral consciousness. It is an “education in human rights” (Kirchschlaeger, 2014, p. 122) in multiple educational settings (formal, non-formal, informal). HRE reflects the interrelating and complementary dimensions of the right to HRE and education in, about, through and for human rights (Kirchschlaeger, 2014, p. 122; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011).

The official definition of HRE is framed as learning *about, through and for* human rights in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011). The non legally binding declaration invites member states to reaffirm their commitment to human rights through education, as stated in the UDHR, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and other human rights instruments. *Learning about human rights*, such as knowledge of domestic and international human rights mechanisms, is an integral component of HRE; if we are unaware of our rights, it is difficult to critique and develop our moral reaction to vulnerability. However, even when we know our rights, *learning through human rights* gives meaning to human rights values and principles as integral components of learning. Cognitive knowledge and sociomoral development help to make sense of experiences of injustice in a way that “is likely to inspire action for justice and human rights” (Osler, 2016, p. 50). It is this action-oriented component that is represented by *learning for human rights*.

Although the legitimacy of the UN definition of HRE should be recognised, and in particular its potential to ensure accountability, this study also engages with the work of critical HRE scholars such as Coysh (2014) and Keet (2015, 2017). Keet’s (2017) claim that “HRE does not exist insofar as it is modelled on an uncritical relationship with human rights universals” (p. 12) has informed my research approach, starting with the personal experiences that underpin this epistemological journey.

### **1.3 Life stories as an epistemological journey**

To position myself within this study, it is necessary to explain how my role as an educator has been informed by my epistemological journey. This journey has developed awareness of how a human rights lens applied to education can effectively address social justice concerns. In this sense, I am applying

critical reflection to respond to my need as a practitioner to question my intentions and values when working to promote human rights. This introspection includes making sense of how I understand human rights and HRE and the important influence of life experiences and my interaction with others.

### **1.3.1 An emerging epistemology: From England to Cambodia**

I am English-Guyanese and was born in the Solomon Islands located in the Pacific. At the age of eight, I was sent to board at a direct grant school<sup>2</sup> in England, a common practice amongst people living overseas employed by the British government. David Gollifer, my father, worked as an agronomist for the then Overseas Development Association (ODA), now the Department of International Development (DFID). He met my mother, Marina Claudia Valenzuela, whilst working in her village, Hosororo, northwest Guyana. I was not conscious of being of mixed heritage or of being a “foreigner” whilst in school; there were a number of boarding and day students with similar family backgrounds. Outside of the school, I was however conscious that there was something about the way that I looked that invited unwelcome remarks. Britain in the late seventies and early eighties was moving away from its social, political, and cultural counter-revolution towards right-wing neoliberal ideology. In this sociopolitical context, I had normalised being called “chocolate drop”, “darkie”, “slant eye”, labels that were thrown at me during different points in my youth. Experiences of racism, both verbal and physical against myself, and other students, were never addressed in school and I never spoke about them at home. Yet I was aware that these acts of aggression never happened when in the Solomon Islands or Botswana. My parents lived in Botswana during the eighties and early nineties. I recall anti-apartheid protests against neighbouring South Africa and the call for solidarity in the name of universal human rights. I became aware of my own shifting identity and status depending on perceptions of what I represented in different geographical locations. The power and privilege implications made me aware of the fragility of human wellbeing and its dependence on perceptions of the historically located self in relation to others.

This sense of belonging and not belonging in different cultural and geographical locations became an internalised part of my being. I developed an empathetic stance towards racism on a personal level but did not make

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<sup>2</sup> Grammar schools that were partly-funded by central government and partly through fees.

connections between social and institutional forms of racism. My response to the 1981 and 1985 Brixton race riots in London was emotive but not action oriented. I lacked an educative space and language to make sense of these experiences. Human rights discourse was non-existent in my schooling experience and not a salient feature of my undergraduate study in Latin American Studies at the University of Newcastle in the northeast of England. The language of human rights was not used to discuss the genocide of indigenous Amerindians, my mother's heritage, or the Slave Trade, which heavily impacted on the cultural diversity of Guyana. These were both core themes in the different courses that made up my undergraduate programme. Autocratic governments and colonialism were discussed as historical events, not as violations of international human rights. At that time, I was a member of Amnesty International. Reading the literature, I was able to associate events going on in South America as human rights crimes. I recall those crimes carried out by the Pinochet regime in Chile where more than 3,000 people disappeared. I attended the meetings, the campaigns, and film shows. However, it was only in 1998, some ten years later that I became critically conscious of the potential power of human rights to challenge such oppression as well as the limits to this power.

During his European visit and whilst in the United Kingdom (UK), General Pinochet was put under house arrest. This was the first time a former head of state had been arrested based on the principle of universal jurisdiction (Amnesty International, 2019a). The Spanish national court and Amnesty had drawn on the rules of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984) to secure his arrest. Although Pinochet was never extradited to Spain, the event raised two important realisations. First, that the legal power of international human rights is recognised as a legitimate path to bring perpetrators of human rights to court; second, that international human rights are at the mercy of political pressure and other competing agendas. The British government intervened in the extradition process and Pinochet was allowed to return as a free man to Chile on dubious medical grounds. The more recent student unrest in Chile reminds us that although human rights are powerful as a language to criminalise acts of violence, its moral, legal, and political power is dependent on two key factors: knowledge about the relationship between social injustice and human rights, and a persistent and collective pursuit of justice to unearth and challenge hidden agendas.

During the Brixton riots in the United Kingdom (UK) in the 1980s, the Race Relations Act had been in force since 1976. However, police forces were

granted an exemption from its conditions during the riots. “Stop and search” (sus) laws allowed those suspected of committing a crime to be stopped and searched. This was justified under the Victorian Vagrancy Act of 1824 that made loitering in a public place a criminal offence. Sus disproportionately affected ethnic minority groups in the UK (Bennetto, 2009). Osler has frequently pointed out that human rights violations are often associated with distant lands and not local realities (see Osler, 2008, 2012, 2016; Osler & Starkey, 2010). The introduction of the 1998 Human Rights Act (Equality and Human Rights Commission, n.d.) suggested increased government accountability to uphold the rights and liberties enshrined in the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights (European Court of Human Rights, n.d.). The act incorporated into British domestic law the rights contained in the European Convention on Human Rights; this meant that British courts would now hear cases previously taken to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The inquest for the April 22, 1993 murder of British schoolboy Stephen Lawrence took place in 1999, a year after the introduction of the 1998 Human Rights Act. It marked a turning point for government accountability.

Police brutality during the Brixton race riots in the eighties had previously been treated as a matter of a “few bad apples” in the police force (The Conversation, 2018). The 1999 Macpherson report on Stephen’s death confirmed an institutionally racist police force. It pointed to racial stereotyping, conscious and unconscious prejudices influencing routine police practices, failure to respond to racist attacks and overuse of stop and search powers (The Conversation, 2018). The 1998 Human Rights Act came into force in October 2000 as a means of holding public authorities accountable for failing to investigate racism. Parliament also passed the Race Relations (Amendment) Act in 2000 (legislation.gov.uk, 2000), prohibiting racial discrimination by public authorities. Stephen Lawrence’s racially motivated death and racially handled case led to change in laws, which were influenced by the European Court of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). While this marked a significant human rights achievement, Stephen’s mother, Doreen Lawrence, commented: “Black people are still dying on the streets and in the back of police vans. For me, institutional racism is ingrained and it’s hard to think of how it will be eradicated from the police force” (Bennetto, 2009, p.10). Stephen’s experience continues to be that of other Black members of society as illustrated by the recent murder of George Floyd in Minnesota on 25 May 2020. The Black Lives Matter movement represents the continuation of struggles against social inequalities that disproportionately impact members

of society from certain ethnic groups. These persistent inequities show that legal human rights legislation is insufficient and, in many instances, unjustly applied. Struggles for justice are a response to the failure of this judiciary system; they are fuelled by moral and political convictions to generate change. This is where HRE becomes important; it has a key role in challenging the contradictions in how human rights legislation is interpreted by drawing on moral and political convictions towards human wellbeing developed through life experiences.

In 1999, the launch of the inquiry into Stephen's death, I was studying for my master's in Manchester, England. My M. Ed. thesis was a critical examination of my pedagogical approach in the context of an adult education programme for ethnic minority groups living in the highlands of Cambodia. I had moved to Cambodia in September 1993 to work on an in-service programme for secondary English Language teachers at one of the five regional teacher training colleges. While studying for my master's, citizenship education was being introduced into schools in England. The initiative was a response to concerns about public apathy towards political processes and the lack of social cohesion, which was regarded as a threat to democracy (Starkey, 2008). The citizenship education proposed, failed to address issues of diversity and human rights (Osler & Vincent, 2002). Emphasis was instead placed on national identity formation, which excluded rather than included many people living in England (Runnymede Trust, 2000). During my master's studies, I became critically aware of the power of education to both perpetuate and challenge dominant societal norms that exclude and create human vulnerabilities.

The impact of education policy and externally imported pedagogy on culturally marginalised groups in Cambodia formed the basis of my master's thesis. I argued that top-down pedagogies that fail to start with local realities serve the interests of dominant cultures; they seek or generate compliance and assimilation into mainstream society (Gollifer, 1999). I argued for a pedagogy based on cross-cultural understanding to bridge the divide between different ways of being and doing. I proposed three pedagogical steps for the educator: *situating yourself; situating yourself in the shoes of others; and situating yourself in relation to the Other* (Gollifer, 1999). My study did not have an explicit rights-based frame even though my analysis addressed core human rights values of diversity, equality, and participation. It was not until I returned to Cambodia, after completion of my master's to coordinate the Girls' and Basic Education Programme for an International Non-Government Organisation, that I started to explore the role of human rights in education to address issues of accountability.

International education programmes globally in the early 2000s were heavily influenced by the UNICEF Child Friendly School initiative, the Education for All Goals (EFA) adopted by The Dakar Framework in April 2000 and the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), especially MDG 2 on universal primary education and MDG 3 on gender equality in education. These initiatives were based on the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) and article 26 of the UDHR (United Nations, n.d. -a), the right to education. What these rights-based frameworks offered to education stakeholders was an accountability mechanism, a way to place responsibility on states to respond to international collective calls to address not only rights to and in education but also human rights more broadly. This experience of using the law and government policy to advocate for girls' rights to education informed my understanding of HRE. Despite the contradictions in how human rights legislation is applied, I realised the powerful potential of its legal dimension in educational contexts. Local communities can fight for their rights to education and use legislation to support their claims; but only if they know what these rights are, how the legislative system works, including its contradictions.

The end of the MDG period in 2015 led to the official launch of the transformative 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, n.d -c). Member States have now pledged their efforts to achieve 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the year 2030, an ambitious objective:

A sustainable world is one where people can escape poverty and enjoy decent work without harming the earth's essential ecosystems and resources; where people can stay healthy and get the food and water they need; where everyone can access clean energy that doesn't contribute to climate change; where women and girls are afforded equal rights and equal opportunity. (Ban Ki-Moon Centre, n.d.)

Human rights are inextricably linked to the SDGs through social and economic factors that involve human need and behaviour (Kirchschlaeger, 2010). Despite distinctive characteristics and different agendas, the right to live a life of dignity free from issues of poverty, discrimination, prejudice, and protection of social and ecological wellbeing are all matters of justice that demand individual and collective responsibility. Human rights are explicitly referenced in the SDGs under goal 16: to promote just, peaceful and inclusive

societies (United Nations, u.d -c). The shift away from prioritising environmental protection towards broader social issues, as reflected in the SDGs, has caused concern that the moral obligation to care about other species or the entire ecosystem is less often part of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) discourse (Kopnina, 2012). I argue that without an explicit human rights lens, it is still common for sustainability, and in particular sustainability education, to work with human rights as an underlying assumption. Uncritical assumptions do not encourage critical engagement about the essential interconnections and dialectical tensions between human and environmental vulnerability. They can lead to passive acceptance and complacency about vulnerable social and ecological realities as distant concerns while the focus is centred round local “eco-friendly” responses. I further argue that assumptions about human rights can be seen in other social justice oriented education approaches, diluting transformative potential; for example, in inclusive, multicultural, and citizenship education, recognised fields of education in Iceland.

### **1.3.2 An emerging epistemology: From Cambodia to Iceland**

I moved to Iceland initially in 2003 and then returned to Cambodia with my family in 2005. This was to take up the position of Education Advisor on a Child Labour Project supported by the USA Department of Labour. During this time, I enrolled on an online course offered by the Human Rights Education Association (HREA). The course was the start of my engagement with HRE as an explicit field of education and a pedagogical approach.

On my return to Iceland in 2010, I enrolled on the doctoral programme at the University of Iceland as a part-time student. During this time, I was working as an English Language teacher at the International School of Iceland and as an international education consultant. I started teaching in the International Studies in Education Programme at the University of Iceland’s School of Education in 2013. The decision to focus my doctoral study on HRE in the context of Iceland was informed by the educational developments taking place in Iceland at the time, and my previous international development experiences. I recognised the potential of HRE as an overarching approach to engage with and address local and global social justice concerns through formal education.

During the first two years as a part-time doctoral candidate, I visited upper secondary schools and met with teachers to develop an understanding of the school system in Iceland. The introduction of the 2011 National Curriculum Guide (NCG) (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012)

evoked interesting reactions amongst teachers, in particular in response to the six curriculum pillars representing general aims at all three levels of formal schooling (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012, pp. 14-23). The pillars are sustainability, equality, democracy and human rights, literacy, health and wellbeing, and creativity. Comments collected in my journal during my initial school visits indicate that some teachers welcomed a more explicit reference to human rights in the curriculum - "I have always believed in human rights and have tried to find ways to integrate it into my teaching...and I have often felt alone" (personal communication, March 11, 2011). Other teachers indicated that there was no room for human rights in their specific subject area - "I teach English not human rights. That's what I test my students on" (personal communication, May 17, 2012). One upper secondary school assistant director felt restricted by a system that tests subject content - "the school system expects this and it is difficult to step outside of the institutional culture as individuals" (personal communication, July 8, 2011). These responses and the general discourse around educational reform in Iceland at that time revealed a curriculum reform process underpinned by conflicting expectations. I became interested in how teachers committed to working with social justice concerns, which were now evident in the six curriculum pillars of the NCG, were responding to the introduction of human rights as a core curriculum concern.

Despite human rights appearing as a term in its own right as a fundamental pillar in the 2011 NCG, the 2014 White Paper on Education Reform makes no reference to human rights (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). In the five-year teacher education programme, it has been argued that focus is placed on the curriculum pillars of literacy, equality, and sustainability (Sigurðardóttir et al., 2018). Despite increased international recognition of the role of HRE since the 1990s (Bajaj, 2018; Osler, 2016; Tibbitts, 2017), a review of Icelandic research databases indicates that HRE is not a recognised field of education in Iceland. Reference to human rights is limited to students' rights in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and democratic participation in schools, in particular student voice. Iceland is party to all major UN human rights conventions. Government commitment to human rights appears strong as suggested by policy and initiatives focused on the advancement of human rights (Government of Iceland, n.d.; City of Reykjavik, n.d.; Icelandic Human Rights Centre, n.d. -a, n.d. -b, n.d. -c, n.d. -d). The CRC was incorporated into law by the adoption of Act 19/2013, which entered into force on 13 March 2013 (Act on the Convention of the Rights of the Child No. 19/2013). Iceland was also elected to the United Nations Human Rights Council until the end of



2019. Despite this strong commitment to human rights, human rights do not play an explicit role in the Icelandic upper secondary school system.

Two significant social justice related education projects in Iceland have resulted in extensive data aimed at enhancing social justice education in the Nordic region: JustEd, the Nordic Centre of Excellence Justice through Education in the Nordic Countries project (2013-2018) and LSP, the Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice Project (2013-2015). An online review of the projects' main publications reveals a rich source of success stories and critical challenges in the context of immigrant students in Nordic countries (LSP, n.d.); and on social justice related concerns under the three themes of governance, politics and marketisation; justice through educational practices; and enabling and constraining justice in education (JustEd. n.d. -a, n.d. -b). Both projects were funded under Nordforsk, an organisation under the Nordic Council of Ministers that provides funding for research and research infrastructure to facilitate Nordic cooperation (<https://www.nordforsk.org/en/about-nordforsk>). Although these publications address social justice related concerns in the context of education and provide valuable data, explicit references to HRE are not evident in any of these. I reference these two projects to support my claim that HRE is not a recognised field of education or research in Iceland or, to a great extent, implemented in other Nordic countries. Throughout this thesis, I argue that explicit attention to human rights in the context of education offers the opportunity to engage in critical examination of how schools and educators address social justice, morally, politically and legally. A third project of significance is the 2013-2017 ActSHEN project (Action for Sustainability in Higher Education in the Nordic countries). I was actively involved in this project and had the opportunity to explore the potential of HRE in enhancing different dimensions of sustainability in and through education with an emphasis on student-driven approaches (Vesterinen et al., 2017). Despite distinctive characteristics and different agendas there is a clear relationship between HRE and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (Kirchschlaeger, 2010). My involvement in the ActSHEN project provided an opportunity to explore the relationship between the two fields in a series of seminars and conference presentations (Gollifer, 2012, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2016). This experience has influenced my research focus and interpretations.

In their review of education for democracy, inclusion, and social justice in Iceland, Halldórsdóttir et al. (2016) acknowledge the absence of research on HRE. The final recommendation made in their paper suggests the need for more research on democracy, citizenship, and social justice in education

more generally (Halldórsdóttir et al., 2016, p. 454). This suggests that human rights can be understood as synonymous with democracy and citizenship, a suggestion that is supported by research (Osler, 2016; Vesterdal, 2016). My concern as an educator is that the lack of explicit reference to HRE fails to engage us in critiques of human rights and to assume a human rights position within social justice responses, a stance that research suggests is common in Nordic countries (Osler, 2015, 2016; Osler & Lybæk, 2014; Vesterdal, 2016). I believe that HRE acts as a tool that can develop the necessary critical skills and attitudes needed to better understand the nature of injustice to challenge it; critical skills are essential for teachers, as my experience of teaching in Iceland reaffirmed.

#### **1.4 Justifying the need for Human Rights Education in Iceland**

I recall running an English class with a group of secondary school students in Iceland where we were discussing *Romeo and Juliet*. To contextualise the discussion in contemporary times, I asked students to read letters written by British Muslim girls who were asking advice about how to tell their parents that they were going out with a non-Muslim boy. I intended to draw on the girls' situations to discuss the theme of *Love as a Cause of Violence*. The reaction of the students surprised me; they laughed and found the girls' situations unbelievable. I realised that I had assumed that they would be familiar with a context that was part of my reality growing up in England. I also realised that this lack of familiarity challenged their capacity for empathy towards certain forms of human vulnerability and for solidarity with unfamiliar struggles for justice. I became aware that I had not prepared for the task in a way that would create constructive and informative connections between diverse lived realities. Such connections are challenging when human rights violations are understood as distant realities and human rights as an assumed core of the national psyche and institutional framework.

When implementing HRE in countries that have strong human rights records, such as Nordic countries where national values are often understood as synonymous with human rights values, effective HRE practice can be undermined (see Osler, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016; Osler & Lybæk, 2014). In 2012, I conducted a small pilot study with a colleague on upper secondary school students' perceptions of democracy, equality, and social justice in Iceland. The data revealed that racism was understood as a distant concern rather than relevant to students' lives and local contexts (Gollifer & Valdimarsdóttir, 2013). This distance can normalise racism, in particular amongst students who are white and who are from the dominant national

culture. Normalisation can breed both conscious and unconscious perpetuation of social reproduction because the dominant culture is neither perceived nor self-identified in the context of race (Boronski & Hassan, 2015). Students from the dominant culture who are not provided with the opportunity to engage in critical analysis of how they perceive the world are unable to make links between their perception of reality and social injustice (Boronski & Hassan, 2015). It has been stated that Iceland has a recent immigrant history setting it apart from other Western countries that have long histories of racial segregation (Halldórsdóttir et al., 2016). There is a risk that this view conceals the fact that discrimination is a complex and deeply rooted concern in Iceland (Loftsdóttir, 2017). Few students or indeed teachers are familiar with the Icelandic government's ban on black US soldiers in Iceland during World War II, which was only repealed in the 1960s. This is in part due to the hidden nature of the ban; it was never put in writing but was an interpretation of Article 6 of the Defence Agreement that gave the Icelandic government ultimate say over the size and composition of the military force (Ingimundarson, 2004). In the 1970s, the ban was exposed by black civil rights organisations in the United States. As Ingimundarson (2004) points out, "less attention was devoted to these revelations in Iceland, a country that prided itself on social tolerance and respect for human rights and that tried to play down any notion of official or public racism" (p. 85).

In Iceland, it is common to celebrate certain forms of "foreignness" as contributions to the "multicultural landscape", concealing institutionalised racism in particular when it "coexists with a celebration of the consumer-orientated packaging of difference" (Loftsdóttir, 2017, p. 75). Institutional racism is fuelled by a political discourse that defends nationalist interests for the sake of the perceived wellbeing of a society. During a presentation at an HRE conference in 2015 in Middleburg, Holland, I argued that the absence of critical dialogue on global events concerning human rights in Icelandic schools fuels xenophobic interpretations and responses. I used a message exchange between a house owner and a potential tenant in Iceland to illustrate how such responses are often justified in the name of human rights (Gollifer, 2015b). Figure 1 shows this exchange, which took place after the 2015 Paris terror attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices.



**Figure 1: A problematic exchange**

“Je suis Charlie” became an international mantra in defence of Charlie Hebdo’s mocking depiction of religious figures. The reproduction of Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed was enacted in the name of the human right to freedom of speech. Understanding freedoms as absolutes, without acknowledging a responsibility to ensure that one set of freedoms does not impinge on the freedom of others, is not uncommon. Failing to understand the implications of attacking or mocking an already marginalised and vulnerable minority group in certain country contexts, negates the cosmopolitan principles of human rights. These principles are universality, indivisibility, reciprocity, and solidarity (Osler & Starkey, 2010). Uncritical and uninformed application of human rights perpetuates discrimination and negative stereotypes that maintain an unjust social and political order. The house owner claimed the right to choose who should rent the property. A human rights frame provides an analysis that seeks to understand the multiple perspectives involved in this exchange. This reveals how rights are not absolute and are intended to protect against forms of discrimination. The potential tenant’s rights were violated on racial and religious grounds. A

human rights lens renders such discriminatory acts as morally, politically, and legally unacceptable.

In 2013, two years before the attack on the Charlie Hebdo headquarters, the City of Reykjavík's decision to allocate a plot of land for a mosque had led to a heated debate on the rights of immigrants in Iceland. Different political groups began to draw on human rights rhetoric to debate the virtues and dangers of Islam. A former mayor of Reykjavík drew on women's rights to justify his opposition to political and feminist groups' tolerance of a religion that degrades women (Kern, 2013). He described Islam as "a religion with the goal to eliminate all other religions" and its influence as "dangerous for our national culture and safety" (Kern, 2013, paras. 24-26). His reference to women's rights dangerously ignores the complex intersection of factors that impinge on the rights of individuals in specific social contexts. As Mohanty (1984) and Spivak (1999) argue, discourses promoted by the powerful often serve to regulate the knowledge and values of the less powerful. Terror attacks in European contexts and the refugee crisis increase nationalist sentiment as attempts are made to protect the interests of the dominant (Maietta, 2018). The contradictory application of human rights calls for education that engages with these contradictions.

Article 65 of the 1944 Icelandic Constitution [Stjórnarskrá lýðveldisins Íslands], which represents the supreme law of the country since its independence from Denmark, states: "Everyone shall be equal before the law and enjoy human rights irrespective of sex, religion, opinion, national origin, race, colour, property, birth, or other status (Icelandic Human Rights Centre, n.d. –a, art. 65). Iceland has a population of approximately 368,000 (Statistics Iceland, 2020). The country has developed from one of the poorest nations in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century towards rapid modernisation. Socioeconomic development has been accompanied by an increase in migration. The number of first and second-generation immigrants stands at just over 15% of the total population (Statistics Iceland, 2020). Despite the financial crisis of 2008, the majority of foreign workers decided to stay in Iceland rather than return to their home countries, even after losing their jobs (Einarsdóttir et al., 2018; Garðarsdóttir & Bjarnason, 2010). Research shows that immigrants in Iceland tend to be in lower income jobs. According to a 2019 report from Statistics Iceland, immigrants are on average paid 8% less than their Icelandic peers doing the same work (Hagstofa Íslands, 2019). This is even after taking into account gender, age, education level, family situation, and other factors. When broken down by demographics, the data show that there is a strong racial component to the wage gap.

A 2014 Red Cross report on marginalised groups in Iceland argues that poverty in Iceland, one of the richest countries in the world, has been constant since the 2008 economic crisis. The definition of poverty in the report is described as: “a lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society” and as “a violation of human dignity” (Red Cross, 2014, p. 5). The report shows that nine per cent of the Icelandic population falls below the poverty line, with 13 per cent of these classified as at risk. Social class differences are significantly greater than a decade ago in Iceland with reports suggesting that the gap between rich and poor is increasing (Save the Children, 2016). The 2016 report on Educational and Child Poverty in Europe shows 14% of children in Iceland are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Save the Children, 2016). The report also shows the link between poverty and academic performance. Internationally, Iceland has tended to be held up as a paragon of equality and quality of life, in particular for women (Hertz, 2016; Marinósdóttir & Erlingsdóttir, 2017). Yet, human rights violations are hidden behind Iceland’s number one ranking in the World Economic Forum’s 2020 Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2020). Domestic violence and sexual harassment in the private sphere amongst immigrant women is considerably more acute than for Icelandic women (Human Rights Council, 2014; Icelandic Human Rights Centre, 2011; Kvennaathvarfið [The women’s shelter], 2021).

In this study, I present HRE as education underpinned by four cosmopolitan principles that are applicable to all country contexts, irrespective of where they stand in international rankings. These principles are solidarity, reciprocity, indivisibility and universality (Osler and Starkey, 2010). The concept of universal responsibility inherent in HRE calls for an intersectional lens that challenges narrow conceptions of human rights that make invisible the sufferings of minority and vulnerable groups. HRE can challenge national tendencies in ways that make human rights more valid now, if not more relevant, than they were in 1948 (Baja, 2017). The results of the 2018 World Justice report have been described by Samuel Moyn of Yale University as “a crisis not just for human rights, but for the human rights movement” (Bordell & Robins, 2018, para. 2). I understand this crisis as an opportunity, rather than as justification to dismiss human rights altogether; an opportunity to maximise the role of education to address issues of racism, discrimination and unequal participation and access that can be found in all country contexts, including Iceland. The transformative nature of HRE lies in its potential to challenge such social injustices.

## 1.5 Research purpose and questions

This study is premised not only on the belief that HRE is a process that can engage with the gap between human rights ideals and realities but that educators have a responsibility to use their privileged position to fight injustice. As Osler (2016) reminds us, teaching is a political act, and as educators, we are all “implicated in processes that either support or undermine struggles for justice” (Osler, 2016, p. 18). Education and HRE are rights because they represent a means to seek transformation that addresses human suffering and vulnerabilities, ensuring other human rights. My understanding of human rights is therefore underpinned by a moral consciousness to prevent suffering and the knowledge that legal and political processes can achieve social justice. These premises underpin my interest in how teachers’ life experiences can inform and extend our understanding of transformative HRE, in particular in formal education contexts that do not make explicit reference to HRE.

This interpretive narrative inquiry draws on the life stories of ten upper secondary school teachers to inform and extend understanding of transformative HRE. The empirical data generated from these life stories is informed by my own life story, analysis of human rights and HRE literature and the education policy and school context in Iceland. My exploration of the concept of “transformative” draws on these different sources of analysis to advocate for HRE as an important contribution to the field of social justice education, and to inform my practice with the explicit purpose of addressing social justice through an engagement with human rights. The teachers in this study have self-identified as working with human rights even though they do not explicitly refer to their approach as “Human Rights Education”. A critical examination of their stories and the sociopolitical and cultural contexts in which these occur provides an insight into why they align their work with human rights, how they address human rights and the perceived systemic challenges. This insight informs responses to the overarching research question: *How do the life stories of ten upper secondary school teachers inform and extend understanding of human rights education as a transformative pedagogy?* The three sub-questions are:

1. How do teachers’ reasons for working with human rights inform and extend understanding of human rights education as a transformative pedagogy?
2. How do teachers’ practices inform and extend understanding of human rights education as a transformative pedagogy?

3. How do teachers' perceptions of systemic challenges inform and extend understanding of human rights education as a transformative pedagogy?

In summary, the focus of this study is to explore the potential role of HRE in the Icelandic school system, an under-researched field despite the inclusion of human rights in the 2011 national curriculum guides and increasing international recognition of the role of human rights in education and schooling. This study will therefore be of interest to a wide range of education stakeholders and contributes to the field of HRE both in Iceland, the Nordic countries, and internationally.

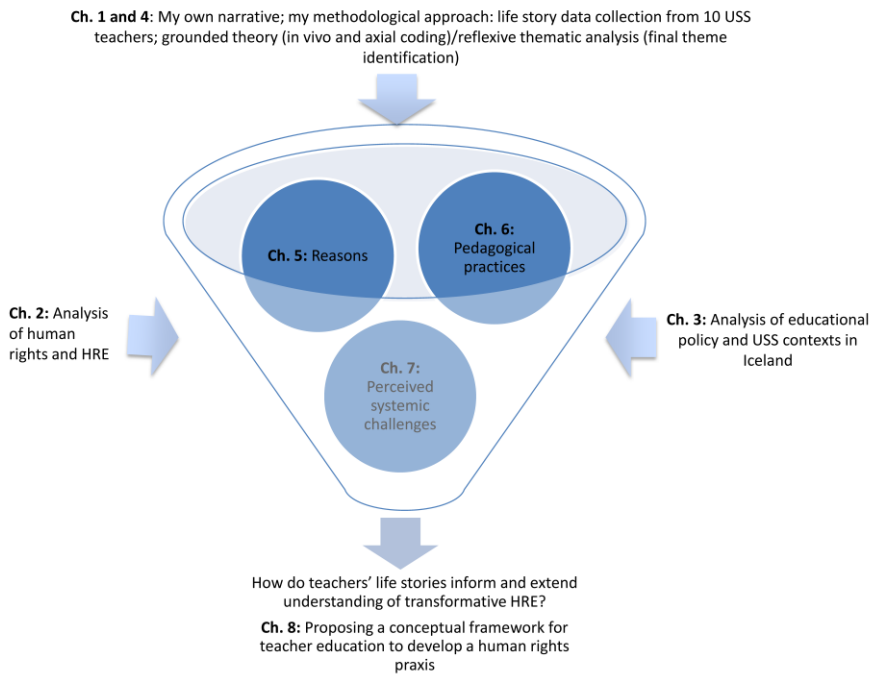
## **1.6 The structure of the thesis**

This chapter has introduced the rationale for my study's focus and context by drawing on my own life story. The eight chapters are interrelated. The final conceptualisation for HRE teacher education, proposed in chapter eight, is informed by the nature of the field of HRE and the Icelandic education context, and how these interact with the understandings and concerns of ten professionals working as teachers at the upper secondary school level (see Figure 2). Each of the remaining chapters addresses the following:

*Chapter two* presents a literature review that situates HRE as an established field of education internationally and in the Nordic context. I address the relationship between social justice and human rights and the emergence of HRE as a field of education, including its history, different models of HRE, and the tensions associated with HRE in formal schooling. The intention is to illustrate how sociopolitical and cultural contexts influence how HRE is understood and practised, and the impact of these contexts on its transformative potential.



*Chapter three* presents the Icelandic education context and situates this research in a country context that has a rhetorically progressive education policy, supporting human rights related concepts and values. The intention is to illustrate that the absence of HRE as an explicit field of education risks limiting social justice education to what takes place in schools. It further suggests that tensions between decentralisation, autonomy and accountability for human rights have resulted in weak institutional responsibility, placing greater dependence on individual teachers.



**Figure 2: The structure of the thesis**

*Chapter four* presents the methodological approach that guides the thesis, including the limitations of the study. Professional knowledge from my own story and analysis of human rights, HRE literature, education policy and the school context in Iceland, support the interpretive narrative inquiry that draws on life stories as a data collection method, as illustrated in Figure 2.

*In chapters five, six, and seven*, the findings are presented starting with the reasons why the ten teachers are working to address human rights issues. The argument is made that teachers' moral and political convictions, informed by cross-cultural experiences, are diluted by tacit knowledge of the

reasons why teachers seek to address justice concerns, and what human rights and HRE are. The chapter on HRE practices reveals pedagogy that is more reflective of learning *through* human rights than *about* and *for* human rights. I suggest this trivialises human rights as teachers revert to familiar discourses and practices, diluting any transformative potential. The final findings chapter on teachers' understandings of perceived systemic challenges draws attention to insufficient systemic and school support to make space for the introduction of new content or themes, such as human rights, creating tensions and contradictions between teachers' work and systemic expectations. In the absence of a whole school approach to human rights, working as individuals in such contexts can dilute teachers' moral and political convictions.

*In chapter eight*, the thesis is drawn to a close by discussing the implications of what teachers' stories tell us about the feasibility of transformative HRE in upper secondary schools in Iceland. The chapter lays the ground for a teacher education framework that aims to not only develop teachers' human rights knowledge and skills but that also aims to develop a human rights praxis that acts as a counter-narrative to systemic constraints.

## 2 Human Rights Education: A field of education and a right

*The political dimensions of how different narratives on human rights are negotiated in a relational context, point to the acknowledgement of human rights education as being far from politically neutral. It is, rather, socially constrained and framed by identity politics. (Adami, 2014, p. 304)*

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) reflected recognition of the role of education in preventing and protecting human rights, stating education as a fundamental human right under article 26. Explicit reference was made to education directed towards human rights and fundamental freedoms. Some twenty years after the drafting of the UDHR, human rights organisations started to look towards both popular and formal education as an essential component of popular resistance (see Flowers, 2015). However, human rights education (HRE) as a field in its own right, did not yet exist (Suárez, 2006).

In 1994, the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education was proclaimed by the General Assembly, spanning the period 1 January 1995 to 31 December 2004. On 10 December 2004, the General Assembly proclaimed the World Programme for Human Rights Education to advance the implementation of HRE in all sectors (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, n.d. -a). In recognition that addressing human rights is a lifelong process, the programme was declared as ongoing (2005-ongoing) and is currently in its fourth phase. The first phase (2005-2009) focused on HRE in primary and secondary schools; the second phase (2010-2014) on tertiary education and training for professionals in diverse fields; and the third phase (2015-2019) on developing the work carried out during the two previous phases, including training to journalists and other media professionals (Russell & Suárez, 2017). Phase four of the programme (2020-2024) aims to align HRE with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other relevant initiatives on human rights education and training (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, n.d. -a). The Human Rights Council, in its resolution 39/3 (27 September 2018), has decided to make youth the focus group of this fourth phase and specifically with target 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, n.d. -c):

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development (target 4.7).

One would expect that after more than 25 years of international standing and global cooperation, HRE would by now be a recognised education approach at the state and the school level. A review of the literature suggests that despite growing recognition of HRE since the start of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education, HRE is not clearly understood, and continues to be underrepresented in schools (Bajaj, 2011b; Gerber, 2011, 2013, 2017; Osler, 2016). This chapter is intended to first provide a brief history of the evolution of universal human rights, to address human rights critiques and discuss the relationship between social justice and human rights. Different models of HRE and the challenges associated with HRE in formal schooling are then presented with particular attention paid to the Nordic context. The intention is to illustrate how specific sociopolitical and cultural contexts, including political ideologies, can influence how human rights are understood and how HRE is practised in schools. I argue for an understanding of human rights contextualised in a theory of social justice that not only provides a normative framework to address human vulnerability but that critically engages with the influences of particular sociopolitical and cultural conditions.

## **2.1 The evolution of universal human rights**

Despite claims that human rights are a western conception, references to the notion of rights can be found in historical documents that predate the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). These include the Constitution of Medina from 622 and the *Al-Risalah al-Huquq* (The Treatise of Rights) from the late 7<sup>th</sup> to early 8<sup>th</sup> century (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2014). Perhaps the most well-known, non-western influence on contemporary forms of human rights is the Cyrus Cylinder, a set of decrees laid down by Cyrus the Great, the first king of ancient Persia when he conquered the city of Babylon in 539 B.C. The Cylinder is recognised as the world's first charter of human rights (Assadi, 2011). Isomorphic equivalents of the modern conception of human rights also include the moral systems of non-Western traditions such as Confucianism and Buddhism (Al-Daraweesh

& Snauwaert, 2015); the notion of human dignity in parts of Africa (Hellsten, 2004; Metz, 2012); the codes of conduct and justice applied by the Inca, Aztec and Native Americans, and the traditions of many cultures which reflect the notion of rights and responsibilities (Flowers, 2000). Human rights concepts are also evident in five of the oldest written sources: the Hindu Vedas, the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, the Bible, the Quran (Koran), and the Analects of Confucius (Flowers, 2000). As Flowers points out, “all societies, whether in oral or written tradition, have had systems of propriety and justice as well as ways of tending to the health and welfare of their members” (Flowers, 2000, part 1). Yet, the universal conception of human rights remains contentious. Hammond (2016) uses *Alice in Wonderland*, a book published in 1865 about a young girl named Alice who falls down a rabbit hole into a fantasy world, to illustrate these contentions. He asks: “Do we have rights when we claim them or are they only real if we can take advantage of them?” (p. 14)

The notion of universal rights evolved from the natural law tradition that understands legal rules and relations as either ordained by God or as inherent in human nature (Thompson Ford, 2011). Natural law acted as a form of protection against state abuse, dating back to the Stoics and philosophical movements of the Hellenistic period. Perhaps the most significant influence of Stoic thought is the belief that practical knowledge or *phronesis*, leading to a state of *eudaimonia* (happiness or wellbeing), is a human capability that allows us to live in harmony with nature. In this sense, the metaphysical notion of universalism is understood as the existence of “a universal independent moral order that can be comprehended by human rationality” (Al-Daraweesh & Snauwaert, 2015, p. 15). Although Stoic philosophers had no concept of universal natural rights (Freeman, 2002) let alone human rights, their belief about human nature had a significant impact on the work of contemporary moral theorists, and in particular, the notion that all people are born as naturally equal, and as such should be treated as equal products of nature.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, there were two distinct ways of thinking about rights in Europe: natural, subjective, individual rights on the one hand; and objective rights and/or civil rights, on the other (Freeman, 2002). The individual and subjective nature of natural rights introduced a degree of accountability that allowed people to protest if their natural rights were impinged on, a concept that was significant during the French and American Revolutions. Drawing on Thomas Hobbes’ concept of the “social contract” John Locke believed that “individual rights and public good were mutually compatible” (Freeman, 2002, p. 21). Locke’s work

influenced the understanding of natural rights as pertinent to the relationship between the individual and the state. Hugo Grotius, the Dutch jurist, played a significant part in providing a secular theory of natural rights. He argued that it was through man's sociability that the will of God was made apparent, claiming that natural law did not require belief in God (Tierney, 2004). Such a claim created the philosophical problem of how morality could be derived from nature without divine intervention.

During the Enlightenment period, moral constructivists addressed this problem and challenged metaphysical and epistemological realism that argued for the separation of a universal moral order and human interpretation. Immanuel Kant argued that all human beings have the capacity for practical reasoning and that moral value and principle are grounded in the universal rational autonomy of the person (Al-Daraweesh & Snauwaert, 2015). He further argued, "reason could justify a set of ethical and political principles based on the obligation to respect the dignity of other persons as rational and autonomous moral agents" (Freeman, 2002, p. 24). The modern conception of human rights was based on this notion; a rational moral response to inhumane acts with the aim of generating a global rights consciousness and a worldwide human rights culture (Russell & Suárez, 2017; Tibbitts, 2017).

In this respect, contemporary rights are not arbitrary assertions of power but instead deeply rational and human responses (Tierney, 2004). The Nuremberg Tribunal after World War II exemplifies this understanding of human rights: "In stipulating crimes against humanity the tribunal asserted a universal scope of moral consideration" (Cooper, 1999, as cited in Al-Daraweesh & Snauwaert, 2015, p. 25). These universal morals became codified in the form of the so-called Bill of Rights, comprised of the legally non-binding 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, n.d. -a), and the legally binding 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, 1966) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966). The Bill of Rights represents political and legal commitments founded on a collective moral understanding that human dignity requires protection. However, despite the shift away from metaphysical understandings towards rationality to explain the existence of human rights, understanding human rights as "timeless absolutes, which stand above and apart from the specific treaties and conventions that give them concrete elaboration" (Thompson Ford, 2011, p. 26), or as an unquestioned necessary component of western liberalism (Brown, 1997; Rorty, 1993), remains problematic.

## 2.2 The problematic nature of universal human rights

Universality associated with rights has a long history that has evolved out of Aristotelian and Kantian thought on the moral human being with the capacity for practical reasoning on one hand, and the need for some form of ethical code to ensure the common good, on the other (Thompson Ford, 2011). Brown (1997) argues that the liberal position that underpinned the implicit notion of universal rights in the 18<sup>th</sup> century has evolved into an explicit claim in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: “the contemporary human rights regime is in general, and, for the most part, in detail, simply a contemporary, internationalised and universalized version of the liberal position on rights” (p. 43). Brown argues that universalising what was conceptually applicable to certain country contexts has created an understanding of human flourishing and human dignity as the antithesis of what is not morally good or acceptable. He claims that this universal status has failed to take into consideration cultural differences. Brown (1997) rejects the universal notion of human rights as discriminatory towards certain cultural modes of being; he argues that the concept of holding states accountable based on common moral standards risks creating an imperialist and uncritical stance.

Cultural relativists claim that by universalising human rights, acts of certain societies (typically western democratic states) come to be justified as ethically good; including engagement in warfare or denouncing cultural traditions in the name of human rights. Cultural relativists argue that “social criticism should rest on conceptions of the good which relate to the contexts in which life is lived” and not “on ‘general moral standards’ applicable to all humanity” (Brown, 1997, p. 55). This critique should not be dismissed, especially given that there are many examples where human rights have been used to protect western national values and dismiss cultural traditions that are perceived as a challenge to these. As discussed in the previous chapter, a former mayor of Reykjavík used the concept of universal women’s rights to justify opposition to building a mosque because of claims that Islam degrades women (Kern, 2013). After the attack on the World Trade Centre, the “War on Terror” was justified as a response to violations against women’s universal human rights. In a radio address in November 2001, Laura Bush declared: “Fighting brutality against women and children is not the expression of a specific culture; it is the acceptance of our common humanity – a commitment shared by people of goodwill on every continent” (The White House, 2001).

Although women’s groups welcomed the attention that this brought to women’s oppression in Afghanistan, drawing on the concept of universal

human rights to justify war raised a number of concerns about imperialism (Stabile & Kumar, 2005). Brown (1997) argues that human rights belong to countries that claim to represent liberal values; not because human rights have led to liberal ideologies but because human rights are understood as a necessary component of liberal democracy. Rorty (1993) states that western human rights cultures and the notion of a shared moral identity have been made possible by an understanding of the term human being that has become synonymous with the human being from a dominant culture; or as Laura Bush understands it, as synonymous with “people of goodwill” (The White House, 2011), as opposed to those without. Rorty argues for what he refers to as sentimental education, the cultivation of a sympathetic or affective stance towards other human beings (Rorty, 1993). This concept is notable because it reflects the pedagogic steps I developed as part of my M.Ed. thesis: *situating yourself; situating yourself in the shoes of others and situating yourself in relation to the Other* (Gollifer, 1999). Yet, a sympathetic stance is not sufficient to foster forms of solidarity against oppression or violence. In his critique of Rorty’s work, Hayden (1999) points out that the role of a universal conception of human rights, underpinned by moral reasoning, is to act as an accountability mechanism when sympathy is not only absent but ineffectual; or when social, political, economic, and cultural systems fail to protect against pain, suffering, or vulnerability.

Donnelly (1984) describes the radical cultural relativist stance as a form of moral cowardice because it rejects the moral significance of the status of the human being. He argues for the need to understand complex power relations and the impact on the human being; to lack criticality or concern about human vulnerability is morally unacceptable. Justifying the moral dimension of human rights is important because as Kirchsclaeger (2014) points out, human rights derive from the human need to respond to the perception of vulnerability. This human need involves developing a consensus as regards which essential elements and areas of human existence require the highest possible protection. Human rights can therefore be understood as “the filter to distinguish between vulnerabilities that are relevant for the protection of human rights as the highest possible protection available to the human community and those that are not” (2014, p. 115). Kirchsclaeger (2014) argues that the principle of vulnerability justifies human rights; not in terms of vulnerability itself but human reactions to the principle of vulnerability. When understood in terms of reactions towards vulnerability, which includes seeking forms of protection, human rights can be understood as morally universal and intercultural. It is not restricted to the west or liberal democracies but applicable to all places where human



beings reside. An intercultural understanding of the universality of human rights challenges human rights used as a western form of imperialism on one hand and justification for acts of violence on the other. An intercultural lens recognises the complex interweaving of strands of social life of the lived human experience as a universal reality.

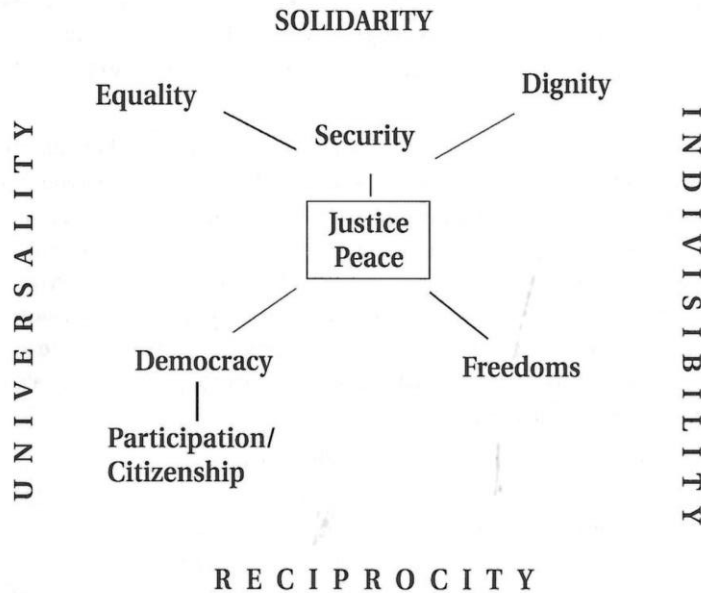
In the foreword to Al-Daraweesh & Snauwaert's (2015) book, Betty Reardon describes human rights as a form of "freestanding culturally sensitive universalism" (p. xiv). By this she refers to a relational hermeneutic approach to global justice; universalism is presented as a normative concept that requires critical exploration rather than an ideological belief system representing an absolute truth. Universal human rights epistemologies are historically determined and should continue to evolve in response to ongoing scrutiny rather than be understood in terms of standardising cultures:

The UDHR does not itself suggest standardization of culture. There is a claim about the universal nature of rights, and of universal principles, but the implementation of these rights takes place within a specific cultural context. Rights need to be applied within a cultural context, but the broad human rights principles of justice and equality should prevail. (Osler, 2016, p. 37)

Osler (2016) draws on the human rights principle of recognition to examine how justice/injustice and equality/inequality are experienced. By applying modernist principles represented by the UDHR, within a postcolonial framework that seeks to decolonise power struggles and asymmetrical power relations, Osler seeks to present core human rights concepts as a way of seeing the world "that does not privilege any one identity but that stresses our common humanity" (Osler, 2016, p. 44). Osler (2014, 2016) also draws on the theory of intersectionality (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 1989) to examine the inter-weaving complexities of human rights abuses across time and cultural contexts. Apartheid and slavery, for example, are not just about race; they are about forms of dominance and repression underpinned by intersecting factors; they represent homophobia, the subordination of women, including white women, and non-recognition of members of society by the dominant and typically privileged culture. An intersectional lens justifies the concept of universality inherent in the UDHR; it not only makes visible the differences between individual lived experiences of inequality and injustice irrespective of a shared national identity, but it also reinforces the need for reciprocity and solidarity. The universality of

human rights should not be used to homogenise the human being. Instead, it is a statement about recognition of multiple identities within social categories; universality is about the interconnections of place and shared responsibility for recognised forms of vulnerability that are part of lived human realities, irrespective of where these take place.

Osler and Starkey's (2010, p. 47) diagrammatic interpretation of the 1948 UDHR (see Figure 3) illustrates these interconnections in relation to four cosmopolitan principles: solidarity, reciprocity, indivisibility and universality. The diagram illustrates how the goal of justice and peace is underpinned by the entitlement of all citizens to equal dignity, security, equality of rights, and democratic practices that safeguard fundamental freedoms. The framework also shows that entitlement depends on participation and the exercise of citizenship rights to achieve effective democratic practice. In this sense, human rights represent the interplay between entitlements and responsibilities in that they depend on the accountability of others and ourselves. Participation in the context of citizenship represents one dimension of a broader set of rights and freedoms, which are determined by their impact on the human rights of others. References to equality, security, and dignity, apply to all human beings and not only those who are in a position to claim their rights or who hold a recognised and/or accepted status in society. Recognition of our mutual status as members of a shared humanity generates a moral responsibility to act to challenge human vulnerability. The diagrammatic interpretation acts as a reminder that human rights cannot be isolated from each other and treated as discrete items on a menu; they represent the indivisible nature of human vulnerability. This vulnerability applies to all human beings, irrespective of citizenship status and national boundaries.



**Figure 3: The core concepts of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Osler and Starkey, 2010)**

The four cosmopolitan principles that hold the UDHR together also suggest that there is a need for critical consciousness when engaging with human rights. Moral responsibility requires the support of legal and political mechanisms in order to increase the potential of human rights as tools to create socially just societies: “Thinking of rights as tools, rather than as abstract moral imperatives, would encourage us to consider alternative approaches to humanitarianism” (Thompson Ford, 2011, p. 121). In this sense, the legal and political dimensions of human rights, which derive from a moral search to address human vulnerability (Osler, 2016, Ch. 2; Kirchsclaeger, 2017) can be understood in terms of a political system created by humans to protect humans. Justice lies at the core of Osler and Starkey’s (2010, p. 47) diagrammatic interpretation of the 1948 UDHR (see Figure 3). The suggestion is that a political system that supports human rights, seeks justice.

Nussbaum (1997a), however, finds the lack of conceptual and theoretical clarity of rights a serious concern when it comes to addressing social injustice. Her work on justice is an important reminder that human rights need to be explained in relation to social justice frameworks in order to work towards greater conceptual and theoretical clarity.

## 2.3 Human rights in relation to social justice

Social justice is a contested term (Robeyns, 2017; Ryan, 2012; Slee, 2011). While there appears to be a general consensus that the term implies notions of liberties and equalities, fairness, and welfare (Ryan, 2012), as with human rights, it is an ambiguous concept that is not always clearly defined (Grant & Agosto, 2008; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009).

John Rawls' (1999) theory of justice is presented as a liberal political conception that calls for just institutions and a democratic society as a necessary background condition. He argues that in a socially just society, free and equal citizens are living in a fair system of cooperation. Cooperation is a democratic process in which basic liberties create an overlapping consensus between reasonable people with different moral, political, and religious backgrounds (Rawls, 1999). The social contract between the state and individuals aims to ensure fair opportunities to certain primary goods and resources. These include the basic liberties of thought and conscience; freedom of movement and choice of occupation; powers and prerogatives of offices of responsibility; income and wealth; and the social basis of self-respect (Rawls, 1999). Human wellbeing is based on ensuring fairness to, and reciprocity between, members who are understood as free equals living in a sociopolitical process controlled by just institutions.

Rawls' theory of justice has been critiqued for its emphasis on the role of the state as guarantor of rights in democratic societies (Ingiyimbere, 2017; Sen, 2010). It has been argued that this is at the expense of commitment to the moral dimension of distributive equality where the wellbeing of all persons is the most important concern. Sen (2010) argues that Rawls' distribution of primary goods is insufficient if we do not consider how effectively people are able to use these goods to pursue their ends. Justice understood in terms of equal distribution of resources fails to recognise the variations in people's needs for resources related to gender, physical and mental disability, socioeconomic status, amongst other social variables. Sen (2001, 2004, 2005, 2010) and Nussbaum (1997a, 2011) use capabilities to theorise social justice. Rather than understanding social justice in terms of the distribution of resources by just institutions as representative of the just society, they argue for a focus on "what actually happens in the world" (p. 8), and not the justness of underlying institutions (National Pro Bono Resource Centre, 2011, p.8):

The effectiveness of government action to improve social justice is judged according to an individual's capability to do things he

or she values and the freedom of individuals to choose between different ways of leading their lives. (National Pro Bono Resource Centre, 2011, p.8)

Additional critiques of justice theories include the failure to address justice concerns outside of national borders and cosmopolitanism perspectives based on assumptions about human rationality, independence, and self-sufficiency (O'Neill, 2003). Nussbaum (2002) argues that even when justice theories focus on people's lives and how distribution of resources improves lives, they may fail to take into consideration how social and economic conditions impinge on an assessment of quality of life (Nussbaum, 2002). Uncritical perceptions of justice risk, what Sen refers to as, adaptive preferences; people's capacity to accept injustice because they have internalised a sense of their unequal worth (Sen, 2010). In order for a theory of justice to support the cosmopolitan nature of human rights, it seems to require "an account of cosmopolitan justice that neither fails to appreciate the vulnerabilities of the vulnerable nor connives with the powers of the powerful" (O'Neill, 2003, p. 2). The suggestion seems to be that accounts of justice therefore require a relational space where vulnerabilities and imbalances of power are actively and critically scrutinised.

Sen (2001, 2004, 2005, 2010) and Nussbaum (1997a, 2011) propose the capabilities theory as a form of social justice based on their work in international development contexts. They argue for a relational space rather than conceptions of justice limited to distribution of resources or subjective preferences of what constitutes a life worth living. Instead of asking "How satisfied is person A?" or "How much in the way of resources does A command?" the question related to capabilities becomes: "What is A actually able to do and to be?" (Nussbaum, 1997a, p. 285). The focus on action is important as it challenges the notion of the passive human being waiting for the state to ensure justice. A capabilities approach to social justice seeks to find out if people have the opportunities to function. This allows for examination of facilitating and constraining factors.

The key idea of the capability approach is that social arrangements should aim to expand people's capability or substantive freedom, to promote or achieve functioning's important to them (Sen, 2001). This understanding of justice addresses the overconcentration on the means or the primary goods available to achieve what a person values (Sen, 2004). Two people can have the same set of means but not the same substantive freedom (the opportunities) to pursue what they value. However, the concept of pursuing what a person values can be problematic because of adapted preferences;

people come to accept vulnerability as a permanent and accepted state because of internalised oppression that allows the powerful to maintain positions of power (Nussbaum, 2011).

Nussbaum (1997a, 2002, 2011) agrees with Sen's concept of a capability as a real possibility or opportunity to perform certain actions; however, she argues that it is essential to define what these actions are in order to build a minimum threshold of justice. Nussbaum specifies a list of capabilities that she presents as a political and moral conception of social justice. These are:

1. Life. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely.
2. Bodily health. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; being adequately nourished; being able to have adequate shelter.
3. Bodily integrity. Being able to move freely from place to place; being able to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction
4. Senses, imagination, thought. Being able to use the senses; being able to imagine, to think, and to reason--and to do these things in a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education; being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing, and producing expressive works and events of one's own choice . . . ; being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech and freedom of religious exercise; being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain
5. Emotions. Being able to have attachments to things and persons outside ourselves; being able to love those who love and care for us; being able to grieve at their absence, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger; not having one's emotional developing blighted by fear or anxiety.
6. Practical reason. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life. (This entails protection for liberty of conscience.)
7. Affiliation. Being able to live for and in relation to others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; being able to imagine the situation of another

and to have compassion for that situation; having the capability for both justice and friendship. Being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others.

8. Other species. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
9. Play. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
10. Control over one's environment. (A) Political: being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the rights of political participation, free speech, and freedom of association. (B) Material: being able to hold property (both land and movable goods); having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 33-34).

Nussbaum argues that if a crucial aim of a theory of justice is to promote some desired state, there is a need for a minimum level of capability for a just society. This ensures that adapted preferences are challenged. The ten capabilities that she lists act as a minimum threshold for human dignity; they are what make us truly human (Nussbaum, 2002). Human dignity, therefore, becomes not about what has been achieved but about what is effectively possible - in other words, the freedom to do (freedom and agency) and be (mental and physical states) the person you want to be (Robeyns, 2003, 2017). Nussbaum's ten central capabilities represent "a commitment to content that offers a threshold level of fundamental entitlements required by the notion of social justice and that develop human dignity" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 34).

The capabilities theory understood as a social justice theory offers human rights an opportunity to be embedded in a context of lived realities represented by the relationship between vulnerabilities and power, with universal application. Nussbaum's list has been critiqued as representing elite and paternalistic western liberalism and not based on empirical data (Okin, 2003). Nussbaum defends her list as cross-cultural in that she claims it offers a minimum threshold of human dignity that is flexible enough to allow for democratic deliberation and thick enough to allow for decision-making on normative standards of human wellbeing that transcend national borders (Nussbaum, 2002). For Nussbaum, justice represents a universal account of human needs while emphasising the essential role of knowledge of local circumstance:

We should not confine our thinking to our own sphere—that in making choices in both political and economic matters we should most seriously consider the right of other human beings to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and work to acquire the knowledge that will enable us to deliberate well about those rights. (Nussbaum, 1994, section 3(3), para. 3)

In defence of Nussbaum's normative list, O'Neill (2003) argues that it represents norms for all in the form of capabilities that can be enacted by all without being unjust to anyone. As O'Neill explains:

The capabilities that all can have, do not therefore include capabilities for injury, oppression, manipulation, coercion, deceit, and the like. If none of these capabilities can be justly enjoyed, then institutions which make some vulnerable to others will be unjust. (p. 8)

Both Sen and Nussbaum have acknowledged the relationship between capabilities and human rights (Nussbaum, 1997a, 2002; Sen, 2004, 2005). The synergy between the two is influenced by the fact that both are widely endorsed ethical frameworks; they share an underlying motivation to protect and enhance human freedoms; they are both applied to address global and domestic justice concerns; they are both concerned with developing links between theory and practice; and both discourses are strongly interdisciplinary in nature (Robeyns, 2017, p. 160). Nussbaum's list, in particular, supports the universal application of ensuring human wellbeing as a moral and political claim that arguably manages to avoid both cultural imperialism and relativism. The focus on substantive freedom rejects the notion of absolute freedoms in that freedoms and functionings are informed by practical reasoning, number six on Nussbaum's list. Nussbaum presents practical reasoning as a core capability along with affiliation, number seven on the list. These two capabilities suggest active and deliberate decision-making in relation to and with others to inform what a person values in response to their particular circumstances. These circumstances differ and it is these differences that the capabilities approach aims to address by developing basic innate capabilities and examining the extent to which external conditions support functionings:

It is not sufficient to produce good internal states of readiness to act. It is necessary, as well, to prepare the material and



institutional environment so that people are actually able to function. (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 132)

Practical reasoning and affiliation represent key educational components; they suggest the need for people to be actively and critically conscious of their circumstances and the role of the state as regards these circumstances. They suggest an education approach that protects diversity and pluralism through empowerment rather than “dragooning them into a total mode of life” (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 133). I present the capabilities approach as a useful justice framework for human rights in that it ensures human rights are understood as more than entitlements with states acting as duty-bearers and individuals as rights-holders. When contextualised in a capabilities framework, rights are understood as tools to ensure accountability towards the principle of vulnerability (Kirchschlaeger, 2014): “Limiting vulnerability is the other face of limiting capabilities whose ‘ideal’ development would damage or undercut others’ capabilities” (O’Neill, 2003, p. 10). This sentiment reflects the human rights notion that freedoms are not absolute. The capabilities provide human rights with an opportunity to act as an educative process that locates discussions on justice and rights in the context of lived reality; they emphasise the cosmopolitan nature of human rights in that the focus on the human life draws attention to wellbeing as a universal concept while dependent on the interconnections between social, economic, cultural, and political circumstances of the individual in particular contexts. This requires a relational space to ensure human wellbeing.

The capabilities approach therefore has much to say about the type of education needed to secure social justice. This has implications for understandings of HRE, and in particular how it can support the realisation of capabilities to ensure human wellbeing.

## **2.4 The evolution of Human Rights Education**

Although HRE is considered a relatively new field of education when aligned with the work of the United Nations, there are a number of important antecedents. Keet (2015) has identified four evolutionary HRE periods. The first, pre-1948 phase, considers the roots of HRE in the form of moral education evident in all the major educational theories, from Plato to Dewey and compassion-based moral education reflected in African, Greek, and Oriental wisdom; the second phase, 1948 to 1994, represents the formalisation of HRE as an educational effort. This phase aimed to legitimise human rights as universal normative standards; the third phase (1995 to

2010) is the beginning of the United Nations Decade for HRE (A/RES/49/194, 1995–2004) when HRE was presented as an internationally recognised legitimate and justifiable pedagogy. The fourth and current phases, according to Keet (2015), started with the adoption of the 2011 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (UNDHRET) and continues today with the emergence of what he refers to as Critical Human Rights Education (CHRE). Keet's (2015) use of phases is problematic for a number of reasons, including the suggestion that critical HRE is a recent phenomenon, as I now discuss.

Keet's reference to the second phase between 1948 and 1994 marks the start of the modern human rights movement (Bajaj, 2011b), which emerged in response to the drafting of the UDHR. During this period, UNESCO's work was significant in terms of promoting the need for education aimed at the advancement of justice, freedom, human rights and peace (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1974). The UNESCO Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (UNESCO EIU) was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference (GC) in 1974 (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1974). This document is a legal instrument specifically directed at peace and human rights in education, and continues to represent current human rights concerns today (Savolainen & Torney-Purta, 2011). The document presents a powerful statement about the gaps between ideals, declared intentions and reality as well as a critique of UNESCO's and member states' role as regards impact and ensuring the needs and aspirations of educational recipients are met. The document further draws attention to the purpose of HRE, and in particular its transformative intentions.

## **2.5 Conceptualising transformative education**

Keet's use of phases not only fails to recognise the significant role of international agencies in formalising and legitimising HRE much earlier than he suggests, but also downplays the significance of the definition of education by the UNESCO EIU. The UNESCO EIU places emphasis on international perspectives and inter-cultural understanding. Article 18 is dedicated to education based on the "study of the major problems of mankind":

Education should be directed both towards the eradication of conditions which perpetuate and aggravate major problems affecting human survival and well-being — inequality,

injustice, international relations based on the use of force — and towards measures of international co-operation likely to help solve them. (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1974 art. 18)

Given that it is my intention to explore how teachers' stories inform and extend understandings of transformative HRE, and the possibilities for transformative HRE in formal schooling, it is important to discuss how I understand and use the term in this thesis. The goal of education suggested in article 18 above is the eradication of conditions that affect human survival and wellbeing. If we accept that the goal of HRE is to ensure human rights through the development of human rights cultures that ensure protection, prevention and equitable participation, the suggestion is that education aims at transforming practices, processes, systems and structures that constrain such a culture. Education aimed at transforming conditions to ensure social justice requires a political and critical stance.

During the 70's and 80's, all over the world, forms of HRE were being used to challenge oppressive governments, systems and structures. In her study on the global movement for HRE, Flowers (2015) illustrates how human rights activists, in particular in Latin America, apply Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996) to generate social and political transformation. Critical pedagogy has been used in both popular and formal education to foster resistance to autocratic rule and restore democracy. What is important about Flowers' (2015) global review is the suggestion that both bottom up and topdown initiatives are required to sustain transformative conceptualisation of HRE. By this Flowers refers to cooperation between grassroots and government HRE initiatives. Keet's reference to critical HRE as a new movement too easily dismisses the work of earlier grassroots initiatives fighting against racism, gender inequalities and other discriminatory practices, as well as international organisations' attempts at ensuring HRE policy and practice. The concept of transformative education understood as generating change to ensure human wellbeing needs to engage with both bottom up and topdown responses to ensuring human rights. This not only critically sustains HRE as a global movement in both formal and nonformal spheres but also begs the important question why earlier efforts by international agencies had little impact. I return to my use of the term transformative pedagogy in section 2.7 where I address different definitions of HRE. In the next section, I look at the role of international organisations in implementing and monitoring HRE to support claims that

international organisations play a crucial role in sustaining HRE as a global movement in both formal and nonformal spheres.

## **2.6 The role of international organisations in the implementation and monitoring of Human Rights Education**

At the European level, as early as 1985, the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation R (85) 7 to the Member States of the Council of Europe (CoE) focused on teaching and learning about human rights in schools (Council of Europe, 1985). The work of the CoE has played a significant role in promoting education for democratic citizenship and HRE in school systems. In 2010, the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDCHRE) was adopted (Council of Europe, 2010). The EDCHRE is non-binding. However, it provides a framework that represents a common commitment to democratic citizenship and HRE. The Charter is used to conduct evaluations of achievement against set priorities and competences every five years; the most recent report was compiled in 2016 (Council of Europe, 2017a).

The World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna in 1993, reaffirmed the essential role of HRE, training, and public information in the promotion of human rights. As stated in the Vienna Declaration, "states are duty-bound...(to ensure that human rights) should be integrated at the national as well as international levels" (Osler & Starkey, 2010, p. 121). This reaffirmation resulted in the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education, spanning the period 1 January 1995 to 31 December 2004, which developed into the World Programme for Human Rights Education, declared by the General Assembly on 10 December 2004, as an ongoing initiative (2005-ongoing) (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, n.d. -a). At the international level, the United Nations Human Rights Council oversees the monitoring of the World Programme for Human Rights Education with a mid-term and final report for each phase of the programme.

National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) also play an important role in the promotion of HRE at the country level. They represent independent institutions with the responsibility to protect and monitor human rights in a given country. As of 26 January 2018, 77 NHRIs had been accredited by the Global Alliance of Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), in compliance with what is referred to as the Paris Principles (Global Alliance of Human Rights Institutions, 2018). The Paris Principles represent key evaluation criteria for

NHRIs as laid out by the General Assembly of the UN in a meeting held in 1993 (United Nations, 1993). According to the Paris principles, NHRIs should be autonomous and independent. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, under Sustainable Development Goal 16 on strong institutions, includes an indicator for NHRIs compliant with the Paris Principles (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). Yet a report on the status of roles of NHRI in the EU, North Macedonia and the United Kingdom, suggests unnecessary constraints are placed on NHRIs by governments and parliaments, which do not allow them to do their job in line with the principles (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2020).

Interagency networks provide a degree of accountability as regards monitoring and assessment of HRE progress at national levels. Given that references to human rights has increased significantly in educational policy documents (Cardenas, 2005; Ramirez et al., 2007; Ramirez & Suárez, 2004; Tibbitts & Kirchsclaeger, 2010), their role becomes important. Processes of globalisation can explain the increase in references to human rights in educational policy since 1990 (Ramirez & Suárez, 2004). It is also however a direct response to human rights violations in post-conflict countries (Bajaj, 2011b; Cardenas, 2005; Flowers, 2015; Tibbitts, 2017; Tibbitts & Kirchsclaeger, 2010). Cardenas (2005) suggests that transnational advocacy networks have had a significant influence on states in terms of applying pressure to endorse human rights norms including HRE. Whilst international interagency networks such as those set up by the UN and the CoE can exert top-down pressure, domestic NGOs and advocacy groups are needed to exert bottom-up pressure to guarantee HRE as a state goal. NHRIs can potentially play an important role in coordinating these initiatives.

International and grassroots initiatives to promote human rights through education have culminated in the 2011 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training (UNDHRET) (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011). UNDHRET represents the support of a wide array of stakeholders, including governments, national human rights institutions, civil society organisations, academics, and international organisations (Gerber, 2011). The declaration emphasises state obligation to monitor and report on its provision of HRE (Bajaj, 2017). Although not a legally binding document, UNDHRET reaffirms the legal obligation to the right to HRE articulated in Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966) and Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). A number

of legal documents refer to education as a universal and inalienable right to protect the rights of vulnerable members of the human community who have historically been marginalised – see, for example, article 5 of the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1965); and article 4 of the 1979 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979). Some legal documents refer explicitly to HRE as an independent right. These include article 10 of the 1984 Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984). This article not only places a specific focus on the role of education in the prohibition against torture but also expands the field of education to training for civil servants and people in positions of state-sanctioned authority (Kirchschlaeger, 2017). References to the responsibility of the state to provide training to civil servants, including teachers, is made in a number of legal documents, including the 2011 UNDHRET (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011). Signatories to these legal documents have agreed to a set of universal principles that include recognition of the right to HRE and accountability to ensure implementation and monitoring of HRE.

The implication of international commitments is that implementation and monitoring of HRE at the formal school level are a state responsibility. However, it is also the responsibility of multiple stakeholders. Although research suggests that inadequate funding and weak cooperation with non-state actors is a major constraint to HRE (Cardenas, 2005), the way that HRE is understood will also have implications for its transformative potential, as I now discuss.

## **2.7 Defining Human Rights Education**

### **2.7.1 The United Nations definition**

The official definition of HRE in the UNDHRET is presented under article 2:

Human rights education and training encompasses:

1. Education *about* human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection.

2. Education *through* human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners.
3. Education *for* human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others. (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011)

These three dimensions reflect a focus on human rights content, including knowledge on human rights instruments and policies; on the development of sociomoral and interpersonal skills; and on transformative action. If we refer back to the capabilities approach as a useful social justice frame for human rights, in the context of social justice education, emphasis on knowledge (mental and physical states of being) and action (the freedom and agency to do) shares similarities with North's (2008) depiction of knowledge and action as one of three intersecting spheres of social justice education. In her critical examination of current literature on social justice education, North (2008) conceptualises the tensions and contradictions amongst different social justice education concepts, which are redistribution and recognition, macro- and micro- level purposes and knowledge and action. As she points out, a number of scholars associate knowledge of social injustice with actively transforming social injustices. This implies that knowledge and action need to be understood as core components of social justice education, as reflected in the United Nations definition of learning *about, through and for* human rights.

While it can be argued that other forms of social justice, such as multicultural education, share these dimensions, an HRE focus on content and process reflects the need to distinguish between HRE as the human right to an education and HRE as being educated about human rights issues (Cardenas, 2005). HRE explicitly aims to ensure the broad spectrum of human rights and is understood as a human right in its own right. This is particularly important when comparing the goals of other social justice oriented approaches such as democratic, citizenship, inclusive, and multicultural education common in Iceland with those of HRE. Despite diverse models and methodologies, which Spreen et al. (2020) refer to as a testament to its relevance, HRE should a) make explicit the social justice frame that shapes and informs the educational response; b) provide a cosmopolitan and critical point of reference as regards the human in the concept of the human being, whose wellbeing it seeks to protect; c) address human wellbeing inside and

outside of the school context; d) understand human wellbeing in terms of the social, cultural, economic, and political and the intersections of these; and e) offer moral, political, and legal justification to challenge injustice, including systemic injustice.

HRE shares the pursuit of social justice with the aforementioned and related fields of education. While these diverse fields of education, including HRE, may choose different agendas or levels of critical engagement with social justice, even within each single field, it is important that they are understood as connected, and attempts should be made to better support each other. As stated in chapter one, my reason for focusing on HRE is its absence in scholarly work and educational practice in Iceland, despite appearing in policy. My intention is not to add a competing discourse but to raise awareness of what HRE can contribute to the existing social justice field in Iceland. HRE shares an interest in challenging and taking action against multiple forms of discrimination, exclusion and prejudice. Indeed, forms of HRE share certain priorities with other fields of education, including “personal empowerment, nation-building, democratic participation, and conflict resolution” (Cardenas, 2005, p. 366). However, the core goal is the realisation of human rights and promotion of a culture of human rights, in schools and broader society, through education *about*, *through* and *for* human rights. Article two of UNDHRET states:

Human rights education and training comprise all educational, training, information, awareness-raising and learning activities aimed at promoting universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and thus contributing, inter alia, to the prevention of human rights violations and abuses by providing persons with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviours, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights. (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011)

Gerber (2011) acknowledges that the UNDHRET allows for the diverse intentions of the multiple stakeholders involved in the process of drafting the document, including government, NGO, and school representatives; UNDHRET focuses on prevention of human rights violations under article 4 and explicitly refers to addressing root causes such as discrimination, racism, hatred, and harmful attitudes and practices; and it addresses the indivisibility of human rights challenging narrow conceptions that focus on civil and



political rights at the expense of social, economic, and cultural rights (Gerber, 2011). Tibbitts (2017) suggests that HRE linked to economic and community development tends to be common in developing countries while post-totalitarian or authoritarian countries are more likely to address civil and political rights. In post-conflict societies, HRE is also often aimed at conflict resolution with an emphasis on learning to live together (Osler & Yahya, 2013). In established democracies, HRE attracts less attention as a pedagogy that aims for systemic change and increased accountability. It is instead understood in terms of addressing specific human rights concerns such as immigrant rights; women's rights; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transsexual people's (LGBT) rights; the rights of people with disabilities; and refugee rights (Tibbitts, 2017).

These contextual interpretations of HRE have led to critiques of the UNDHRET. Gerber (2011) argues that although the UNDHRET discusses root causes of human rights violations associated with discrimination based on socially constructed categories, it fails to reference vulnerable groups or individuals within certain groups who are at risk of discrimination (Gerber, 2011). The vague language used to explain the right to HRE as a normative claim weakens the potential of HRE as an accountability mechanism (Gerber, 2011). It is important to remember that the UNDHRET is not legally binding and works to "invite" member states to address HRE and training, a point I return to in chapter three. Gerber points to the use of "tolerance" in the document arguing that it encourages HRE approaches that reflect a passive acceptance of an unjust status quo. Gerber's critiques illustrate the need to critically engage with definitions of HRE to avoid assumptions about what it can realistically achieve or to challenge its use to foster compliance with the status quo. This is where understanding HRE in relation to social justice and capabilities becomes important; it allows us to identify ways in which different models of HRE can constrain or develop the capabilities needed to protect against human vulnerability.

### **2.7.2 Different models of Human Rights Education**

Education stakeholders have approached human rights from multiple perspectives and with varying agendas (Flowers, 2004, 2015; Tibbitts, 2002, 2012, 2017; Tibbitts & Kirchsclaeger, 2010). Flowers (2004) categorises HRE into three main types: governmental organisation approaches, nongovernment organisation (NGO) approaches, and academic approaches. She argues that governmental organisations tend to focus on goals and outcomes that preserve social order and the state. The focus is on passive

knowledge of national and international legal instruments, and emphasis on rights of citizens and duties of the state. In contrast, NGOs have tended to define HRE in terms of social change (Flowers, 2004). Violations are addressed and action to demand or claim rights that have been denied is encouraged. This approach reflects transformative HRE models (Tibbitts, 2017), typically associated with critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996; Giroux, 2010; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007):

The overlap between critical pedagogy and education for human rights is clear, for a central component of the latter is that learners are not only able to recognise injustice, inequality or situations of human indignity, but are also empowered to take action to promote and defend these, and other, human rights issues. (Struthers, 2017, p. 5)

The transformative nature of HRE is therefore dependent on a combination of education *about*, *through* and *for* human rights. The academic approach emphasises moral actions and duties and the development of sociomoral and interpersonal skills to respond to ethical concerns (Flowers, 2004), suggesting education *through* human rights. Tibbitts (2017) draws on extensive study and reflexive praxis of teaching and learning settings globally, including her own, to propose three HRE models: the values and awareness/socialization model, the accountability/professional development model and the activism/transformation model (Tibbitts, 2002, 2017). In her most recent work on these models, Tibbitts (2017) proposes four HRE methodologies applicable to each of the three models. These are: didactic methodologies understood as the teaching and learning of content with minimal attention paid to critical reflection; participatory/interactive methodologies that promote student-centred learning and critical thinking but not necessarily student agency; empowerment methodologies that foster agency to recognise causes of oppression and ways to influence social change; and transformative methodologies that act as an extension of instrumental empowerment; agency is explicitly aimed at both personal and social transformation in line with Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996). Critical pedagogy and the use of typologies are not distinct to HRE. Tibbitts' models reflect the distinctions made by multicultural education scholars who have identified different typologies that range from conservative/assimilationist approaches to critical multicultural education that examines social justice

and promotes social action (see Gorski, 2009; Grant & Sleeter, 2006; Jenks & Kanipol, 2001).

Tibbitts' work, based on hypothesis rather than empirical studies, suggests that the transformative conceptualisation of HRE is challenged by formal school systems where HRE is more closely aligned with "socialization towards prosocial behaviour" (Tibbitts, 2017, p. 86). She argues that this is evident in schools where HRE reflects values and awareness/socialization and participatory/interactive models, which fail to foster agency towards instrumental or intrinsic empowerment. In the context of this thesis, HRE as a transformative pedagogy requires learning *about*, *through* and *for* human rights with the explicit intention of generating change to ensure human wellbeing. This has certain implications as regards the content and processes of learning. Where a pedagogical approach aims for preservation of a social order that is unjust to ensure stability and cohesion, it cannot be transformative. In this sense, preservative forms of HRE perpetuate injustices that transformative forms of HRE challenge and disrupt. It does this by applying Freirean critical pedagogy and consciousness raising, supported by the philosophical tradition of cosmopolitanism (Bajaj, 2017; Bajaj et al., 2016; Osler & Starkey, 2010; Osler, 2016; Tibbitts, 2017). Transformative HRE offers a potential tool to challenge compliance and blind acceptance of human rights and the neglect of accountability, in particular in countries considered paragons of democracy and justice (Osler, 2016).

A number of HRE scholars have raised concerns about the content and processes of HRE (Bajaj, 2011b; Keet, 2012; Tibbitts, 2002; Zembylas et al., 2015). They criticise HRE where "the focus is on the superficial knowledge of the history and key documents of human rights" (Zembylas et al. 2016, p.3). Keet (2015) suggests these concerns have led to an emerging form of critical human rights education (CHRE), which he argues, challenges normative HRE approaches that fail to acknowledge broader debates in the field of HRE. In an edited book by Zembylas and Keet (Zembylas & Keet, 2020), a number of HRE scholars present HRE from a position of criticality. These include Adami (2020); Bajaj (2020); Covell & Howe (2020); Coysh (2020); and Zembylas (2020). As previously stated, criticality in HRE is not new, in particular when understood in terms of Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996). Indeed, Keet's description of CHRE reflects Freire's concept of "dialogue" and "conscientization", the emancipatory educational process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action (Darder et al., 2009: p.13). As Keet (2015) explains, CHRE,

First, stands in a critical relationship with human rights universals; second, perpetually revisits the receivable categories of human rights praxes; third, advances a social-justice-oriented human rights practice; and fourth, emphasises human critiques to enrich human rights understanding. (Keet, 2015, p. 58)

Although Keet offers an interesting perspective informed by critical social theory and critical pedagogy, in particular the need for a critical approach to developing understandings of human rights, his work lacks empirical evidence to support his claims about declarationist approaches. His argument is that HRE in schools is typically about teaching human rights content in a way that situates human rights as a product of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Keet, 2015).

In the next section, I draw on empirical studies that support Tibbitts' claims about values awareness and socialisation as the dominant model in formal schools. These studies also suggest that it is not so much the declarationsist approach that impedes transformative HRE but lack of teacher knowledge on human rights and HRE. I suggest that teachers' lack of knowledge and lack of accountability, rather than over-emphasis on learning about human rights as universal truths imposed by the United Nations, represent the key challenges that require urgent attention.

## **2.8 Human Rights Education in formal school contexts: International and Nordic perspectives**

Formal education has a long association with the social, moral, and academic development of students to participate in society fully and actively (Meyer et al., 1992). Content and methodologies play a pivotal role in determining the nature of this participation. As Meyer et al. (1992) suggest, education has historically been used to support nation-state building. This has involved “transmitting narratives of the imagined national community” (Spreen & Monaghan, 2017, p. 291) that students belong to and take part in. HRE has not escaped this political and partisan interpretation. During the cold war some states saw the civil and political rights aspect of HRE as a threat to one-party rule. Other states regarded exposure of social and economic rights violations as a threat to social cohesion, including in stable democracies (Flowers, 2015). In this section, I have selected literature that focuses on issues of accountability for HRE and teacher knowledge of human rights and HRE in international settings with an emphasis on the Nordic countries. In section 2.8.1, I draw on the work of HRE scholars and national level agencies

engaged in comprehensive reviews of HRE policy and practice. In section 2.8.2, my choice of literature was informed by scholarly work on HRE. While relatively new and small, this scholarly body is represented by a growing number of renowned international HRE scholars who present their work in edited books or in peer-reviewed journals, specifically on HRE. Given my focus on Iceland, I searched for empirical studies conducted in Europe and the Nordic region, due to shared sociopolitical conditions and ideological and cultural characteristics that influence the formal education system.

### **2.8.1 Accountability mechanisms**

Countries are obligated to include human rights in education on the basis of domestic and international human rights legal commitments (Gerber, 2011). However, the interplay between the dual processes of globalisation and localisation is not straightforward (Tomaševski, 2001). National governments are ultimately responsible to ensure that education addresses human rights in line with domestic laws on the orientation and purpose of education. National reports on the state of HRE can provide an important starting point to tease out the challenges of addressing human rights in formal schools. The use of national reports compiled by individual states and submitted to regional and international institutions provide important insights into the status of HRE in a given country.

An important finding from the 2016 survey on the state of education for democratic citizenship and human rights education (EDC/HRE) in Europe (Council of Europe, 2017b) is the substantial differences in responses between government and civil society organisations, with the former presenting a more optimistic picture of the state of EDC/HRE. Ninety-three percent of government respondents reported the existence of measures or activities to promote EDC/HRE in comparison with 30% of civil society respondents. This suggests that interpretations of what constitutes HRE differ. This becomes a problem when these interpretations go unexplored, allowing preservative HRE models to go uncritiqued. The survey also points to a lack of coordination and collaboration at country level. This finding is supported at the international level. The final evaluation report of the first phase of the United Nations World Programme for Human Rights Education was based on 76 responses out of 192 member states (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, n.d. -c). The national evaluation reports were compiled either by Ministries of Education, or by other government offices dealing with external affairs, human rights, finance, and justice. Non-governmental organisations and other civil society

groups were rarely involved and secondary sources were used to assess the HRE context of 57 countries that did not respond to the questionnaires (United Nations, 2010). These findings are reflected in subsequent reports on the United Nations World Programme for Human Rights Education (United Nations, 2015, 2017). They raise questions about the role of government in ensuring accountability for HRE and the implications as regards the evident disparities between rhetoric and HRE practice in schools (Bajaj et al., 2016; Gerber, 2008; Osler, 2016).

Examining HRE in the context of Nordic countries with positive human rights records reveals a number of tensions and ambiguities that exist between national values and human rights values (Osler, 2015, 2016). Although Nordic countries do not constitute a political entity, they have many commonalities related to culture, social structure, and history that influence the way HRE is understood and implemented (Osler, 2015, 2016). The Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, are all signatories to both non-legally and legally binding international human rights declarations and conventions, including those that address the right to HRE. They therefore all have a legal obligation to ensure the right to HRE both from an international and domestic law perspective. Norway was the only Nordic country to respond to the questionnaire for the evaluation of the first phase of the World Programme, although Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Iceland were included in the secondary data collection process (United Nations, 2010). In the evaluation of the second phase of the Programme, only Sweden features in the report (United Nations, 2015), and in the mid-term report for the third phase, only Denmark and Finland participated in the data collection process (United Nations, 2017). Denmark, Finland, and Norway have NHRIs that are fully accredited by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) (Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, n.d). The status of Sweden is registered as partially compliant with the Paris Principles and Iceland currently has the status of no application for accreditation (Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, n.d).

In Denmark, The Danish Institute for Human Rights acts as the NHRI. The institute conducted a comprehensive survey on the state of HRE in primary and lower secondary schools (Decara, 2013) reporting that it is arbitrary whether pupils in primary and lower secondary schools in Denmark learn about human rights. The mid-term report submitted by the Danish Institute for Human Rights on the third phase of the World Programme suggests that the weak status of HRE has not changed (Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2017). The report states that the international framework for HRE is not a focus area for the Danish Government. This claim is based on scarce

reporting and weak implementation strategies in response to the World Programme and the absence of a national action plan on HRE for Denmark.

In the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted in June 1993, the World Conference on Human Rights recommended to States to consider the desirability of drawing up a national action plan identifying steps whereby States would improve the promotion and protection of human rights (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, n.d. - d). Finland's 2017-2019 national action plan on fundamental and human rights included a section on HRE (Ministry of Justice Finland, 2017). A comprehensive national baseline study on HRE, conducted in 2014 by the Finnish Human Rights Centre (Finnish Human Rights Centre, 2014), recommended that the government draft a separate action plan for HRE to ensure systematic and coordinated implementation and training across the whole education system. The recommendation was made in response to weak implementation characterised by inconsistent practices, narrow content, and a weak state response. Non-governmental organisations, individual education providers, and teachers currently bear the responsibility for the implementation of HRE and training in Finland (Ministry of Justice Finland, 2017). The Finnish Human Rights Centre has a Human Rights Delegation, comprising 20 to 40 members appointed by the Parliamentary Ombudsman for a four-year term. The Delegation functions as the national cooperative body for fundamental and human rights actors (Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, n.d).

Sweden also included HRE as a key focus area in its 2006-2009 national action plan for human rights (Summary of the Swedish government communication, 2005). A recommendation made by the Human Rights Council in response to Sweden's performance during the second phase of the World Programme was to establish an independent NHRI. Sweden currently has an Equality Ombudsman, which is a government agency working on behalf of the Swedish parliament and government to promote equal rights and opportunities and to combat discrimination (Diskriminerings ombudsmannen, 2020).

HRE is evident in the 1999 Norwegian Human Rights Act, which incorporates international conventions as taking precedence over domestic legislation (The World Law Guide, n.d.). In 2014 when Norway celebrated its 200th anniversary of independence, amendments to the 1814 constitution included the constitutional right to HRE (Vesterdal, 2016). However, Vesterdal's study suggests a lack of research, knowledge, and an overview of what is going on in Norwegian schools when it comes to HRE (Vesterdal, 2016). Strømme Lile (2019) conducted an analysis of the Norwegian state's

commitment and efforts to realise HRE. The conclusions drawn in this study are that despite Norway's reputation as a country with strong commitments to addressing human rights concerns overseas, its commitment to HRE at the country level is affected by assumptions that "human rights are seen as part of Norwegian values, and thus HRE is not seen as necessary in itself – or, more accurately, promoting Norwegian values is seen as the same as HRE" (p. 160). Vesterdal's (2019) qualitative analysis of Norwegian policy documents and reports shares these findings; he argues that HRE acts as political currency in its foreign policy while being understood as a core component of Norwegian national identity.

The Nordic countries provide an interesting context, not least because of their reputation as stable democracies grounded on values associated with human rights. Nordic welfare states with globalised capitalist economies cannot assume to be socially just because of their human rights rhetoric (Kirchschlaeger, 2017; Osler, 2015, 2016). Gullestad (2002) argues that equality conceived as what she refers to as 'imagined sameness' in Nordic countries, has resulted in "a growing ethnification of national identity" (p. 1). Depending on international organisations such as the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner to ensure accountability for HRE in national contexts is problematic, suggesting the need for autonomous NHRIs. They represent independent institutions with the responsibility to protect and monitor human rights in a given country. In this respect, they increase accountability to respond to regional and international HRE monitoring mechanisms about ad hoc training initiatives and inadequate evaluation and follow-up training for teachers. The role of NHRIs in Denmark and Finland has led to informative surveys that have highlighted the need for local responses to HRE, including the need for increased attention paid to preparing teachers to work with HRE, as is now discussed.

### **2.8.2 Teachers' knowledge of human rights and Human Rights Education**

Teachers are key to successful HRE implementation given that the human rights practices of educators in schools will inevitably impact on learners' responses to human rights (Bajaj, 2011a, 2011b; Flowers et al., 2000; Fritzsche & Tibbitts, 2006; Gerber, 2013; Osler & Starkey, 2010; Tibbitts, 2002, 2017; Zembylas, 2016). Empirical studies suggest that teachers have difficulties in defining and explaining what human rights are (Vesterdal, 2016; Zembylas et al., 2016); teachers report limited and inadequate structural support (Cassidy et al., 2014; Müller, 2009; Rinaldi, 2017); HRE is insufficiently addressed as part of teacher education (Müller, 2009; Rinaldi, 2017; Zembylas et al., 2016), or is not an explicit component of school policy



and practice (Cassidy et al., 2014; Messina & Jacott, 2013; Müller, 2009; Rinaldi, 2017; Zembylas et al., 2016). A recent study in three secondary schools in England where students were engaged in deliberative discussion of controversial issues suggests the need to be more explicit about what constitutes human rights knowledge; that HRE requires the development of political understanding, which moves beyond individual empathy; that educators need to value the process of deliberative discussions and avoid a push for conclusive answers; and that students need support to draw on knowledge from a range of disciplines (Jerome et al., 2020). If these issues are not addressed, some students are able to engage in rights-based discussions with little knowledge and understanding of rights. Teachers' interpretation of human rights discourse can lead to inequitable experiences of HRE for students, creating what Robinson (2017) refers to as an ethical concern. According to research, teachers' limited knowledge of legal human rights frameworks and associated concepts constrains the potential for social change (Flowers, 2004; Osler & Starkey, 2010; Tibbitts, 2012). Five comprehensive studies on HRE in schools support these claims: a study on HRE in schools in Scotland (BEMIS, 2013), two Irish studies (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011; Waldron et al., 2011), and two Nordic studies (Decara, 2013; Finnish Human Rights Centre, 2014).

BEMIS was established in 2001 as the national umbrella body supporting the development of the Ethnic Minorities Voluntary Sector in Scotland. In 2013 it conducted a study to map HRE in schools in Scotland with a focus on mapping the extent of teachers' knowledge of HRE, and "their experience in incorporating this into classroom teaching" (BEMIS, 2013, p. 29). The BEMIS study suggests that teachers lack the confidence to work with human rights because of insufficient training. Seventy-eight percent of the 346 respondents had received no training in HRE. The findings from the Scottish study support previous European studies such as the one conducted by Müller (2009) on HRE in schools in Germany. His study included six UNESCO-supported schools and focused on teachers' ability to identify human rights articles and the source of teachers' human rights knowledge. Müller (2009) found that HRE is practised mainly by teachers personally motivated and committed to human rights. He argues that these teachers are not numerous enough to produce significant outcomes, even at UNESCO-supported schools. In his study, media and public events ranked first in terms of sources of knowledge on human rights. Ranked lowest were "the first phase of pedagogical training; student teaching internships; in-service days; and other continuing education opportunities for teaching staff" (Müller, 2009, p. 15).

The Danish Institute conducted a study in 2012 on HRE in primary and lower secondary schools (Decara, 2013; Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2013). The study consisted of a questionnaire survey with 445 respondents (a 37% response rate) and 16 focus group interviews with 50 teachers and 12 teacher trainers, representing schools and college universities from all over the country. A key finding in the report was that human rights are not incorporated sufficiently in the official curriculum in teacher university colleges and that teachers have insufficient frameworks and tools to support HRE. A high number of lecturers at Danish teacher training colleges reported not feeling competent in teaching HRE. 74% responded that familiarity with concepts such as human rights, discrimination and equal opportunities is largely or to some extent a relevant factor for determining whether such topics will be included in teaching. Focus group interviews revealed that rights are addressed but without direct reference to “human rights” or the legal mechanisms responsible for the protection of rights. This suggests that rights may be understood and taught in ways that negate the indivisibility of human rights and that neglect issues of accountability through the legal dimension of human rights. 87% of teachers revealed that teacher education played little or no role in motivating them to teach about human rights, and the survey showed that 55% of teachers were motivated by personal interest or experience with over 70% reporting that teacher education played no role at all. The report concludes with seven recommendations including the development of a national action plan for human rights education and training, and explicit learning objectives for human rights in teacher education (Decara, 2013).

The Finnish Human Rights Centre conducted the first comprehensive baseline study on HRE in Finland in 2014 (Finnish Human Rights Centre, 2014). Informed by the national baseline study published by the Irish Human Rights Commission in 2011 (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011), the main findings were similar. They point to a lack of human rights training in the education of teachers and educators (Finnish Human Rights Centre, 2014). These findings support other studies conducted in Finland. Toivanen (2007) carried out a study as part of the “Teaching Human Rights in Europe” project. The aim was to measure the progress made in Finnish schools against the objectives of the Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004). Although human rights had been integrated into the revised 2004 curriculum, she noted that teachers were not trained to teach human rights and were teaching with limited if any understanding of those rights (Toivanen, 2007). Matilainen and Kallioniemi (2012) carried out a content analysis of interviews with teachers and students in upper secondary schools in Finland to

investigate the role of HRE. Although the findings specifically relate to the teaching of religious education, they found that teachers were not familiar with HRE as a concept and had had no specialised training or formal education in human rights issues. There was also a tendency amongst teachers to relate the teaching of human rights to certain subject areas such as History, Religious Education, and Social Studies.

In an interdisciplinary research project on HRE and national minorities in six European countries - Armenia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Slovakia and Spain (Mahler et al. 2009a, 2009b), the researchers concluded that civic education seemed more popular than HRE because funders and governments found HRE unnecessary or difficult. As Toivanen (2009) points out, forms of HRE that question hierarchies, hegemonies and customs can be incongruous with other education goals. Teachers' vagueness as regards human rights and HRE can lead to what Zembylas et al. (2016) refer to as HRE limited to learning about rights in decontextualized ways that trivialise human rights, leading teachers to retreat to familiar discourses and activities.

Research on HRE in schools in Sweden and Norway is limited in terms of large-scale comprehensive studies. In the 2016 report on the State of Citizenship and Human Rights Education in Europe, the Swedish Ministry of Education and Research responded "yes" to a question on the state's provision of citizenship and HRE in initial teacher education and continuing professional development (Council of Europe, 2017b, question 16). However, there is no research available to assess the effectiveness of what happens at the school level. Studies on HRE in Norwegian upper secondary schools (Vesterdal, 2016) suggest that teaching human rights at higher levels of schooling is more demanding and complex than at lower levels and that teachers need to update existing knowledge. Without the opportunity to critically explore human rights, inherent dangers include:

Potential misuse by those who learn the language without embracing the vision, its appropriation by one group or another for their own worthy but limited goals, its rejection by reactionaries and rationalists or dismissal by impatient revolutionaries. (Flowers, 2004, p. 124)

Nordic studies suggest that teachers' limited knowledge has led to an understanding of HRE as limited to civil and political rights with human rights understood as synonymous with democracy and HRE with civic education (Mahler et al., 2009a; Vesterdal, 2016). International studies support these findings (Human Rights Watch, 2011; International Association for the

Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2009; Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011). Osler argues that Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) in schools focuses on horizontal relationships between citizens. HRE, on the other hand, promotes understanding of horizontal and vertical power relations (Osler, 2008, 2012, 2016; Osler & Starkey, 2003, 2005, 2009). Whilst HRE and EDC may share the same goals and practices, HRE “is concerned with the broader spectrum of human rights and fundamental freedoms in every aspect of people’s lives”. EDC, on the other hand, focuses on “democratic rights and responsibilities and active participation, in relation to the civic, political, social, economic, legal and cultural spheres of society” (Council of Europe, 2010, p. 8, para. 3).

HRE understood as a form of civics education risks being preservative rather than transformative, in particular in country contexts where human rights are assumed (Osler 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016; Osler & Lybæk, 2014). Osler and Lybæk (2014) refer to the MIPEX policy index (2011), a rough comparative study of EU member-states, which includes Norway. The study provides an assessment of laws and policies to promote equality and participation and prevent discrimination. Norway is ranked fourth, alongside Finland and Denmark, behind top-ranked Sweden. Reference is made to Norway’s multicultural education approach as a determining factor in its ranking. Osler and Lybæk (2014) argue that the study’s positive assessment of Norway based on its multicultural education programme is inadequate. They suggest that multicultural education is equated with learning Norwegian and the assimilation of minorities into an existing system assumed as democratic and underpinned by national values of equality and justice.

This section has highlighted the gap between countries’ moral, legal and political commitment to human rights articulated in international and national level documents, and government responsibility to engage with these commitments. The reviewed research on HRE in schools shows that this gap has created an uncertain position for HRE. This uncertainty is due to lack of accountability for HRE implementation, resulting in representations of HRE that reflect preservative rather than transformative pedagogies, influenced by teachers’ lack of training and support to develop knowledge of human rights, and HRE.

## **2.9 Summary of chapter two**

In this chapter I have traced the evolution of HRE as an evolving field of education internationally, engaged with its critics, and discussed its critical

roots as informed by the work of human rights activists and UNESCO's 1974 Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (UNESCO EIU). I have argued for human rights to be understood in relation to a social justice frame that reflects the four cosmopolitan principles of universality, indivisibility, solidarity and reciprocity. The chapter then draws on international and Nordic literature to illustrate the lack of accountability towards HRE in schools, resulting in teachers who are unprepared and unsupported and HRE models that are preservative rather than transformative. I propose a conceptualisation of HRE that engages with human vulnerability from a cosmopolitan perspective, while being aware of how particular sociopolitical and cultural conditions can influence its conception and implementation. In the next chapter, I consider these conditions in the context of Iceland.



### 3 Situating Human Rights Education in the Icelandic context

*The universality of human rights is constantly challenged by particular interests, for example by states which claim the priority of their sovereignty or alleged democratic decisions over the universality of human rights, or by the private sector which claims self-regulating approaches and uses this to define its sphere of influence within certain limits. These challenges are part of the political and legal dimension of human rights and as a consequence of the moral dimension of human rights as well. (Kirchschlaeger, 2014, p. 118)*

With a population of 368,010 (Statistics Iceland, 2020), Iceland is the smallest of the Nordic countries in terms of the number of inhabitants. A growing migrant population, currently placed at just over 15% of the total population (Statistics Iceland, 2020), has started to challenge Iceland's global reputation as a paragon of equality. In particular, studies on the immigrant population and the experiences of women of foreign origin contradict the notion of a social justice and gender equality paradise (Human Rights Council, 2014; Kvennaathvarfið [The women's shelter], 2021). Increasing diversity in Icelandic society, effective nation branding, and long-standing nationalist ideals of Icelanders' imagined identity (Loftsdóttir, 2018) combine to feed into the sociopolitical and cultural complexities of this small Nordic society. It is this context of complexity that needs to inform questions about the role that Human Rights Education (HRE) can play in the formal education system in Iceland.

This chapter uses the context of Iceland to argue that an explicit human rights framework, underpinned by the cosmopolitan principles of indivisibility, solidarity, reciprocity and universality, can expose conservative and certain liberal forms of education as, potentially, morally, legally and politically discriminatory, and therefore unjust. First, I present the education system in Iceland, with emphasis on upper secondary schooling. This is followed by an overview of the most prominent social justice education approaches in Iceland: citizenship, inclusive, multicultural, and sustainability education. I illustrate how ideological and political influences can determine the conceptualisation and implementation of these approaches in policy and practice, with implications as regards to intended social justice goals.

### 3.1 The Icelandic formal education system

The Icelandic formal education system is made up of four different levels of schooling: Preschool education (leikskóli), providing education and care for children who have not reached six years of age; compulsory education (grunnskóli) for children aged between six and sixteen; upper secondary education (framhaldsskóli), which offers academic, technical and vocational programmes for students who have completed compulsory education; and higher education (háskólar). While preschool and compulsory education fall under the responsibility of the municipalities, central government is responsible for the operation of upper secondary schools and higher education (see Act on Compulsory School no. 91/2008; Act on Early Childhood Education no. 90/2008; Act on Upper Secondary School no. 92/2008); Act on Higher Education no. 85/2008).

The introduction of the 2008 education act for upper secondary schools (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008) and the 2011 national curriculum guides (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012) suggest a significant shift from the traditional subject-based system evident in the 2004 curriculum for upper secondary schools (see Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2004). Emphasis was placed on holistic and interdisciplinary competence-based teaching and learning informed by six inter-dependent and integrated foundational curricula themes. Referred to as fundamental pillars, these are intended to represent the core of school programming. The general section of the national curriculum states these should be integrated into all aspects of schooling at the preschool, compulsory and upper secondary school levels (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). The suggestion is that both general aims and subject content are considered essential components of upper secondary school education. The six pillars are health and welfare, literacy, sustainability, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity. The influence of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UNESCO policy on general education and sustainable development and the Council of Europe (CoE) policy on democracy and human rights are stated in the curriculum guides (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012, p. 14). Legal and moral frameworks therefore underpin the national curriculum guide. The inclusion of human rights as a fundamental curricular concern was new; previously human rights featured as a minor topic in social studies and life skills curricula.

At the compulsory school level, the education reforms marked a move away from a centralised and standardised education system, with increasing



autonomy placed in the hands of individual schools. At the upper secondary school level, it has been argued that there has always been a certain degree of flexibility. This is best explained in Harðarson's article on the 2011 National Curriculum Guide for upper secondary schools (Harðarson, 2012). Harðarson suggests that the education approach in the 2011 national curriculum guide reflects greater systemic control than previous curricula guides. Specific demands on schools "to use precise formulation of learner-centred aims as organising principles" (Harðarson, 2012, p. 89) replaced aims as principles of curriculum organisation evident in earlier curricula. The three core objectives of upper secondary school, as articulated under article two of the education act, are: the all-round development of all students; active participation in democratic society; and participation in working life and further studies (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008). School responses to these objectives need to be understood in the context of Harðarson's (2012) suggestion that the 2011 national curriculum guide provides a more prescriptive guide as regards the general aims of upper secondary school, as I discuss below.

### **3.1.1 The upper secondary school system**

There are three types of upper secondary schools in Iceland: those offering academic study programmes exclusively, comprehensive schools offering academic and vocational programmes, and vocational or technical colleges. Colleges may also offer practical academic programmes (Jóhannesson & Bjarnadóttir, 2015). Out of the 34 upper secondary schools in Iceland (including vocational and technical schools), only four are not state-run. Students are typically aged between 16 and 19 years of age and, although not compulsory, the 2008 education act makes it the legal responsibility of the state to provide upper secondary schooling for all students at least up to the age of 18 (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008).

The majority of upper secondary schools are organised around a credit system (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). The system takes into account students' progress in completing coursework at their own pace with an estimated time spent on learning taken into consideration (Ragnarsdóttir, 2018). Besides the three compulsory subjects of Icelandic, mathematics, and English, schools can choose what and how to design their programmes. This allows schools the flexibility to retain traditional subjects from the 1999 curriculum or adopt new ones; it also allows for interdisciplinary and cross-curricular approaches to respond to student needs and diversity (Ragnarsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014, p. 47). Another important feature of the 2011 curriculum is the equal

legal status given to vocational and academic studies (Ragnarsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). Programmatic diversity and flexibility aim to decrease the number of students who drop out or who leave upper secondary school to later return (Ragnarsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). Despite laws and policy supporting issues of inclusion, equality and rights, academic performance and social status seem to continue to play a significant role in determining which school students will attend (Ragnarsdóttir, 2018, p. 7). This raises concerns about the gap between the intended and implemented curriculum.

Teachers at all levels of schooling are required to have a master's degree, meaning five years of university education. A new Teacher Education Law was introduced in 2019 (Act on Teacher Education, 2019), which has led to the introduction of the Master's in Teaching (MT), allowing students to become certified to teach at all levels of schooling. The MT does not require a research component and is intended to boost the number of students choosing to become teachers; a profession that has been experiencing a declining number of graduates. The introduction of a decentralised system calling for a holistic competence-based approach underpinned by the six fundamental pillars raised significant challenges at the upper secondary school level. Teachers have complained of extra work and pressure as a result of expectations of additional responsibilities (Jónasson, 2016; Ragnarsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014; Ragnarsdóttir, 2018; Sigurðardóttir et al, 2014). Drawing on data from a survey via questionnaires conducted in 2008, 2010, and 2012, Ragnarsdóttir and Jóhannesson (2014) suggest that the increased workload of teachers in more challenging circumstances without an increase in salary has resulted in less job satisfaction and heightened occupational stress at the upper secondary school level. This impacted on the number of students choosing to commit to five years of study. Inevitably, this has also affected how teachers perceive or respond to the introduction of the curriculum pillars.

Curriculum change in the context of sociocultural, political, and economic transformations, both globally and nationally, creates tensions for a number of reasons. These include the conflict between increased autonomy, lack of training, limited resources, weak stakeholder collaboration and shifting emphases on purposes of education (Flores, 2005; Goodson, 1997; Reynisdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2013; Sachs, 2003). The policy shifts in Iceland have raised debate about the role of the teacher as subject specialist versus all-round professional (Ragnarsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014) as they move from "simply teaching to participating in educational reform" (p. 47). This has had certain implications for social justice oriented goals of education.

### **3.2 An overview of social justice responses in the Icelandic education system**

Curriculum reform processes in Europe and many other parts of the world have been influenced by global initiatives such as the 1994 Salamanca Statement and Platform for Action (UNESCO, 1994), the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, n.d. -c), and the World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005-ongoing) (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, n.d. -a). In particular, the first two initiatives provide the context for four social justice oriented fields of education evident in the Icelandic education system: democracy and citizenship education, inclusive education, multicultural education, and sustainability education. In Iceland, inclusive education and multicultural education tend to focus on what happens in schools as a social justice response (i.e. the right to education and rights in education). Sustainability education shares with HRE a broader social justice frame that is inclusive of rights through education and beyond the focus on students in schools. Although distinct fields with differing (and overlapping) agendas, social justice fields of education in Iceland connect with human rights albeit to varying degrees, as I now explain.

Democracy as a discourse has a longer history than human rights in the education system in Iceland (Halldórsdóttir et al., 2016; Jónsson & Sigurðardóttir, 2012). The emphasis on democratic principles with the introduction of the comprehensive school system in 1974 reflected progressive education views common in Europe at that time. Emphasis was placed on social justice and equal opportunity regardless of learning ability or social status, reflecting egalitarian viewpoints and democratic principles (Jóhannesson, 2006; Jónsson, 2016). Although initially there appears to have been agreement about the educational reform of 1974, a decade later, this perspective began to attract opposition. Critics considered liberal values as a threat to Icelandic identity (see Edelstein 1988/2013). From around November 1983 to February 1984 various people, including some scholars and journalists but mostly politicians, criticised the lack of teaching of Icelandic history at the compulsory school level (Halldórsdóttir et al., 2016). This period became known as “sögukennsluskammdegið” [the dark period of history teaching] (Halldórsdóttir et al., 2016). Tensions emerged between those who called for cosmopolitan values, dialogue, and engagement with contemporary social issues, and those who argued for a conception of democratic education underpinned by traditional values to inform personal and political identity and promote social cohesion (Edelstein 1988/2013; Halldórsdóttir et al., 2016). An MA thesis on the implementation of

democracy and human rights in upper secondary schools suggests there is minimal evidence of educational and institutional change at the upper secondary school level to accommodate the curriculum pillar of democracy and human rights (Jóhannsdóttir, 2018). This seems to be in great part due to the school culture at the upper secondary school level. A recent doctoral study on democracy and student influence at the upper secondary school level suggests power structures are strongly related to traditional subject hierarchies, which challenge genuine student participation in decision-making (Bjarnardóttir, 2019). The emphasis on student participation in studies that address democracy in schools is relevant to this study because it raises the important question about the relationship between human rights and democracy.

Democracy as a concept has never been perceived as problematic or an explicit topic of public controversy in Iceland. Official educational policy has continued to promote democracy whilst being “silent about things that one should expect to be central to democratic educational policy such as equality, gender, and class” (Jónsson, 2016, p. 80). As Halldórsdóttir et al. (2016, p. 44) point out, democracy in education in Iceland has focused on advancing individual preferences and “its basic function was considered to regulate a free competition of individual opinions and preferences” (Halldórsdóttir et al. 2016, p. 441). According to Kirchsclaeger (2014), a human rights lens applied to democracy ensures that questions about lack of participation and inclusion take on a moral and legal dimension, and are not limited to political understandings of democracy. Addressing issues of democracy in schools without making an explicit connection to human rights risks acceptance of the will of the dominant majority, discourse and power. Similar concerns can be associated with inclusive education in Iceland.

Although the requirement that all pupils should be educated was implicit in the 1974 and 1995 compulsory school acts (Jónsson, 2016), it was first made explicit in the 2008 act for compulsory schools (Act on Compulsory School No. 91/2008; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019). The 1974 act for compulsory school challenged the notion of schooling as the teaching of subjects. The focus shifted to schooling as the organisation of instruction according to students’ development and understanding, in particular with regard to residence (urban vs. rural), gender, and disability (Jónasson, 1996, as cited in Óskarsdóttir et al. 2019). The 1994 UNESCO Salamanca agreement, which advocated for an inclusive education approach grounded in the concept of social equity (UNESCO, 1994), led to the introduction of the term “school without segregation” (*skóli án aðgreiningar*), still used today (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019). The introduction of the 1995 act for compulsory schooling (Act on

Compulsory School No. 66/1995) moved the control of and responsibility for schools from the Ministry of Education to Municipality level. Schools began to depend on medical diagnoses in order to secure funds for special needs education (Jónasson, 2008, as cited in Óskarsdóttir et al. 2019). The medical model of financing of special needs in schools has been heavily criticised (Jónsson, 2016; Óskarsdóttir et al. 2019; Sverrisdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2018). The model has raised awareness of the needs of students who do not have a medical condition but who are excluded because of other factors such as poverty, ethnicity and language barriers (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017).

Research on inclusive education in Iceland suggests tensions between a medical model dependent on diagnosis and a rights-based approach that contextualises the right to education within a broader social justice frame underpinned by equity and democratic participation (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017; Óskarsdóttir et al. 2019; Sverrisdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2018). Inclusive education is not directly referenced in the 2008 act for upper secondary schools. The general section of the 2011 national curriculum guide suggests a broader conceptualisation of inclusive education based on the social justice dimension evident in the fundamental pillars, in particular the pillars of equality and democracy and human rights (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). In practice, however, inclusive education continues to be understood as related to special needs and disability education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017). Sverrisdóttir & Jóhannesson (2018) suggest forms of ableism in the way that students without disabilities are considered the norm and used as a frame of reference for upper secondary school practices. Sverrisdóttir and Jóhannesson question how the terms 'school without segregation' and 'school without discrimination' can apply to the upper secondary school level. They analysed upper secondary education policy documents to determine representation of individuals labelled with intellectual disability and found multiple examples of segregation (2018, pp. 13-14). They suggest that the medical gaze as the dominant education ideology legitimises categorisation of students into the able and the not able. An explicit focus on human rights in the context of inclusive education can be used to challenge such categorisations, morally as well as legally. A focus on diagnosis can make invisible other forms of inequality related to gender, culture, and class (Jóhannesson, 2006) that a human rights lens can make visible. Multicultural education in Iceland is a social justice education field that has effectively made visible inequalities in schooling that affect students with an immigrant background.

Despite references to equitable access for all students in education policy since the 1970s, education laws and the national curriculum prior to 1998 failed to respond to an increasingly multicultural population in Iceland (Loftsdóttir, 2009; Ragnarsdóttir et al., 2007). The educational disparities between immigrant and non-immigrant students at the upper secondary school level have raised questions about the inclusivity of the upper secondary school (Gollifer & Tran, 2012; Halldórsdóttir et al., 2016; Tran, 2016; Tran & Ragnarsdóttir, 2018; Pálsdóttir et al., 2014; Ragnarsdóttir & Schmidt, 2014; Ragnarsdóttir & Lefever, 2018). Multicultural education started to gain prominence in Iceland at the beginning of the millennium in response to global trends and internal changes in demographics, politics, and economics (Jónsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2010). Conceptualisations of multicultural education vary as discussed in the work of Banks (2018). Gorski (2009) draws on empirical data on multicultural teacher education to conclude that multiculturalism can be understood in terms of human relations or celebration of diversity at one extreme of the spectrum, and as committed to educational equity and social justice at the other. Such distinctions are evident in a number of multicultural education typologies (see Grant & Sleeter, 2006; Jenks & Kanipol, 2001). Grant and Sleeter propose five approaches consisting of a) an assimilationist approach; b) a prejudice reduction and interpersonal harmony approach; c) a specific target group approach; d) a multicultural approach that addresses issues of power and privilege; and e) a social constructivist multicultural approach that promotes democratic schooling, critical consciousness, and examination of social justice and social action. Grant and Sleeter's typology can be aligned with those of Jenks et al. (2001) who distinguish between a) conservative, liberal and critical multiculturalism in terms of the education ideology and approach that each of the three forms suggests. Although conservative multiculturalists may support the concept of equality, they do so in terms of a commitment to those who are willing to adopt "mainstream culture and its attending values, mores, and norms" (Gorski, 2009, p. 311); the emphasis is assimilationist. Liberal multiculturalists may appreciate difference and recognise pluralism, but they distance themselves from issues of power, control, and privilege. The emphasis is on human relations focused on prejudice reduction and interpersonal harmony, and there is a tendency to address specific target groups. The critical multiculturalist position, in contrast, urges educators to understand their work within a larger sociopolitical context with the aim of engaging with issues of power and privilege and "dismantle, rather than reify social stratification" (2009, p. 311).

There has been a tendency to focus on the schooling experience of students of immigrant background in the field of multicultural education in Iceland. Given that multicultural education emerged in Iceland as a response to address educational disparities between immigrant students and students of Icelandic heritage, this is not surprising. Findings from studies have raised numerous pertinent questions about the school system's response to the educational needs of immigrant students. One study suggests that deficit education models are the norm in upper secondary schools with immigrant students treated as a problem to be fixed (Tran, 2016). Tran and Lefever (2018) point to the language barriers faced by Icelandic born students of immigrant background including feeling vulnerable about their academic capabilities and their sense of belonging. A study on the experiences of refugee families and their children further raises questions about how the school system responds to students who come from very different educational and cultural backgrounds (Ragnarsdóttir & Rafik Hama, 2018). Gollifer and Tran (2012) argue that curricular and policy documents fail to recognise the knowledge that students with immigrant backgrounds bring to their schooling experience. While the focus on immigrant students has revealed important findings that have contributed to important policy and practice that favour students with an immigrant background, emphasis on immigrant students as a group risks making invisible forms of intersectional inequality related to socially constructed variables other than ethnicity, language or nationality. It also risks associating multicultural education with the legitimisation of assimilationist practices, such as learning Icelandic as a second language as a solution to immigrant student integration in schools and society, without engaging in discussions on power, control, and privilege. Osler & Lybaek (2014) suggest that multicultural education can be used to promote national values and encourage cultural relativism when it fails to engage with the cosmopolitan perspective provided by the notion of human rights. A third field of education that addresses social justice concerns is sustainability education.

Sustainability is an important curriculum concern in the 2011 national curriculum guide. Understanding the connections between sustainability education and human rights would seem to be a matter of common sense given the links between human rights and the UN 2030 Agenda, framed by 17 sustainable development goals. The UN fourth phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education (2020-2024) focuses on aligning this phase with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically with target 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, n.d. -c). Target 4.7 states:

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

There is however little research on how human rights, or indeed issues of social justice, are being addressed through sustainability education in schools in Iceland. The most comprehensive study looks at sustainability education as an emerging curriculum concern in the context of formal schooling at the compulsory school level (Pálsdóttir, 2014). The study suggests that environmental education is the core of sustainability education in schools. This is evident in the focus on the Eco-school programme in Iceland, with almost two hundred participating schools from all levels (Landvernd, n.d.). There are examples of individual schools and teachers, at both the compulsory and upper secondary school levels, working with the sustainable development goals in ways that make explicit connections to social justice and human rights; but this remains an under-researched area.

The way in which different social justice oriented education approaches are understood and enacted says much about the purpose of education. Jónsson (2016) identifies four distinct but interwoven themes that represent certain understandings of both the role of schools in general and what he refers to as their "proper role" for inclusion in particular. He presents these themes as:

An ideological background to many of the claims about schools, teachers, students, and educational practices in general that are made in the public debate, as well as in various official policy documents. (Jónsson, 2016, p. 79)

These themes are: individualistic understanding – where difficulties are individualised; medical model – where individual difficulties are diagnosed and remedies found to fix what is out of order; technical approach – where there is an emphasis on diagnosis as a method rather than pedagogy, and where curricula specifies skills to be delivered; and the market-commodity view of education, characterised by competition for ranking, opportunity and funding understood as an investment (Jónsson, 2016, pp. 79-80). Icelandic



scholars have argued that shifts towards neoliberal political ideologies in the 1990s have constrained curriculum reform that supports social justice oriented and progressive goals (Jóhannesson, 2006; Jónsson, 2016; Marinósson & Bjarnason, 2014). These ideological shifts manage to maintain social justice discourse while also managing to depoliticise responses. As discussed previously, democracy as an educational objective has survived these shifts, even though the democratic principles of the 1970s were abandoned during the 1990s (Jónsson, 2016). The concept of human rights, in contrast, is a relatively new addition to educational policy. In this sense it has the potential to be used to challenge the depoliticisation that Jónsson (2016) associates with other forms of social justice oriented and progressive goals.

In this section, I have presented the main social justice education approaches implemented in schools in Iceland. My intention was to show how an explicit human rights lens that emphasises the moral, legal and political position of human rights can contribute to the social justice oriented goals of other fields of education. The familiarity of human rights discourse on one hand, and the dichotomy between understandings of human rights as assumed and unproblematic on the other, create an educative opportunity that can disrupt depoliticised responses to education. The 2008 education act and the 2011 national curriculum guides are examples of legal and political educational responses in Iceland.

### **3.3 The 2008 Education Act and 2011 National Curriculum Guides**

According to Harðarson (2013), the introduction of the 2008 education act and 2011 national curriculum guides marked the end of centralisation. General education aims were introduced that responded to both social and individual needs in the form of six fundamental pillars. These suggested more progressive and transformative understandings of the aims of education. References to “rewriting the world”, “shaping society” and “capability for action” evident in the descriptions of the pillars, seemed to support forms of political action and social change through education (Gollifer & Tran, 2012). Yet, a deeper analysis of the text suggests a lack of clarity as regards social justice related aims, which can lead to issues of justice being understood as uncontroversial and unproblematic. This creates an interesting tension between a decentralised curriculum on one hand and promoting normative social justice related concepts such as human rights on the other. This

tension begs the question: what does a decentralised system really mean in terms of its intended and implemented curriculum?

The fundamental pillars make explicit issues that one would expect to be central to democratic educational policy, such as environmental concerns, gender, disability, and immigration. Contextualised in the six curricular pillars of health and welfare; literacy; creativity; sustainability; equality; and democracy and human rights, these are referred to as “a vision of the future” and represent the “ability and will to influence” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012, pp. 14-24). The ideological tensions between conservative/preservative, liberal/progressive and transformative/emancipatory understandings of education become evident in references to “maintaining” on one hand and “changing” and “developing” on the other (pp.14-24). While such tensions can be viewed as democratically relevant in that they represent multiple stakeholders’ perspectives on important social concerns, uncritical acceptance of the tensions can allow more dominant ideologies to have greater influence in practice. Critical social justice education discourse becomes an acceptable part of the intended policy context but is not necessarily enacted:

Education towards sustainability, equality, democracy, and human rights therefore aims at children and youth understanding society as it is and has developed. At the same time, education aims at enabling children and youth to participate in forming society and thus acquiring a vision of the future and ideals to advocate. (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012, p. 16)

The notion of social justice can easily become assumed as applicable to each of Jónsson’s (2016) individualistic, medical, technical, and market commodity models. Harðarson’s (2012) suggestion that the aims-based education approach in the 2011 national curriculum guide reflects greater systemic control than previous curricula guides, raises concerns about social justice in education being understood as unproblematic. Under Section Five of the national curriculum guides, key competencies for each of the six fundamental pillars are presented, as well as an additional set for general learnability, described as:

Intellectual curiosity, faith in one’s own abilities and talents to constructively use one’s knowledge, skills, and competence in various tasks. It is also related to the ability to link knowledge

and skills to further studies and employment. (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012, p. 32)

The purpose of schooling as an individual pursuit towards acquiring the knowledge, skills and key competencies required for studies and employment seems to neglect two of the three core objectives of upper secondary school: the all-round development of all students; and active participation in democratic society (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008). It also seems to reject an understanding of social justice as relational. Rather than emphasising the development of capabilities to increase substantive freedoms, the competences for the pillar of democracy and human rights reflect Tibbitts' (2017) values awareness/socialisation model. They suggest "socialization towards prosocial behaviour" (Tibbitts, 2017, p. 86) and emphasise horizontal rather than vertical relationships:

- respect the opinions of others and their values of life,
- respect human rights and human values,
- are able to express their views and participate in discussion,
- take a critical view of ethical matters of opinion,
- respect the basic principles of society,
- are active and responsible participants in democratic society,
- are aware of the value of good behaviour and conduct in their relations with other people, animals, and the environment,
- have acquired a positive and constructive social and communicative ability (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012, pp. 34-35)

Harðarson (2012) argues that specification of the aims of schooling is in contrast to more liberal and humanist approaches that require schools to use aims as principles of curriculum organisation. Specifying these competencies suggests greater emphasis on a prescribed form of socialisation. Rather than provide the reader opportunities to understand the complexities and tensions involved in working with social justice related concepts, democracy and human rights are presented as assumed components of society. It is difficult to differentiate between democracy and human rights while reading the curriculum guides, in that the relation between the two is not made explicit. As discussed in the previous chapter, research on teachers' understandings of human rights and HRE practices suggests an unproblematic and limited understanding of human rights, often limited to

civil and political rights (Toivanen, 2009; Vesterdal, 2016). The competences reflect an emphasis on horizontal relationships common to Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) rather than both horizontal and vertical power relations common to HRE (Osler, 2008, 2012, 2016; Osler & Starkey, 2003, 2005, 2009). Horizontal relations can foster a reductionist understanding of democracy (Kirchschlaeger, 2014). Complex interactions influenced by sociopolitical, economic and cultural disparities are not recognised or addressed as part of the democratic process; and the accountability role of human rights in the democratic process is absent. The specificity of aims that Harðarson (2012) notes can therefore be understood in terms of restricting the necessary critical examination of larger sociopolitical and cultural contexts, which would allow more opportunity for teacher and student engagement in reflexive and empowering forms of learning. Specificity of aims that promote certain forms of socialisation can be challenged by human rights that raise awareness of complex unequal realities. Human rights addressed in education can therefore become understood as unnecessary or difficult, as suggested by an interdisciplinary research project on HRE and national minorities in six European countries (Mahler et al. 2009a, 2009b). Rather than form the core of the curriculum, human rights are instead pushed to the periphery of the curriculum.

### **3.4 Human rights in the curriculum: A core or peripheral concern?**

Prior to the introduction of the 2011 curriculum guides, human rights were not an explicit part of education discourse in Iceland. They were however addressed in other social justice oriented approaches and ad hoc initiatives. These initiatives included the development of materials on human rights introduced into compulsory and upper secondary level schools by the Icelandic Red Cross (Árnason, 1995) and the Human Rights Education Project of the Icelandic Human Rights Centre (Icelandic Human Rights Centre, n.d. - b). A joint intervention and research programme started in 1988 (see Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2002a, 2002b) was followed up with teaching material called "SAMVERA" (Being Together) for teachers and parents in 1992 (Aðalbjarnardóttir & Elíasdóttir, 1992). From 1999, the programme started to focus on issues related to citizenship, equality, and democracy (Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2011). Research projects such as JustEd (JustEd, n.d. -a, n.d. -b), the Nordic Centre of Excellence Justice through Education in the Nordic Countries project (2013-2018); LSP (LSP, n.d.) the Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice Project (2013-2015); and the 2013-2017 ActSHEN

project (Action for Sustainability in Higher Education in the Nordic countries) (Vesterinen et al., 2017) have also engaged with human rights concerns under broader social justice education frameworks. UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools (UNICEF UK, n.d), a global initiative, has been piloted in several compulsory schools in Iceland, with explicit links made to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals (Jónsdóttir, 2020; UNICEF Iceland, n.d).

Human rights has typically been addressed in subjects such as history and social studies or electives developed by teachers (Halldórsdóttir et al., 2016). The introduction of life skills in the 1999 national curriculum (Kristjánsson, 2001; Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2004; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 1999) provided an opportunity for upper secondary school students to explore human rights and civics themes. Emphasis was placed on personal development, ethics, and character education (Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2004). The focus on sociomoral development rather than social or political engagement suggests a political decision that reflects the shift away from the progressive cosmopolitan values promoted by curriculum reformers in the 1970s

Harðarson (2013) suggests upper secondary school teachers are more influenced by historical and cultural understandings of the role of education than overarching education aims in policy. Despite the introduction of centralised and standardised approaches in the 1999 national curriculum guide, which included general overarching aims and detailed subject-related aims, Harðarson (2013) suggests that natural science, mathematics and history teachers understand their subject areas as compatible with general education aims that focus on the improvement of society or individual development. The teachers he interviewed in his study did not change their teaching dramatically in response to the focus on teaching academic subjects in the 1999 curriculum. They made links between general aims that included the development of intellectual, moral and democratic values and their subject areas. The teachers felt general aims were internal to their subjects, reflecting a liberal education tradition where learning academic subjects is understood as a) a way to realise one's best potentialities and acquire intellectual or moral values; and b) an end in itself, rewarding regardless of practical use (Harðarson, 2013, p. 154). The relevance of Harðarson's study is the focus on how teachers respond to educational aims and the implications for the introduction of human rights into the curriculum.

If, as suggested by Harðarson, irrespective of prescribed general aims proposed from the top, teachers respond based on their understandings and

values of the role of the upper secondary school, we need to consider how human rights are part of upper secondary school teachers' understandings and values, and how these are culturally and historically informed. Iceland's upper secondary school system reflects the persistence of tradition (Harðarson, 2013). The system evolved as a compromise between enlightenment principles on one hand and humanism and romanticism on the other. Adoption of the modern grammar school system in the early 20th century led to enlightenment influences gaining momentum (Harðarson, 2013). A subject-based curriculum was offered by secondary schools as preparation for university, and the notion of core subject areas persisted irrespective of changes to overarching general aims in policy documents. This suggests that human rights in the curriculum is likely to be influenced by traditional notions of the role of the upper secondary school, which include certain subjects holding higher status than others (Bjarnadóttir & Geirsdóttir, 2018; Ragnarsdóttir, 2018).

Harðarson (2013) discusses the fundamental pillar of equality as an educational aim that can coexist with academic school subjects such as history, literature, and social and natural sciences. Drawing on the perceptions of subject teachers, he suggests that equality education becomes possible as a means and an end through student engagement in rational and critical decision-making. This engagement involves understanding what equality entails through a learning process that he describes as "the cultivated ability to do serious academic research into deep and difficult questions about fairness, equity, power, and subordination" (2013, p. 244). While the notion of pedagogy that encourages engagement in dialogues about power and injustice is worthy, educators need to be wary of understanding the pursuit of social justice as a process of philosophical inquiry in the context of teaching academic subjects. If social justice related curriculum aims, such as equality, democracy, and human rights, are understood in terms of developing necessary values and virtues through the process of acquiring academic knowledge, human rights as content matter, or as lived reality, become pushed to the periphery of the curriculum. This is a concern given that research suggests that teachers have limited knowledge of human rights and HRE (BEMIS, 2013; Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011; Osler, 2016; Osler & Starkey, 2010; Tibbitts, 2017; Waldron et al., 2011; Zembylas et al., 2016). Understanding general aims and specific subject areas as compatible based on an understanding of the former as the development of intellectual or moral virtues, risks diluting the practical political and legal dimensions of HRE.

Liberal education traditions that promote intellectual and moral virtues, as the essence of a life worth living or as representative of what is essentially a common good, risk creating complacency about who is the rational and autonomous human being in a national context (or indeed in a school setting). Values understood in terms of abstract theoretical constructs, intellectual virtues, or moral virtues, can make invisible inequalities and injustices that exist in lived realities. An explicit human rights framework underpinned by the cosmopolitan principles of indivisibility, solidarity, reciprocity, and universality, exposes conservative and certain liberal forms of education as potentially morally, legally, and politically discriminatory, and therefore unjust. This is not because a focus on intellectual and moral virtue development is not a worthy educational aim in itself; but it risks failing to challenge traditional school systems, irrespective of the education ideology that underpins the model. It fails to prioritise calling out a system that favours dominant and mainstream cultures, as undemocratic and unjust. This requires a more explicitly political education approach clearly aligned with a theory of justice that ensures accountability towards addressing vulnerabilities.

Harðarson's (2013) study is important in that it raises questions about teacher autonomy to respond to social justice related general aims versus accountability measures. He points out that addressing general aims that focus on social justice concerns is problematic in a system that allows a minority to participate in educational debate and set "educational aims for others who do not possess the intellectual means to criticise them" (Harðarson, 2013, p. 244). Harðarson concludes, the dialectical relationship between general education aims and content should be recognised as an important part of the ongoing debate on how best to approach education ideals. I agree and further argue that this debate needs to more explicitly include human rights in order to address why human rights remain on the periphery of a curriculum that promotes them as a core concern; and that continues to favour academic subject aims in its organisation. If human rights continue as a peripheral curriculum concern and remain assumed in existing fields of social justice education, issues of accountability will remain unaddressed, a topic I now turn to in the next section.

### **3.5 Accountability to human rights as a core educational aim**

As discussed in chapter two, it is problematic to depend on international organisations such as the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner and the European Council to ensure accountability for HRE at the national level. International and regional organisations can encourage HRE implementation at the domestic level but not enforce it. What is required, it seems, is a consensus among education stakeholders that HRE is

a necessary good for society and that it should therefore be promoted and supported in schools. National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) have an important role to play in this respect as they can encourage local debate through research on HRE. According to the webpage, the Icelandic Human Rights Centre (Icelandic Human Rights Centre, n.d. -d) has as its purpose and aim “to promote human rights by collecting information on and raising awareness of human rights issues in Iceland and abroad” (para.2). The centre receives both private and public funding. Although the centre has not applied for NHRI status, it is a member of the Association of Human Rights Institutes (AHRI), which consists of over 70 member institutions that carry out research and education in the field of human rights. The objective of the AHRI is “to promote research, education and discussion in the field of human rights” (Association of Human Rights Institutions, n.d., para. 1). The centre has published and distributed human rights related materials to schools as part of the Human Rights Education Project (Icelandic Human Rights Centre, n.d. -b), but it has not carried out any comprehensive HRE research in Iceland.

Iceland has pledged a commitment to international human rights conventions that address HRE as a right in itself. These include the non-binding 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see article 26); the legally binding 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) ratified in 1979 (see article 13); the CRC, ratified in 1992 (see article 29), which was incorporated into Icelandic law in 2013 (Act on the Convention of the Rights of the Child No. 19/2013); and the Council of Europe Charter on Education for democratic citizenship and human rights education, signed in 2010. As a member of the United Nations, Iceland has also been invited to “intensify their efforts to disseminate” the 2011 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (UNDHRET) (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011). As discussed, the 2011 national curriculum guide acknowledges these commitments up to a point; yet the 2014 White Paper on Education Reform (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014) makes no reference to its human rights obligations, let alone its commitment to HRE as articulated in the UNDHRET. The education concerns presented in the White Paper represent human rights violations if viewed through the lens of Iceland’s legal human rights commitments. Students’ low achievement and high drop out are main challenges at the upper secondary school level (Blöndal et al., 2011; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014; Sigurðardóttir et al., 2014), with certain students more at risk than others. Katarina Tomaševski, who worked as the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education from 1998 to 2004, argued that education is not a privilege but a legal human right that cannot



“exist without corresponding government obligations” (2003, p.51). The lack of cohesion as regards the use of rights discourse between the two ministerial documents raises questions about the status of the national curriculum guide, and indeed human rights as an educational priority in Iceland. Tomaševski’s 4-A rights-based scheme makes it clear that the priorities raised in the 2014 White Paper are human rights concerns: they represent issues related to availability of and accessibility to quality education, as well as the acceptability and adaptability of the current system (Tomaševski, 2003, p.51-52). In her 2006 global report, Tomaševski (2006) argues that a rights-based approach challenges the image of wealthy countries with universal education and can be used to hold governments everywhere, accountable to ensure the right to education for all children.

The education of immigrants in the Icelandic school system is identified as a concern in the 2015 Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) report, the policy index on migrant integration (MIPEX, 2015). The major constraint identified in the report is the absence of an anti-discrimination law. The 2017 report compiled by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance also raised concern about the absence of legal provisions to combat racial discrimination (Council of Europe, 2017c). The 2020 report (Council of Europe, 2020) notes that Iceland has since enacted two discrimination bills. The Act on Equal Treatment Irrespective of Race or Ethnic Origin No. 85/2018 [Lög um jafna meðferð óháð kynþætti og þjóðernisuppruna nr. 85/2018 frá 25. júní 2018], and the Act on Equal Treatment in the Labour Market 86/2018 [Lög um jafna meðferð á vinnumarkaði nr. 86.2018]. They entered into force on 1 September 2018. The latter act covers racial or ethnic origin, religion, disability, reduced working capacity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual characteristics and gender expression. The former is the first comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation concerning race and ethnic origin adopted in the country, with article ten of the act explicitly prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race or ethnic origin in schools and teaching institutions. The lack of legal and political accountability towards addressing and incorporating human rights in education is a widespread international problem. To a great extent, this is due to the fact that HRE is not understood as a human right and, as Osler (2016) points out, you cannot fight for something that you are unaware of. However, it seems to also be the result of human rights being assumed in the curriculum without critical engagement on curriculum content and how this is decided; including the influence of the tertiary system and industry on curriculum priorities in schools (Nylund et al., 2018). Unlike in some of the other Nordic countries, there are no comprehensive

studies on HRE in Iceland. Lack of local research limits critical discussions amongst education stakeholders about HRE as a necessary good for society. It also restricts dialogue about the role of HRE in teacher education and the role of teacher education as an accountability mechanism to ensure HRE in upper secondary schools.

### **3.5.1 Teacher education and accountability to human rights**

The teacher education programme at the School of Education is currently under review as a result of the introduction of the MT (Master's in Teaching). According to Sigurðardóttir et al. (2018), the five-year teacher education programme has tended to focus on the curriculum pillars of literacy, equality, and sustainability. Although focused on the teacher education programme for compulsory school teaching, their study raises awareness of the challenges of working with different and contradicting interests amongst stakeholders. One effect seems to be the important role of the elective system in place at the School of Education (SoE) of the University of Iceland, and the influence of the individual course instructors, as I now explain.

In order to obtain an upper secondary school teaching postgraduate diploma, students who have completed a master's degree (with a 30 ECTS final thesis) in a specialised subject area, require 40 ECTS of core pedagogy courses, and an additional 20 ECTS in elective courses. The two compulsory subjects are *Inngangur að kennslufræði* [Introduction to teaching] (SFG102F) and *Námskrá og skólaþróun í framhaldsskólum* [Curriculum and school development in secondary schools] (SFG202F). The aims of SFG102F refer to applying theories and research to teaching and learning. SFG202F deals with curriculum and school development in schools. The course description includes references to analysis of policy, societal changes and how various factors in school culture can influence school interpretation of education policy (University of Iceland, 2019/2021). The *Introduction to teaching course* (SFG102F), designed by current course instructors, includes an activity that engages students in researching and theorising the rights of certain groups of students in relation to educational policy (G. Ragnarsdóttir, personal communication, February 19, 2021). The *Curriculum and school development in secondary schools course* (SFG202F) also includes a research component whereby students can find a topic of their choice that they explore in depth in a school context (University of Iceland, 2019/2021). This course provides students the opportunity to analyse “the content and different opinions of education policy” (University of Iceland, 2019/2021). This suggests inclusion of the curriculum pillars, including human rights. However, without explicit

reference to issues of justice and human rights, how instructors understand the role and relevance of each of the six pillars in relation to the professional development of upper secondary school teachers, will determine how and the extent to which these curricula themes are addressed (G. Ragnarsdóttir, personal communication, February 19, 2021). This suggests that addressing human rights, and indeed other features of the curricula themes, is less informed by the learning outcomes of these two compulsory courses, and more by instructors' pedagogical preferences and specialist research interests.

Courses related to the main social justice education approaches in Iceland that I have previously discussed - democracy, citizenship, multicultural, inclusive, and sustainability education - are offered as electives for students studying to become upper secondary school teachers. Students can select two elective courses, making up 20 ECTS of their diploma. These courses include *Fjölmenningsamfélag og skóli: Hugmyndafræði og rannsóknir* [Multicultural society and schools - Ideology and research] (UME104F); *Menntun til sjálfbærni – hæfni í heimi breytinga* [Education for sustainability – skills in a changing world] (KME110F); *Menntun og kyngervi: Orðræðan um drengi og stúlkur* [Gender and education] (UME004M); *Lýðræði, mannréttindi og borgaravitund ungmenna* [Democracy, human rights and young people's citizenship] (UMS101F); and *Barnavernd - hvað er börnum fyrir bestu?* [Child protection - Children's rights and interests] (SKF204F) (University of Iceland, 2019/2021; 2020/2021a). The additional 20 ECTS that students need to complete, are two bounded electives selected from a choice of five courses. Four of these courses address core subject areas taught at the upper secondary school level: Natural sciences and mathematics; Icelandic; Foreign language teaching; and Social sciences. The fifth course is focused on practical training for teachers and aims to complement the two compulsory courses previously referred to, *Introduction to teaching* (SFG102F) and *Curriculum and school development in secondary schools* (SFG202F). A focus on the six curriculum pillars is not evident in the course descriptions. Attention is paid to the teaching and learning of the specific subject area. Given that teachers' subject specialisation is unlikely to engage with the curriculum pillars, the elective system plays a potentially key role. This system of electives suggests that the six fundamental pillars are left to the discretion of individual instructors and student preference. The implication is that the teacher education programme is not grounded on the same fundamental pillars that make up the core of the national curriculum guides for the three levels of schooling.

There has been a move towards collaboration between the fields of inclusive and multicultural education in recognition that matters of social justice, such as equality, democracy and inclusion, require an integrated and practical response to address increasing diversity in schools in Iceland. In 2017, faculty members specialised in multicultural, inclusive and democracy education designed an elective 10 ECT master's course. The course aimed to focus on diversity and society from a historical and ethical perspective, and was called *Margbreytileiki og samfélag Saga, siðfræði og viðhorf* [Diversity and society: History, ethics, and attitudes] (UME103F) (University of Iceland, 2020/2021b). The course continues to be offered today as an elective that can be selected by students on the upper secondary school teaching postgraduate diploma. It is my judgement that committed individuals, are responsible for addressing social justice in education. The elective status of courses that engage with human rights suggests weak institutional responsibility for general aims related to the curriculum pillar of human rights and democracy. The communication gap between ministerial documents, as previously mentioned in connection to human rights in the 2011 national curriculum guide and its absence in the 2014 White Paper, is also evident in the seemingly lack of cohesion between institutions responsible for education. When this gap is discussed in relation to the role of human rights in education, it raises questions about how accountability should be understood; what role should or can national government play? What role should or can individual schools and teachers play? What role should or can an institution such as the School of Education play to ensure commitment to human rights, a commitment that is not politically and legally supported. These are questions that I return to in my final chapter.

The need for Iceland to address human rights in teacher education has been raised by regional and international evaluations of the state of HRE. UNICEF, in collaboration with the Centre for Children's Rights in Queen's University Belfast, conducted a baseline survey of Child Rights Education (CRE) to provide an overview of the extent to which CRE is embedded in formal education settings and teacher education in 26 countries (Jerome et al., 2015). The introduction of democracy and human rights in the Icelandic national curriculum guide was highlighted as an indication of progress. However, it was also noted that there was no requirement for all teachers to be trained in human rights or children's rights and no regulations concerning explicit connections to children's rights for qualified teachers (Jerome et al., 2015, p. 35). Respondents (national experts identified by UNICEF National Committees) reported an implementation gap between the introduction of

the new curriculum and fully developed CRE. Teacher education was stated as a priority for action (Jerome et al., 2015).

Advocates for social justice education within the School of Education of the University of Iceland have conducted research and initiated social justice education projects. These include JustEd, the Nordic Centre of Excellence Justice through Education in the Nordic Countries project (2013-2018); LSP, the Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice Project (2013-2015); and the 2013-2017 ActSHEN project (Action for Sustainability in Higher Education in the Nordic countries). These initiatives have led towards increased collaboration and cooperation between different educational fields and have been used to advocate for change to teacher education in Iceland. Research-based papers produced as part of the JustEd and LSP projects address important human rights related concerns. These include student influence at the upper secondary school level (Bjarnadóttir & Geirsdóttir, 2018; Bjarnadóttir et. al., 2019); upper secondary school drop out (Jóhannesson & Bjarnadóttir, 2015); inclusion and exclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students (Kjaran, & Jóhannesson, 2015); experiences of immigrant students in upper secondary schools (Lefever et. al., 2018); and tensions between immigration, integration and students' rights in educational policy documents (Kulbrandstad et. al. 2018). The JustEd and LSP project publications provide examples of concerns that can be framed as human rights, and which upper secondary school teachers are exposed to. In 2017, restructuring of the faculties took place in 2017 in the School of Education. This process missed a valuable opportunity for the School to holistically integrate the six pillars into its programming, which as previously discussed, currently depends on the elective system.

The absence of an *explicit* focus on human rights in teacher education for upper secondary schools raises questions about the national curriculum guide as the intended versus the implemented curriculum. As this chapter has shown, there are significant gaps between the two reflecting tensions between decentralisation and legal obligations. This gap is perpetuated by crucial national level documents, such as the 2014 White Paper on Education Reform, which makes no reference to human rights (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). Lack of state and institutional responsibility towards its human rights obligations dilutes the importance of the fundamental pillar of democracy and human rights. Tensions between decentralisation and legal obligations raise further questions. To what extent does the Icelandic education system make it the professional responsibility of individual teachers versus the professional responsibility of a school to engage with human rights? To what extent can a decentralised and

democratic system hold teachers' accountable for addressing issues of human rights? Some teachers may not consider it their role to address human rights. The lack of human rights training or support suggests weak institutional responsibility to address human rights despite its representation as a fundamental pillar in the intended curriculum.

As I have discussed in this chapter, human rights holds formal status in the Icelandic curriculum. Yet, despite being underpinned by international and national law concerning education, it acts as a guide for schools, which have the autonomy to develop their own school curriculum. The lack of clarity and depth in the description of the fundamental pillars suggest weak institutional intentionality and purpose as regards the pillars. As stated previously, there are more detailed teacher guides for each pillar, including democracy and human rights. Yet the discussion on the upper secondary school teaching postgraduate diploma suggests the system supports individual preference rather than institutional responsibility. My analysis of the sociopolitical and cultural context of Iceland's education system suggests responsibility for general aims, such as human rights, are placed on individual teachers. My study takes place in this context. Given that my interest lies in using the stories of upper secondary school teachers to identify the transformative potential of HRE, questions about the intended versus the implemented curriculum, the professional responsibility of individual teachers versus the professional responsibility of individual schools and issues of accountability for addressing human rights are addressed in my three findings chapters.

### **3.6 Summary of chapter three**

This chapter has provided an overview of the Icelandic education system and the status of HRE within it, with emphasis on the upper secondary school level. HRE is not a recognised field of education in Iceland, despite international and national level policy commitments to human rights and human rights being one of the six foundational pillars in the national curriculum guide. This lack of recognition is evident in the absence of research on human rights in upper secondary schools and teacher education. Other forms of social justice education exist in formal schools, including multicultural, inclusive and democratic education approaches. These raise and address a number of human rights concerns but without explicit reference to these as such. These fields of education also tend to focus on justice issues within schools rather than society more broadly. I have argued that the sociopolitical and cultural context of Iceland's education system

suggests weak institutional responsibility for the fundamental pillar of democracy and human rights. Tensions between decentralisation, autonomy and ensuring accountability for human rights have placed greater responsibility on the individual teacher. In the next chapter, I turn to the methodological approach used in this study. I have so far in this thesis aimed at advocating for HRE as a valuable contribution to other forms of social justice oriented education in Iceland. I now move towards introducing the role of teachers' stories in my study as a means of informing and extending understanding of transformative HRE.





## 4 Life stories and narrative inquiry

*Theory and practice are connected and integrated in the development of the individual's voice and in the narrative quest for a better state of things. (Goodson & Gill, 2014, p. 36)*

The purpose of my study is two-fold: to advocate for HRE as an important contribution to other forms of social justice oriented education and to develop my practice when working with teachers to engage with human rights concerns. The former part of this purpose has been addressed to a great extent in the previous three chapters. My own professional knowledge drawn from my life experiences, as presented in chapter one, can be understood as a single data set. My analysis of human rights, HRE literature and the policy and school context in Iceland, as presented in chapters two and three, can be understood as a second data set. These support my third data set, which is generated through an interpretive narrative inquiry approach, using life story as a data collection method. The use of teachers' life stories aims to provide rich empirical data to inform and extend my understanding of HRE, and in particular its transformative potential.

Narrative inquiry is a methodological approach that generates rich data informed by interpretations of individuals' perspectives on what they identify as relevant and significant about a certain event, topic, or theme (Goodson & Gill, 2014). While narrative inquiry as a methodological approach can be understood as "a way of honouring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17), it is the researcher who decides what stories to include, the interpretation, and the organisation of the final presentation and product (Chase, 2005). Creswell (1998) reminds us that there are many forms of narrative research that use a variety of data collection and analysis approaches, influenced by different epistemologies.

Using life stories as a data collection process suggests a social constructivist understanding of knowledge constructed through social interactions. Understanding reality and knowledge construction as relational provides "the context in which issues of social justice or injustice arise and can be inquired into" (Caine et al., 2018, p. 142). Social justice is integral to a critical epistemology in which knowledge is understood not only as being socially constructed but also as constructed in particular ways and to serve

particular interests. My use of narrative recognises that there are hierarchies of knowledge and these can support or not support the status quo. My reading of teachers' stories is aimed at understanding how to develop the transformative potential of HRE to challenge and change dominant epistemological practices. For this reason, my methodological choices are underpinned by my interest in searching for data that can inform a conceptual framework for HRE that generates transformative pedagogy.

Narrative offers a means of understanding experience to improve teachers' and teacher educators' own practices. Exploration of teachers' lives and experiences to generate new knowledge on HRE can therefore be understood as a social justice practice. A subjective reconstruction is created of teachers' realities to inform and extend the understanding of HRE, and its role within the broader field of social justice oriented education. The personal life story in chapter one was presented as a subjective reconstruction of my relationship with social justice to understand the multiple and intersecting influences on my work with human rights. In the same way, I draw on teachers' complex, unique and irreplaceable realities to extend and inform my understanding of HRE, and in particular its transformative potential. Given the intensely personal nature of teaching, it is critical to understand the type of person that the teacher is (Goodson, 1992), and the sociocultural and sciopolitical influences that shape them and their pedagogical choices.

This chapter aims to present the methodological approach that underpins the use of ten teachers' life stories. First, the research purpose and questions, as presented in chapter one, are restated. This is followed by an overview of life story as a data collection method and the use of grounded theory and thematic analysis to create an abductive data analysis process. Finally, the methodological challenges and limitations of the study are explained, as are my attempts to address these.

#### **4.1 Research purpose, questions, and contributions**

In the absence of research on HRE in Iceland, this study draws on the life stories of ten upper secondary school teachers to inform and extend understanding of transformative HRE. As discussed in chapter two, there are different understandings of HRE. My interest is in its transformative potential. As previously stated, HRE as a transformative pedagogy requires learning *about*, *through* and *for* human rights with the explicit intention of generating change to ensure human wellbeing. Choosing to work with upper secondary school teachers was influenced by language factors, social

positioning as a researcher, and curriculum-related factors, as discussed later in this chapter. The teachers in this study self-identified as working with human rights even though they all express a lack of familiarity with the term HRE. A critical examination of their stories and the sociopolitical and cultural contexts in which these occur provides insights into why they align their work with human rights, how they address human rights, and the systemic challenges that they face. These insights are developed through responses to three sub questions. These are:

1. How do teachers' reasons for working with human rights inform and extend understanding of human rights education as a transformative pedagogy?
2. How do teachers' practices inform and extend understanding of human rights education as a transformative pedagogy?
3. How do teachers' perceptions of systemic challenges inform and extend understanding of human rights education as a transformative pedagogy?

The responses to these questions are then used to respond to the overarching research question, which is: *How do the life stories of ten upper secondary school teachers inform and extend understanding of human rights education as a transformative pedagogy?* A study on the potential role of HRE in the Icelandic upper secondary school system to contribute to social justice as a general aim of education is an under-researched field. The inclusion of human rights in the 2011 national curriculum guides and increasing international recognition of the role of human rights in education and schooling makes this a timely study. Studies on teachers' engagement with social justice are numerous (see for example the work of Cochran-Smith, 2019; hooks, 1994, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2005; Sleeter, 2017; Zeichner, 2019). Although international studies have extensively addressed HRE practices and challenges (see for example, Bajaj, 2017; Osler, 2016; Tibbitts, 2017; Tibbitts & Kirchsclaeger, 2010; Zembylas & Keet, 2020), in my review of the literature, I was only able to find two studies that address the reasons why teachers engage with human rights. These are the work of Magendzo et al. (2015) and Tibbitts (2016). Neither of these is based on deep analysis of the reasons and how these inform teachers' practice. Understanding teachers' commitment towards human rights is an important contribution to what we already know about HRE and its implementation in formal schooling. They allow for interpretations of the dynamics between reasons, practices, and perceptions of systemic challenges, and how these

can inform transformative pedagogy that challenges an unjust status quo. Teachers' stories provide both the content and context to explore the nature of transformative pedagogies. This study is aimed at informing the work of a wide range of education stakeholders and contributing to the field of social justice education, both in Iceland and internationally.

#### **4.2 The complementary nature of narrative inquiry and life story to understand HRE**

Human rights are commonly discussed from a macro perspective concerning foreign policy, international legal instruments, and abstract universal moral codes, rather than from an everyday living perspective (Osler, 2013a). This study is based on the belief that the starting point for the promotion of HRE in schools is to recognise teachers' lived experiences as a valuable resource (Osler & Zhu, 2011). Teachers' stories can lead us towards collective but diverse understandings of social justice and human rights and the complexities involved in pursuing justice through schooling. The study of teachers' narratives—that is, stories of teachers' own experiences—has been recognised as crucial to the study of teachers' thinking, culture, and behaviour (Carter, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Teachers' meaning making develops, shifts, and is transformed as a result of critical retrospection of lived experience (Crotty, 1998). Narratives help to identify the impact of relational factors including age, gender, class, ethnicity, and the intersections of these (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). In addition, stories reveal sociocultural and institutional influences on how teachers understand the world and their work as teachers.

A number of educational researchers have placed narratives at the centre of research on teaching as a practice, the study of teachers, and the schooling process (Burner & Osler, 2021; Carter, 1993; Casey, 1993, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Goodson, 1992; Ingvarsdóttir, 2014; Osler, 1997; Osler & Zhu, 2011; Smith, 2016). The relationship between life story and narrative inquiry lies in "the view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). Although other forms of qualitative inquiry also draw on the social and the story, narrative inquiry differs in its use of commonplaces (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) argue that narrative inquiry involves the simultaneous exploration of temporality, sociality, and place. The concept of temporality refers to recognition that people, places, and events are always in a process of transition that has a past, present, and future. Sociality takes into consideration personal conditions (feelings, hopes,

desires, and moral dispositions) and existential conditions (the environment, surrounding factors and forces, including people that make up the individual's context). Sociability also includes the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Place refers to the concrete boundaries of locations or series of places that impact on the participants' experiences, which shift in line with temporality (Connelly et al., 2006, p. 23). Analysis of teachers' stories in the context of the three common places of temporality, sociality, and place allows for a deeper and contextualised understanding of teachers' formation of beliefs, attitudes and actions at specific times in their lives, within historically bound contexts (Osler, 2013b).

The in-depth nature of an analysis of teachers' stories within the overlapping conceptual framework of temporality, sociality, and place allows the researcher to focus on a relatively small sample. The emphasis is on individual experience and theorising of meanings attached to each life story within its unique context (Goodson, 2008). The aim of this study is not to present objective representative realities but to generate in-depth data from individual stories that can be used to develop a shared understanding of teachers' reasons for working with human rights, their practices, and perceptions of the systemic challenges, including those related to school culture, cooperation and collaboration. In this sense, this study creates a space for shared life experiences that offer "insights into the complexities and contradictions of human experience" (Osler, 1997, p. 56). By accessing these insights, we are better placed to engage in deep critical reflection and inquiry leading to new ways to understand, engage with, and support teachers' work around social justice and human rights.

Fook (2011) describes critical reflection as a way of learning from and reworking experience. She divides the process into two stages. First, the unearthing of fundamental assumptions implicit in stories that are primarily concerned with power, including the connections between the individual and the social context. Second, the use of the intentions and values that emerge from the story and that are recognised as important to reshape practice. This allows us to not simply position ourselves in the world, but to actively engage with others and with the world (Freire, 1996). The research process is therefore political in that it reveals "the inevitable politics inherent in personal and professional realms" (Page & Curran, 2010, p. 76).

Goodson and Gill (2014) describe the narrative process as one that allows us to be, and become, more fulfilled human beings, "returning to and reaffirming one's humanity and the humanity of others" (2014, p. 17). If we understand narrative inquiry as a humanising process that is political, life

stories become important pedagogical tools (Goodson & Gill, 2014; Osler, 1997, 2016; Osler & Zhu, 2011). The stories allow for interpretations that can “illuminate our scope of action” (Goodson & Gill, 2014, p. 36). Life stories support narrative inquiry’s action-oriented nature because the stories provide a pedagogical context for theorising about issues of human rights and social justice, and the implications for HRE in schools.

In the next section, the research methods are presented and details provided of the data collection and analysis processes.

### **4.3 Data collection stages**

#### **4.3.1 The grounding and pilot stage**

I enrolled on the doctoral programme in the autumn of 2010 as a part-time student at the University of Iceland. I spent the first two years of my study familiarising myself with the Icelandic school context while also carrying out education consultancies overseas and teaching at the International School of Iceland. I refer to this stage as my grounding period in that I used it to develop a foundation from which my study would grow.

During this time, I met with different education stakeholders, visited schools, and conducted a review of education policies in Iceland (see Gollifer & Tran, 2013). These activities allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the Icelandic education context, the nature of social justice oriented education in Icelandic formal education, and the potential role of HRE. My decision to focus on the upper secondary school level was based on three main factors. First, upper secondary schools provide certain challenges to HRE that are not as evident at the compulsory school level; the focus is on subject specialisation in both academic and vocational/technical schools, and teachers are first and foremost trained as subject specialists. Second, as an English language teacher and a non-Icelandic speaker, I had better access to upper secondary school teachers and their students. I found that teachers and students at this level of schooling were more confident about using English than teachers at the compulsory school level. Third, upper secondary school represents the transition from child to adult; students enter at the age of 16 and leave at 19, suggesting a critical period in terms of social and academic development. These young adults represent the next generation of influential decision makers with consequences for human and ecological wellbeing.

I conducted a pilot study in the autumn of 2012. This involved classroom observation, co-teaching, and conducting semi-structured interviews with

students and two teachers at the upper secondary school level. This period led me to develop an appreciation for life story as a data collection method that was centred on knowledge construction through interaction and critical examination of the knowledge to identify how it might create injustice by serving particular interests. The pilot study was completed in the spring of 2013 and informed my doctoral proposal. My interim evaluation was held in May 2013, after which I was ready to start data collection in earnest.

#### **4.3.2 Selecting the teachers**

The criteria to participate in this study focused on teachers who identify with working towards social justice aims and who promote human rights in their work. The decision was made to work with between eight and ten teachers. In table 1, I provide information related to the five female and five male teachers who participated in this study. As the table indicates, they teach a range of different subjects; they come from a variety of schools including grammar (Gr), comprehensive (Comp) and Technical (T); and they have had varying years of experience teaching at the upper secondary school level. Two teachers do not have both parents of Icelandic heritage. Despite being a relatively homogeneous group in terms of ethnicity and experiences of education, the telling of stories allows for different interpretive nuances of similar lived experiences. These interpretations are informed by teachers' beliefs, attitudes, sense of identity and actions at specific times in their lives, within historically bound contexts (Osler, 2013b).

The teachers' stories were not intended to generalise to a population as regards the representation or status of HRE in Icelandic upper secondary schools. They are used to explore what they reveal about the potential of HRE as a transformative pedagogy. The most appropriate selection approach was purposeful sampling and snowballing (Creswell, 2008). Criteria for the recruitment process included upper secondary school teachers "committed to" and "working with" human rights and social justice aims. The criteria were intentionally broad to encourage a range of emphases as regards teachers making links between their work and human rights.

The invitation letter (appendix 1.1) was sent to 16 colleagues at the School of Education of the University of Iceland, who acted as gatekeepers (Creswell, 2008). The gatekeepers have links to upper secondary schools, work directly with upper secondary school teachers, and/or are active in the field of teacher education. The gatekeepers were asked to consider any potential participants and to pass on the invitation letter. Some did this, whilst others sent me the names of potential teacher participants. A list with

the names of 34 upper secondary school teachers was compiled. Teachers were selected based on their subject areas to ensure representation from the sciences, mathematics, humanities, arts, and social science disciplines. Gender balance was also a consideration. Although sufficient rich data had been generated from the stories of nine teachers, it was decided to include the story of one of the teachers who had participated in the pilot study. This teacher had been interviewed twice, and her life story provided interesting insights about the relationship between tacit knowledge and social justice that were not as strongly evident in the other nine stories.

The study does not aim to draw conclusions, make comparisons, or claim population representation in relation to variables such as school type, school culture, subject area, age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. I recognise that these variables, and their intersections, influence teachers' storytelling and meaning-making process around their work with social justice. The teachers were selected based on their commitment to social justice and human rights. Life story as a data collection method helps to understand the nature of this commitment. It provides information on teachers' reasons for addressing social justice, their practices, and their perceptions of systemic challenges, which are then used to inform and extend understanding of transformative HRE in upper secondary schools in Iceland.



| Name/Age<br>(at time of<br>interview) | Years<br>teaching | School<br>type/# | Subject<br>Specialisation                             | Date interviewed   | Significant life experiences related to working with human<br>rights   |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|---|--|--|
| Ella (F)<br>Early 40s                 | Since 2000        | Gr/1             | English   | Pilot study<br>Interview 1: 12 <sup>th</sup><br>Oct. 2012: 14.30-<br>17.00<br>Interview 2: 20 <sup>th</sup><br>March 2013: 16.30-<br>18.15 | Went straight into teaching; strong sense of family<br>and community; awareness of role models and<br>cross-cultural experiences of studying and living<br>abroad in shaping her approach to teaching.   |
| Anna (F)<br>Early 50s                 | Since 2006        | Comp/2           | Sociology, History,<br>Gender Studies, Life<br>Skills | Interview 1: 24 <sup>th</sup><br>July 2013: 10.00-<br>11.32<br>Interview 2: 2 <sup>nd</sup> May<br>2014: 16.00-17.05                       | Became a teacher later in life and is influenced by<br>her feminist stance; aware of the influence of<br>feminism and politics in shaping her approach to<br>teaching.   |
| Helga (F)<br>Late 40s                 | Since 1987        | Comp/3           | History   | 20 <sup>th</sup> Aug. 2013<br>10.36-11.55  | Went straight into teaching; strong sense of family;<br>awareness of role models in shaping her approach<br>to teaching; thrives on the student diversity in her<br>school.  |
| Bjarni (M)<br>Mid 30s                 | Since 2003        | Comp/3           | Geography,<br>Geology, Life Skills                    | 21 <sup>st</sup> Aug. 2013<br>09.10-10.20  | Strong socialist values and aware of the influence of<br>politics in shaping his approach to teaching.   |
| Ingimar (M)<br>Late 40s               | Since 1987        | Gr/4             | History, Sociology                                    | Interview 1:<br>30 <sup>th</sup> April 2014<br>09.10-10.20<br>Interview 2:<br>29 <sup>th</sup> Oct. 2014<br>09.30-11.00                    | Went straight into teaching; strong awareness of<br>political influences on his teaching, developed<br>though cross-cultural experiences; strong critic of<br>selective schooling; left upper secondary school<br>teaching disillusioned with the system.    |
| Tumi (M)<br>Early 40s                 | Since 1998        | Gr/5             | Philosophy, English                                   | 6 <sup>th</sup> May 2014:<br>10.00-11.33   | Went straight into teaching; strong views on the<br>negative impact of hierarchy in schools; his<br>approach to teaching is influenced by growing up in<br>a politically aware household in his youth and his<br>own experience of schooling.                |
| Ilmur (F)<br>Mid 30s                  | Since 2011        | T/6              | Cultural Literacy, Art<br>and Design                  | 8 <sup>th</sup> May 2014:<br>13.45-14.40   | Worked in human resource training before<br>becoming a teacher; her teaching approach is<br>influenced by sustainability education and growing<br>up as the daughter of a father not from Iceland and<br>an Icelandic mother, in different country contexts. |
| Simon (M)<br>Early 50s                | Since 1990        | Comp/7           | Biology, Chemistry                                    | 7 <sup>th</sup> Oct. 2014:<br>17.00-18.20  | Went straight into teaching; childhood experiences<br>of illness influence his approach to teaching;<br>emphasis on students at risk of dropping out; strong<br>critic of selective schooling.   |
| Selma (F)<br>Mid 30s                  | Since 2004        | Gr/4             | English   | 29 <sup>th</sup> Oct. 2014:<br>11.15-13.00   | Went straight into teaching; concerned about<br>working as an individual and in a school system that<br>prioritises core subjects; seeks opportunities to<br>develop her commitment to social justice in her<br>teaching.                                    |
| Viktor (M)<br>Early 40s               | Since 2009        | Comp/8           | Mathematics   | 19 <sup>th</sup> Jan. 2015: 10.00-<br>11.30  | Worked as a carpenter before moving into teaching.<br>Strong sense of social justice developed through<br>cross-cultural experiences; his teaching responds to<br>the negative impact of schooling on student<br>wellbeing.                                  |

**Table 1: Profile of participating teachers**

teachers' frequently made references to never having had the opportunity to express or explore their commitment to human rights and social justice. This was reminiscent of author James Meek's point that, when you actively engage people in telling their stories, "from this little seed an enormous tree grows that branches out into all sorts of directions and that really enriches your understanding of the ground on which you stand" (Wade, 2019, para. 10). Narration generates a deeper understanding for both the storyteller and the listener; it facilitates revealing honest admissions, an important part of the story, which more structured and formal interview approaches may not allow to flourish.

Qualitative data collection is cyclical in nature in that it allows for deeper exploration of issues through inductive inferences (Hennink et al., 2011). Key issues or themes that are identified in one interview can be used to refine questions and topical probes in the next, even with the same participant. For this reason, the first pilot interview was included in the data analysis, and a second interview with Ella was conducted using the three guiding questions. Second interviews were also conducted with two of the other participants, Anna and Ingimar. As the interviews progressed, the narratives became richer and generated enough deep data for analysis purposes from one sitting. The interview times varied between just over one hour and two and a half hours, the longest being the first pilot interview (see table 4).

Qualitative researchers are always faced with the perennial question, how many interviews is enough? In response to this question posed to 14 renowned social scientists and five early career researchers, the majority answer was inevitably, "it depends", and ranged from one to over one hundred (Baker & Edwards, n.d). The authors identified three key factors to consider when answering this question, which were categorised under epistemological, methodological and practical concerns (Baker & Edwards, n.d). As I stated previously, from a list of 34 upper secondary school teachers, I looked for subject and gender representation. Given that the teachers are a relatively homogenous group in terms of ethnicity and education, ten teachers' stories provided sufficient rich data to be able to respond to my three sub questions. As I have also explained, the three open questions (see appendix 1.2) provided before the interview helped the teachers and I to hold fruitful and deep meaningful exchanges that were focused on generating data related to the research questions. In three instances, I held a second interview with teachers and I emailed three other teachers for factual clarifications after the interview. Each teacher was sent a reconstructed story, representing my data set, giving them the opportunity to further engage if they felt that this was necessary. For the purpose of my

study, ten teachers' stories provided the data that I needed to answer my research questions and create my conceptualisation of a transformative HRE teacher education framework. In answer to the perennial question based on my experience during this study, it is not the quantity of interviews that counts but rather the quality of the data, what you do with the data, and how it is presented that matters; it needs to serve the purpose of your research study.

#### **4.3.4 Informed consent, reflections, memo writing and data storage**

All the participants signed an informed consent form (see appendix 1.3) and interviews were recorded with permission. The research project was registered with The Icelandic Data Protection Authority (Persónuvernd, nr. S6320/2013) (see appendix 1.4). Recordings were transcribed the same day or within two days of the interview, except in two cases where the transcriptions were completed a month after each of the interviews. However, immediate impressions on how the interview went were recorded in a computer file that was developed for the interview process. These were named *Post-interview reflections*. These initial reflections were invaluable in preparing for the next interview. This also made it possible to refer back to the reflections when re-constructing the teachers' stories (see appendix 1.5). Memo writing (Charmaz, 2006) was an important part of the research process, allowing reference to be made to journal notes during the data analysis process.

The data storage management file consists of a table format that records the basic personal and professional details of participants, such as gender, current age, the age that they started teaching, subjects taught, type of school, and location. Systematic data storage and organisation, allowed for time spent "bathing in the data" (Goodson, 2013, p. 40). This careful notetaking and organisation of the collected data facilitated the return to the study after a two-year break, as explained in section 4.5.

#### **4.4 Data analysis**

The abductive approach to data analysis is best explained as a non-linear process, involving "researchers' immersion in and deliberate turning or moving away from the task of scrutinizing evidence to be open to possibilities" (Rinehart, 2020, p. 1). Rinehart (2020) identifies three necessary conditions for abductive analysis: time to become knowledgeable, receptivity to prompts and clues, and backward mapping "to trace the logics-in-hindsight" (p.2). It is an active and conscious process and requires

accepting the need for changes or modifications, as is now explained by the audit trail.

#### 4.4.1 The audit trail

Given that abductive analysis is greatly influenced by the researcher's intuitive and interpretive understandings, and not purely by data sets or theoretical and conceptual frameworks (Rinehart, 2020), the use of both Grounded Theory (GT) and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as data analysis methods is appropriate. GT provided a reiterative approach to sorting, coding, and comparison, which provided a certain rigour leading to the identification of relevant categories (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). It is a constructivist approach that takes the initial data set and creates codes based on a) reading for overall content, b) data annotation, c) repetition identification, d) topic changes, e) in vivo codes, f) analytical reading and g) exploring underlying concepts to represent a collective group of codes (Hennink et al., 2011).

It is important to note that GT is used in this study as a data analysis method **and not** a methodological approach. In this respect, the use of GT was not aimed at generating any sort of theory from the data but instead at providing a systematic coding mechanism to organise the extensive rich data generated by the teachers' stories. The initial inductive approach started with a line-by-line review of each data set (13 interview transcripts from 10 teachers); initial or open coding included self-reflective memos in the form of interviewer's reflections (IR) written into the transcriptions. IRs consist of "questions, musings, and speculations about the data" (Creswell, 1998, p. 302), which suits an abductive approach understood as a back and forth conversation between empirical observations and theoretical propositions (Rinehart, 2020). The "back and forth" of abduction challenges the notion of research as a step-by-step process (Rinehart, 2020, p.3). Instead it offers "a reciprocal coming-in-close and backing-off-to-a-distance in terms of researcher exploration of situations and evidence" (Rinehart, 2020, p.3).

The reflections were used to develop a *table of life experiences* for each teacher. This laid out the core features of their story under broad headings. These features were then used to identify in vivo codes representing each of the teachers' stories. In vivo codes represent the initial coding process to assist with the development of more complex and nuanced GT codes (Charmaz, 2006). These were categorised under teachers' reasons for working with human rights, teachers' practices, and perceptions of systemic challenges, and then used to reconstruct each story in a way that would allow

for exploration of temporality, sociability and place (see appendix 1.5). Temporality, sociability, and place offer a conceptual framework that encourages simultaneous exploration to build a deeper understanding of the individual behind the story. These stories are the heart of the thesis in that they not only provide the content and context for the three findings and discussion chapters that follow and are a necessary source of cross-referencing for the main themes, they also serve to give voice and credibility to each individual teacher as unique human beings whose contribution is worth listening to. I made a methodological choice to analyse the stories to generate themes related to my three sub-questions rather than focus on each individual story as a single data set. The reconstructed stories as individual data sets are however important as pedagogical tools for HRE, as I discuss further in my final chapter.

The reconstructed stories worked as one data set used to identify axial codes typical in GT. Axial coding is a process of putting data back together in new ways by “making connections between a category and its subcategories” (Creswell, 1998, p. 302). The relatively small data set facilitated manual analysis, which allowed for full engagement with each of the participants’ stories. The in-depth and personal attachment to each story reflects the relational aspect of life story, in particular, the connection between the researcher and the participant. This intuitively, rather than consciously, leads the researcher into deliberation and reflection, creating multiple possibilities as regards how the data can be interpreted. The process of backward mapping to identify the way forward revealed the need for certain modifications in my research; first, to my initial research question and then, to the use of GT as the data analysis tool.

The initial research question I was working with was: *How is human rights education in upper secondary schools in Iceland represented by ten teachers and their stories?* The use of “representation” of HRE in upper secondary schools in Iceland became problematic because it placed the focus on analysing teachers’ discourse related to reasons, practices and perceptions of systemic challenges. This suggested that I wanted to create an understanding of how HRE is understood in the Icelandic education context. My interest is not only in *how HRE is understood* but in *the relation between teachers’ lived experiences in certain sociocultural and political contexts (including the school) and their practices, and what this implies for transformative HRE*. The use of narratives in the form of life stories was aimed at better understanding what is meant by “transformative” HRE and to identify ways to develop a transformative HRE approach. The overarching question was modified so that the emphasis was on the life story as content

and context. The question thus became: *How do the life stories of ten upper secondary school teachers inform and extend understanding of human rights education as transformative pedagogy?*

Data analysis consists of many searches, which may lead to “important findings, some will be unfruitful and others will generate ideas, thoughts, and questions for further data searches” (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 237). As Reichertz (2010) explains in reference to abduction:

The search for order is never definitively complete and is always undertaken provisionally. So long as the new order is helpful in the completion of a task it is allowed to remain in force: if its value is limited, distinctions must be made; if it shows itself to be useless, it is abandoned. In this sense, abductively discovered orders are neither (preferred) constructions nor (valid) reconstructions, but usable (re-) constructions. (para. 24)

Deliberation and reflection during the process of developing axial codes, made me aware that I was drawing on professional knowledge from my own life story, and theoretical and conceptual constructs from my analysis of human rights, HRE literature and the policy and school context in Iceland. While GT suggests a rigorous systematic inductive approach, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) provided a deeper critical analysis informed by the literature review, including the different interpretations of social justice and the constraints to HRE in schools. This led to the identification of latent themes. The GT axial codes were more reflective of semantic or descriptive codes. Although, semantic coding involves a level of interpretation to capture the surface meanings of data, latent themes present a constructionist account of the data that moves beyond explicit and descriptive content (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In contrast to GT that seeks meaning from the data in a structured and systematic way, RTA is an actively creative process carried out by the researcher “at the intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). Using GT at the beginning of the analysis process provided strong initial in-vivo codes. Given the extensive and rich data that the life stories generated, this allowed for easy reconstruction of the teachers’ stories, which could then be drawn on to categorise the data into manageable axial codes. RTA then helped refine these codes and develop them into the final themes used in the finding chapters. While the axial codes represent generic accounts of reasons, practices and perceptions of systemic challenges, RTA allowed for a stronger social constructionist interpretation of these generic codes.

## **4.5 Methodological and ethical challenges and limitations**

### **4.5.1 Language issues**

The use of English in the data collection process can be considered a potential weakness. At the start of the research project, my spoken and written Icelandic was limited. Conducting interviews in English poses obvious constraints given that language usage is more than a technical concern, reflecting issues of voice, reflexivity, and cultural representation (Temple, 2006). From a technical perspective, experience has shown that teachers' use of English is strong and allows for fluent and meaningful communication. In cases where teachers struggled with a translation, for example of an intrinsically Icelandic term, they were encouraged to use Icelandic. Teachers used random Icelandic words or phrases, in particular for emphasis, during their interviews. The use of recording and transcription allowed for later translation and verification of meaning with the participant, if needed.

From a social constructivist view, language is an essential tool that allows the researcher to understand social processes and cultural meanings that inscribe human behaviour (Hennink, 2008). This requires the ability to respond to and interpret culturally contextualized references on the part of the researcher. References that were essentially Icelandic and that required knowledge of the context were always followed up with the participants themselves or with colleagues. The use of one dominant language throughout the research process raises questions about power relations, as is discussed in intercultural studies and interpretation/translation literature (Temple, 2006). There are instances when participants who are speaking a second language during the interview process may use a term that has certain negative political or sociocultural connotations. One teacher in this study uses the term "civilised countries" to refer to countries in the global north. From a postcolonial perspective, the use of certain terms could be viewed as derogatory and a discourse analysis could shed light on teacher bias and prejudice. However, reconstructions of the life stories focus on meaning making related to reasons, practices and systemic challenges. Teachers' choice of vocabulary is not analysed because first, teachers are using a second language to share their stories and second, the focus is the whole life experience, not individual linguistic items.

The use of English can limit the quality of the data collected and restrict recruitment. Some teachers may have decided not to participate because of the use of English and/or a view that a foreigner may not be able to fully understand or relate to specific Icelandic experiences. All researchers face

risks when they make choices in their research approach. Although I had no other option at the start of my study, on reflection, the use of English has not negatively affected the research approach. First, enough teachers of a range of subject areas were recruited and the life story data collection method allowed space for teachers to focus on their stories rather than language. In fact, it can be argued that the use of English throughout, with no need to translate parts of the data set (or only minor translations of random Icelandic words or phrases), avoided the disconnect between the participants' original spoken words and the translated version in a text. When the language issue was discussed with participants in the study, many of them expressed that they were used to dialoguing in English. For those who were not so confident, the fact that they were sharing experiences with an educator who shares their commitment to social justice and human rights made the conversational flow easier. For some, the research being conducted by a non-Icelander was a bonus in that it allowed them to explain themselves in ways that led to their own deeper reflection of educational events specific to Iceland. One participant interestingly commented that sharing their story in English to a non-Icelander created a comfortable distance because they felt less at risk of being judged by someone who may be more familiar with their personal or professional background.

#### **4.5.2 The researcher as an insider or outsider**

An important factor related to positionality and power besides language is how the participants perceive or position the researcher. At the time of the interviews, I was not teaching at the School of Education. Although I had taught at the International School, I was not a recognised member of the Icelandic teaching community, which is small and connected across levels and institutions. This meant that other ways had to be found to gain trust, respect, and acceptance of credentials as a researcher of this particular topic. The use of life story facilitated dialogues where the shared experience becomes as important as the content. In each interview, I would start by introducing my interest in human rights as an educator, providing a shared professional identity. The participants were also made aware of my connections to Iceland as the mother of a daughter in the Icelandic school system. I adopted the privileged dual position of "outsider-insider", which revealed more commonalities than differences. This dual positioning proved useful as it provided a balance between an objective lens looking in from a critical distance, and a subjective lens that draws on experience and knowledge to make sense of what was learned from looking in.



The outsider-insider position fits well with the abductive analysis approach in that it also involves moving back and forth from one position to the other, revealing the influences that each have on meaning making. In this sense, it “raises possibilities for thinking differently by including those aspects of our lives that are normally bracketed from consideration” (Bauman & May, 2001, p. 167). Challenges and limitations as regards positionality and privilege are less about language and/or the researcher as insider or outsider, and more about the intercultural communication skills of the researcher. This refers to the capacity to generate communication based on empathy, solidarity, and mutual respect, which can also be discussed in relation to issues of reciprocity.

#### **4.5.3 Reciprocity**

Osler (1997) points out that participants in qualitative studies too often tend to be seen as a source of data. This way of thinking is revealed in the following statement: “an in-depth interview is an interview; it is not a dialogue, which involves a two-way exchange of information” (Hennink *et al.*, 2011, p. 128). The authors go on to say, “the steadfast rule is to keep yourself out of the interview!” (p. 128). Other scholars challenge this view and understand knowledge production during the interview as a joint endeavour of the interviewee and the interviewer (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), reflecting a social constructivist position.

The notion of a joint endeavour is important in that it suggests the need for reciprocity, an exchange that ensures mutual benefit. An informed interview or discussion cannot be had about a research topic if the interviewer stays out of the conversation. Life story aims to create a reciprocal flow of information that enriches both the participant and the researcher. As explained in the data collection section, a balance between the structured interview and the open-ended approach had to be found, leading to the development of the interview guides that were sent out to participants before meeting in person. The researcher’s personal story was shared with participants to varying levels, depending on the exchange and communication flow. This did not result in influencing the views of the interviewee in any negative way but instead worked to establish a working relationship built on transparency and values such as equality (Osler, 1997). Given that telling one’s life story is dependent on mutual trust, there is a need to carefully consider the nature of the rapport with the participant. As Osler points out, “interviews are necessarily complex social interactions and it would seem that the critical issue is not whether a particular interview is

biased or not but whether the researcher is aware of their own influence” (Osler, 1997, p. 67).

#### **4.5.4 Grounded theory or grounded theory-lite?**

Although I have clearly stated that this research is not a grounded theory study, there is a need to address the criticism frequently raised about researchers misunderstanding and misusing GT. These include the need to differentiate between “grounded theory” and “grounded theory-lite” (Braun & Clarke, 2006; The University of Auckland, n.d.). The former is understood as a methodological approach while the latter is used to describe researchers using the techniques of grounded theory to develop categories (and concepts) and identify the relations between these. Thematic Analysis (TA) and grounded theory-lite both apply processes of coding to generate and interpret broader patterns in the data (The University of Auckland, n.d.). The use of GT in this dissertation could therefore be described as TA in that GT was chosen as a data analysis tool and not a methodological approach. In this study, this is presented as a challenge faced by the researcher rather than a limitation of the study. The question is then whether the study would be improved by using only Thematic Analysis (TA). In this case, no, as the GT process allowed for more time spent systematically organising the data into codes and categories, giving a deeper overview of the meanings embedded behind each of the teachers’ stories. The process reflects the three conditions of time, receptiveness and back mapping referred to by Rinehart (2020), core characteristics of the abductive approach. A researcher needs to be prepared to engage with the challenge of the inherent complexities of data analysis and the abductive nature of interpreting human stories. The qualitative nature of a research process is as much about being honest about who we are and how we work as individual researchers, as ensuring quality in terms of how the analysis informs the questions we set out to answer.

#### **4.5.5 The (ir)responsible researcher**

It should be recognised that the time between data collection and the completion of the analysis and writing up of the findings could be viewed as a limitation of the study. I raise this as a concern not in the apologetic sense, but as an ethical concern. Participants had given their time and opened up in ways that may have revealed insecurities, frustrations, and, in several cases, a burning need to share experiences in order to get some form of response or support. The question then becomes one about the relevance of the findings today.

Data collection took approximately two years. This was to a great extent due to personal and professional issues but also my way of working. As a novice researcher, I initially started by completing transcriptions and initial line-by-line coding before taking the next interview. At the time of data collection, spanning from 2012 to 2015, the introduction of the 2011 curriculum was fresh off the press. Teachers were on strike during this period and dealing with immense pressures brought about as a result of the education reforms. 2015 was the year in which all upper secondary schools were expected to implement the 2011 National Curriculum Guides. These events are likely to have influenced the underlying frustration of the teachers apparent in a number of the stories. However, the length of time as regards data collection does not seem to have influenced teachers' stories. Recent research on the upper secondary school level (Bjarnadóttir, 2019; Ragnarsdóttir, 2018) suggest that teachers' perspectives are connected to factors that are as applicable today as they were when the teachers were interviewed.

Due to personal and professional reasons, I chose to take a two-year break from my studies at the point where I had collected the data and completed the GT analysis. Although not officially registered as a doctoral student, during this two-year break, I continued to reflect on my data, I read, I journalled and I discussed my interpretations with colleagues. When I re-registered on the doctoral programme, I realised that the teachers' stories represented a rich part of the ongoing historical development of HRE in Iceland and internationally. I understand these stories as timeless and genuine interpretations of their experiences, as relevant today in 2021 as they were when they were first told. The time between data collection and completion of the thesis has allowed for deeper inferences as regards the stubborn nature of systems in constraining change and being unresponsive to teachers' attempts at engaging with human rights, as I discuss in my findings and concluding chapters.

The lengthy research experience has resulted in a depth and richness that would not have been possible had this thesis been undertaken full-time and completed in four years. Taking time to be receptive to prompts that deepen our knowledge and that lead to modifications in order to create meaningful interpretations, is reflective of a responsible, rather than irresponsible researcher. This is a highly subjective conclusion that is influenced by my individual preferences as a researcher. However, in the spirit of the abductive approach to research, "not only do we need to take the time to complete our tasks with the satisfaction of work well done, we also need time away from these tasks, including those we label research analysis" (Rinehart, 2020, p.4).

#### 4.5.6 Confidentiality and anonymity

The content addressed and presented in the study is not sensitive in the sense that its publication does not put any participants at risk of obvious physical or psychological harm. However, it is sensitive because of its personal nature. The teachers have opened up about their political stance; family, socioeconomic, and cultural background; their frustrations about the school and education system; and their visions for a socially just society.

On June 2, 2019, all ten teachers received a correspondence explaining my two-year break and the delay in writing up the thesis. The majority of the teachers responded expressing their support and continued interest in reading the final results. I again wrote to the teachers in early 2020 to update them on the progress of the thesis. I also sent them their reconstructed stories (appendix 1.5) to review and to ask for permission to use these as pedagogical tools in my teaching. As a researcher, I felt a strong ethical and professional responsibility towards the ten teachers; this included keeping them informed and allowing them to express their feelings about how they were presented in the stories. Some of the email responses from teachers were:

It's quite strange to read this now - but there is nothing there that isn't true. (Anna, personal communication, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020)

I still recognize myself! But everything else has changed (and not necessarily for the better)...You are doing work, which is so important. (Selma, personal communication, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020)

Your research is important. I still fight for the group of students you mention. The ones that come to school with failing grades in academics and they really are convinced they are not as good as others not only at learning, but as people. (Simon, personal communication, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020)

The participants have been given pseudonyms. They were asked to agree on the pseudonym or choose another name. When writing to the participants, it was stressed that the findings chapters represent an interpretation of their stories. The reconstructions of the stories form the basis of the findings and represent usable (re-) constructions of their life story as it was told in the interviews. Nine of the ten teachers agreed to allow me to use their stories for teaching purposes and in the thesis, if I chose to

do so. One teacher was concerned about anonymity, and it was decided not to include or use their reconstructed story as a pedagogical tool. This teacher did however consent to being included in the findings chapters.

Iceland is a small country and the upper secondary school community is even smaller. For this reason, careful thought had to be given to how the data was presented in terms of what it reveals about a participants' identity. The fact that teachers have read through and agreed on the reconstructions of their stories suggests that they are aware of the risks. One teacher acknowledged that it was likely that he would be recognised in the reconstructed story by those who knew him but he still agreed to his story being used. Other teachers asked for some information to be changed to better conceal their identity. This process of engagement on issues of anonymity has given a deeper understanding of the notion of informed consent and the responsibility of the researcher, in particular given the time that had passed since the interviews were taken. The wellbeing of the participant is a priority. Even though this study does not address or raise highly sensitive issues, the researcher needs to respect participants' decisions to withdraw from the study.

Despite these methodological challenges related to anonymity, the relatively small size of the population in Iceland also offers certain advantages. The Icelandic education and research community has had to respond creatively to adhere to principles of anonymity and confidentiality in educational research. This seems to have created a strong unspoken code of mutual respect and trust, as indicated by the teacher who agreed to me using his reconstructed story, despite believing that it is likely that he will be recognised. However, the response of the teacher who does not want his reconstructed story to be used, illustrates that certain research formalities need to be taken seriously and consent cannot be assumed.

#### **4.5.7 Working with a select group of teachers**

I chose to work with teachers who self-identify as working towards social justice and human rights. This could be considered a limitation in terms of scope, given that the group I have chosen to work with is not representative of teachers at large. However, the focus of my study is not to search for broader representations. It is to develop a deep understanding of the committed teacher to better understand the nature of transformative pedagogies in a country context where HRE remains an underresearched field and currently plays no role in teacher preparation. As stated earlier, I was only able to locate two studies on teachers' reasons for choosing to

engage with social justice concerns in their work. Teachers' insights on their reasons, practices and perceived challenges represent one important part of a broader reality. The knowledge from teachers who are engaging with general aims of education despite a school system that prioritises subject specialisation offers insights that can inform the work of HRE educators. It allows for consideration of the possibilities for transformative pedagogies in upper secondary schools; and it raises critical questions about how teacher education can draw on teachers' moral and political commitments to increase accountability for social justice and human rights in the upper secondary school system. More importantly, analysis of committed teachers' stories create possible content and contexts for teacher education. Such content and contexts expose all teachers to critical discussions on the purpose of upper secondary schooling, teachers who may not share the same enthusiasm for social justice related aims as the teachers in this study.

#### **4.6 Summary of chapter four**

In this chapter, the methodological approach has been explained in detail based on a social constructivist stance. Narrative inquiry is used, supported by life story as the data collection method, and GT and RTA to support an abductive data analysis approach. I have argued that abductive analysis complements the use of life stories in that it allows for researcher deliberation and reflexivity that generate the respect and attention that each individual narrative deserves. I present methodological and ethical concerns to address issues related to language, the insider-outsider position, reciprocity, the gap between data collection and completion of the thesis, and considerations related to anonymity and confidentiality, as well as the selection of teachers. The main lesson learned from my methodological approach is that the researcher should listen to their own internal common sense as regards the time needed to carry out research; and not to external "time pressures for the production of research outputs" in order to attempt to be efficient (Rinehart, 2020, p. 3).

Drawing on this methodological base, I now turn to my findings chapters. First, I present a discussion on the reasons why teachers have chosen to work with human rights in chapter five, followed by analysis of teachers' practices in chapter six, before moving to teachers' perceptions of systemic challenges in chapter seven. I then draw on these findings in chapter eight to explore how teachers' life stories inform our understanding of transformative HRE and to propose a conceptual framework for HRE teacher education.

## 5 What do teachers' life stories reveal about why they work with human rights?

*Education could be described as a process through which the hidden, the implicit, the tacit, the elusive, and the unknown become vivid and known to us. However, it is not enough to know and understand-we must know with intention and purpose, and we must act with understanding and meaning. (Giroux & Purpel, 1983, p. 277)*

### 5.1 Introduction

To answer the question, *what do teachers' life stories reveal about why they work with human rights?* I have drawn on my own life story, my analysis of human rights, HRE literature and the policy and school contexts in Iceland, as well as the ten teachers' life stories. In this chapter, three main themes are presented that make suggestions about why upper secondary school teachers choose to work with issues of social justice and human rights, despite being trained as subject specialists. These are: moral and political convictions underpin teachers' reasons for working with human rights; cross-cultural experiences shape teachers' moral and political convictions; teachers draw on tacit knowledge to explain their reasons for working with human rights. These themes are interrelated. Although moral and political convictions are shaped by cross-cultural experiences, the tacit nature of teachers' reasons suggests undeveloped explicit know-how of the relationship between socioculturally developed values and dispositions, and how these impact on understanding human rights. These themes are used to discuss the implications of tacit knowledge that constrains the intention and purpose needed for transformative HRE. As stated in chapter two, HRE as a transformative pedagogy requires learning *about*, *through* and *for* human rights with the explicit intention of generating change to ensure human wellbeing. Tacit knowledge can dilute teachers' understanding of their actions and more importantly, the implications of these actions. This leads to the suggestion that tacit knowledge can perpetuate the very injustices that teachers seek to address.

This first of three findings chapter is the core of the study. Not only does the chapter introduce each of the ten teachers; it provides valuable insights

into the influence of teachers' life experiences on their reasons for engaging with social justice and human rights. Their life experiences reveal interrelated sociocultural influences. As previously stated, I was only able to locate two studies that address the reasons why teachers engage with human rights (see Magendzo et al., 2015; Tibbitts, 2016). The findings presented are therefore an important and new contribution to scholarly work on social justice in teacher education, in Iceland and internationally.

## **5.2 Moral and political convictions underpin teachers' reasons for working with human rights**

Several scholars have discussed teaching as a moral and political endeavour (Dewey, 1996; Freire, 1996; Giroux, 2010; Giroux & Purpel, 1983). As Biesta & Miedema (2002) point out a large number of teachers "conceive of their profession much more in moral and social than in crudely cognitive and instrumental terms" (p. 176). In her review of the literature, Campbell (2008) distinguishes between different conceptual perspectives of teaching as a "moral" endeavour. These include virtue ethics in the Aristotelian tradition which emphasises virtues of mind, character, and sense of honesty through forms of moral education (Carr, 2000; Fenstermacher, 1990); morals in the context of principles, rights, and duties (Strike, 1990); morals contextualised in the area of care and caring (Noddings, 1984, 2002); psychological perspectives of moral development (Kohlberg, 1981); and moral perspectives aligned with postmodern social justice paradigms (Slattery & Rapp, 2003). Teaching as a political endeavour is closely aligned with social justice education aimed at addressing power and equity concerns (Giroux, 2010, Giroux & Purpel, 1983; Freire, 1996). In this chapter, the terms moral and political conviction are used to discuss teachers' beliefs and values about the purpose of education and the role of the teacher and schooling. Socially constructed moral and political positions shape teachers' ideas about purpose and role as related to human rights. Teachers' moral and political convictions are therefore context-based and relational in that they are responsive to sociopolitical and cultural conditions.

Moral convictions that underpin reasons for working with human rights are evident in all teachers' narratives. These convictions tend to reflect an understanding of the role of the teacher as more than a subject specialist; the teacher has a moral responsibility to address issues of rights and justice because these are part of lived reality. Ilmur, who began teaching in 2011 and who teaches art and design, and cultural literacy in an upper secondary school offering both vocational programmes and university entry



qualifications, states: "Everything has to do with human rights... teaching something about just the way of living". Selma works in a grammar school where she had been teaching English for over 10 years at the time of the interview. She understands working with human rights as the "right thing to do" because "human rights are something that, the minute that you are born it is attached to you, in your heart and in your lungs". Again, the suggestion is that teachers should be working with human rights because they are an essential component of lived reality.

Teachers talk about the need to be "fair" and "just" and to show students "care" to ensure effective learning and general wellbeing. Anna, who had been teaching history, gender studies, life skills, and social sciences in the same school since 2006 argues for: "Care, care, care...it's useless for you to teach social justice if you don't show care". Anna directly references Nell Noddings' ethics of care (Noddings, 2002) as an influence on her teaching. Noddings' notion of caring relations, as the foundation for successful pedagogical activity, is reflected in a number of the narratives. Ella is an English teacher and had been working in the same grammar school for over seven years at the time of the interview. She understands teaching as primarily a moral endeavour where the teaching of English becomes secondary to ensuring student wellbeing: "being a teacher comes first and then what I teach comes second". Both Ella and Selma refer to their roles as mothers as closely linked to informing a social justice response. As Selma explains: "I think I have always had this inclination towards social justice...As a mother, I think that I can engage with my students about these issues and get them engaged". Ella states: "I think, parenting and teaching is closely related". Ella is also aware of how her moral stance is influenced by her own internal biases:

I also have to fight my own prejudice... sometimes, I feed into the wrong stereotype, like I say things like to a girl, 'oh you are so conscientious', 'you work so hard' instead of saying 'you are so smart' and I say to the boys, 'well, you're just lazy. You're really smart but you just don't work hard'. (Ella, English teacher)

Viktor is a mathematics teacher who had been working in the same upper secondary school since 2009. Although he explains during the interview that he is not associated with any political party, he recognises that his interest in environmental concerns has developed his awareness of the role of schools in engaging students' in political concerns:

Social justice within our country...the equal opportunity to do things both from the rural and urban areas, the growing economic gap where many kids are working many hours a week and how this affects their study and their opportunities and goals. What is the purpose of education? Is it to get a highly paid job? Or is it to be happy in life? These things we talk about a lot with the kids. (Viktor, mathematics teacher)

Viktor explains that he has been influenced by what he refers to as character education and the belief that students need to learn “that there will be sacrifices along the way that need to be made, but that should not harm anyone along the way”. The cultivation of the virtuous person through mathematics teaching reflects liberal understandings of the purpose of education; Viktor understands the development of values and norms that may bring about some form of positive social change as instrumental to teaching his subject. Simon also shows an understanding of the teacher as a moral agent: “My responsibility is not first and foremost a science teacher in my school. It’s being a member of staff in this school and whatever the school does”. In this sense, he sees the whole school as having a moral obligation to ensure the wellbeing of students. He is a science teacher who teaches biology and chemistry. He had been teaching in the same comprehensive school for 24 years at the time of his interview in 2014. He explains his work with human rights and social justice as a response to what he perceives as an unjust education system. He understands his engagement with human rights as a response to a school system that fails certain students because these students are not able to keep up with systemic expectations of the purpose of education:

You come to the school counsellor when you are in trouble in school, your attendance is not good and you’re not interested in what you are doing in school because the school counsellor only has information about school subjects. (Simon, science teacher)

His reasons for working with human rights are based on understanding student wellbeing as a human rights concern: “And of course, this is human rights, of course”. The discussion about students getting the same chance to develop and achieve is a common theme evident in all of the narratives. Tumi had been working at the same grammar school for 16 years at the time of his

interview. He is a Philosophy and English teacher. Tumi connects his teaching to social justice in the context of challenging a selective school system:

What I think is most important is that the kids, they come in and their English is better when they leave, and that they are better people when they leave, and that they know more stuff. I'm, you know, if they get an 8 or a 9 or a 7, or a 6 or, or, if they cheat here or if they cheat there, I mean, that's not my, my primary concern, do you know what I mean? (Tumi, philosophy and English teacher)

His reference to grades not being a primary concern suggests that he resists the notion of schooling as limited to acquiring qualifications. Helga who teaches history at a comprehensive school and who had been teaching for over 26 years at the time of the interview, understands teaching as a moral vocation: "I was born to teach". She also has strong opinions about selective schooling and the emphasis on qualifications as primary goals of schooling. Before moving to the comprehensive school where she now works, Helga worked at a grammar school: "Do you know what you are missing when you don't want to bring in these people because they don't have an 8 in maths?" She understands the connection between human rights and her own teaching as underpinned by the need to be responsive to student diversity: "The students were wonderful...but all the same (*referring to the grammar school where she worked*)...then I switched...and that's where I found the environment where I can blossom".

Ingimar had been teaching for some 25 years in the same grammar school at the time of the interview. He trained as a history teacher but had also taught life skills and sociology. Ingimar believes that all teachers "are in this business of changing the world for the better, I really, I suspect they are". He explains that when he started teaching, he was influenced by an understanding of teaching as a process of critical thinking and debate on social concerns. He felt empowered when working with students who were only slightly younger than he was. His stronger political focus developed as he became more aware of the inequalities inherent in the upper secondary school system on one hand, and the power of education to generate forms of activism on the other. His narrative portrays an individual who entered the profession with strong views on the moral and political nature of teaching, but who struggled to maintain his convictions in a school context that prioritises subject academic achievement over general aims of education:

We are on the run as a professional class, we are on the run from our ideals and values...as professionals, we do not ask ourselves who is responsible for bringing up the population, our responsibility towards people...towards nature, if teachers are not going to do it, consciously or deliberately, and at least ask themselves, is this our responsibility? (Ingimar, history teacher)

Anna and Bjarni share Ingimar's strong political conviction. Anna presents herself as a feminist and understands teaching as a means of challenging gender inequalities fuelled by harmful social practices, such as pornography and hate speech. Although many teachers refer to addressing "gender concerns" (Selma, Ilmur, Viktor) or "women's inequality" (Tumi, Ella, Simon, Helga) as human rights concerns, Anna's references have a stronger political emphasis. Her narrative suggests that she understands the purpose of upper secondary school to be inclusive of addressing social concerns as well as developing individual's skills and knowledge:

I also have a very clear meaning of what Menntaskóli, Framhaldskóli should be, what it is for, what its role in the society is...no matter where I am, in what subject I am teaching, social justice is always a clear focus. I just put it in different contexts. (Anna, gender studies teacher)

Anna recognises that her work is influenced by both a moral and political stance: "It's really a moral thing for me...moral absolutely, first and foremost, and political absolutely". She discusses the need to disrupt the status quo to generate change towards equitable ways of being: "If you are not critical, you are not going to change anybody's position in the society, so, everything continues to be the same". Bjarni is a geography teacher who had been teaching at the same comprehensive school for over 10 years at the time of the interview. He explains that it is difficult to separate political views from teaching. Addressing social justice is a core component of his personal and professional life:

First of all, my views are coloured by my political views. I am a socialist. I am not ashamed of it. I like a society where everyone can have equal rights...every student should get the same chance. That is my political view, and probably my political view and my life view is reflected in my teaching. (Bjarni, geography teacher)

These examples suggest that teachers' reasons for working with human rights challenge an understanding of the purpose of upper secondary school as limited to acquiring qualifications. Teachers' reasons for associating their work with social justice and human rights are underpinned by moral and political convictions about their role as teachers, schooling, and broader societal concerns. Their convictions reflect the different conceptual nuances of teaching as a "moral" endeavour that Campbell (2008) addresses in her review of the literature. There is evidence of teachers being influenced by moral education, the ethics of care, and understandings of morals as linked to rights and responsibilities, and social justice paradigms. The teachers' narratives also reflect a political understanding of the purpose of education, such as to challenge inequitable processes of schooling and broader social injustices. The next section examines how these moral and political convictions are shaped by cross-cultural experiences.

### **5.3 Cross-cultural experiences shape teachers' moral and political convictions about schooling**

Cross-cultural experiences refer to episodes in life where people with different cultural habits, attitudes and dispositions come into contact with each other, offering contexts that provide the opportunity for cultural comparisons. What makes people culturally different is not an innate characteristic of the human being, but the influence of learned and shared values, beliefs, and behaviours (Bennett, 1993). These socially learned ways of being, impact on the way culturally different individuals and groups understand and respond to each other. Studies have shown the importance of cross-cultural experiences in shaping cultural awareness and competence amongst students and teachers. These include the effects of studying and living abroad, including cross-cultural dialogues and language learning (Braskamp et al., 2009; Keengwe, 2010; Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2016; Stebleton et al., 2013). The influence of cross-cultural experiences on shaping teachers' moral and political convictions towards human rights has not been widely researched. Two relevant studies include a collection of personal journeys of human rights educators (Magendzo et al., 2015) and the use of political autobiography with graduate students in a teachers college (Tibbitts, 2016). The first study suggests that life experiences and diverse ideological perspectives have shaped the work of human rights educators. The second suggests that reflexive inquiry on beliefs and values in relation to social justice concerns such as race, gender, sexuality, and class, for example, and which are evident in one's personal and professional lives, helps social justice educators' develop understanding and agency. Moral and political convictions are socially constructed moral beliefs and values about the

purpose of schooling, teaching and learning, and the role of the teacher in responding to these convictions. These convictions are shaped and influenced by cross-cultural life experiences. The ten teachers' cross-cultural experiences take place during travel, in the home environment, through formal and informal education, and include encounters with influential role models. Although all the narratives reveal important cross-cultural experiences, examples have been chosen that best illustrate how these underpin moral and political convictions about schooling.

Almost all of the teachers made references to political environments as influential on their commitment to social justice and human rights. These included family gatherings where politics was actively discussed, and household contexts, where reading political literature was the norm. Parents' political affiliation was frequently discussed as an important factor in shaping teachers' own political stance. Bjarni explains his strong critical views developed in his teenage years as a result of heated political discussions in the family. Although he associates his socialist stance as partly influenced by opposition to his father's strong capitalist ideals, he also discusses the impact of reading about global political events. He understands his knowledge of political events and the opportunity to discuss these, as influential on his reasons for understanding social justice and human rights as necessary components of schooling. He also refers to a teacher education programme that he felt was unconnected to lived reality:

It was not relevant to the society that we live in. What in my view, what I learned was how to spoon-feed children, just pour, the only thing I learned about teaching was to pour into them the knowledge and to learn about Piaget...my teaching diploma was all about dead guys and pouring knowledge into kids, it was not relevant, not, it was not relevant to the society that we lived in. I'm really sorry to say (Bjarni, geography teacher).

Bjarni believes that an increasingly multicultural society in Iceland presents an opportunity to develop new mindsets because of a context that lends itself to "listening to different views and perspectives". He wants to see this multicultural reality addressed in teacher education. Viktor also refers to the importance of life experiences as influential on how he understands his role as a teacher.

I draw from my life experiences and they probably are what motivated me to become a teacher, not teaching a subject, not the bringer of facts but to be a motivation to have kids grow self-esteem and to learn what I think upper secondary schools

should teach kids, to learn and finding a field of interest and not to teach facts as such. (Viktor, mathematics teacher)

Viktor's convictions are both moral and political in that he seeks to foster inter-relational learning; students engage with each other to enhance learning and awareness of social inequalities. He refers to teacher education courses on character education, which seem to have emphasised his focus on developing students' intellectual capacity as a social justice response. His narrative also reveals life experiences that provide a context for reflection on the impact of unequal social and political power relations. Viktor lived in Sweden from the age of five to ten at a time when political persecutions were resulting in a high number of refugees to Europe from South America and the Middle East. He recalls having classmates who had migrated to Sweden with their families, not by choice but out of desperation, in stark contrast to his family's context. He recalls their trauma and culture shock as they adjusted to their new reality.

Ingimar's narrative refers to a similar cross-cultural experience: "I think I learned, I learned *that* in Copenhagen as a child, when I was ten years old". By "*that*" he refers to the relevance of human rights in schools.

We had this big house of our own, and that meant that mum and dad, somehow they were very progressive people, I know now, they were not old fashioned as I thought once, I know they were definitely not, but...there were all kinds of people coming and going, someone hadn't paid his rent and he came and stayed with us for some weeks, and the people were coming and going all the time, and somehow, I knew after this that the world that I had lived in, and I thought was the only world, was not, so you have to ask, how do we want to organise our lives? There are other possibilities than other ways we are living. (Ingimar, history teacher)

His childhood in Copenhagen developed his awareness of the differences between his own reality and that of students from non-Nordic country contexts. He recalls being taken out of the "special class for foreigners" and mainstreamed. As an Icelandic, he believes that he was perceived as being more prepared to learn and work in Danish than his predominantly non-European peers. Ingimar's experience reflects what Guðjónsdóttir and Loftsdóttir (2017) refer to as "hierarchy of acceptability of migrants" (p. 23), a term drawn from the work of McDowell (2009). Ingimar reflects on his

childhood experience as important in terms of influencing his current worldview: “I knew after this that the world that I had lived in and I thought was the only world, was not”. Ingimar’s experience led him to question what he refers to as the “grand stories of the Icelandic people” in history teaching:

I knew having studied history that these grand stories of the Icelandic people, it was, maybe not completely wrong, but it was erratic in many ways, so I never, I never did want to be a teacher that was reproducing some stereotypical view of the world.  
(Ingimar, history teacher)

Despite the progressive values of social democratic political systems that Ingimar had admired from his time in Denmark, he shows a critical awareness of singular narratives that negatively affect some human beings more than others. His moral and political convictions about schooling are shaped by these cross-cultural experiences and in particular, his reflections on these:

It’s heartbreaking to see that young people are full of prejudice towards people...if they have some reason to classify them as not belonging to us, to the norm...What have we been doing, can’t we teach young people basic ideas of living in a world with other people...and I think it comes down to the independence struggle and all that, where the nation defined itself as a whole unified entity in religion, politics, and interests. (Ingimar, history teacher)

Ilmur’s story suggests that her focus on understanding human rights as a way of “teaching something about just the way of living” is informed by her experience of growing up as the daughter of an Icelandic mother and a non-Icelandic father. She recalls feeling as if she was “being brought up by two different cultures”: “I remember thinking, I don’t know if I am more Icelandic or a bit of uncertainty of where exactly you want to be identified; at one point loving it, at another hating it”. This cross-cultural experience has influenced her perception of cultural belonging and she recognises the dangers of adopting one fixed identity. She understands the human being as being “diverse”, even when classified as “Icelandic”. Her use of the term diversity refers to her students’ multiple life experiences and family contexts. She draws on her own experience of uncertainty as regards her shifting identity to encourage students to reflect on their different life experiences as “diverse realities” and to explore how these experiences shape their



understanding of the world. Her conflicting sense of belonging in her childhood has shaped her understanding of her students as “living in the same community” while representing “diverse realities”.

The notion of belonging should not only be associated with nationality, ethnicity and language, as Ella's narrative suggests. Ella describes her childhood home in a rural location of Iceland as “a magical place to grow up in”. Ella recalls moving from the “magical” rural setting to an urban residential area where she suddenly felt out of place. She explains how the experience of feeling like an outsider led her to rebel at school. The exposure to different cultural norms that exist in rural and urban communities and schools seems to have developed Ella's strong moral conviction towards addressing student vulnerability. She makes a link between student vulnerability and the role of the teacher as responsive to students' emotional states:

I think, it's a privilege to work in this profession, I mean, you know, to meet them, like, one boy, had a really, it was hard not to take it personally, one of my homeroom students had, for example, lost two of his brothers and sisters from a disease, his mother had tried to commit suicide, and then he was really acting out in my class and he was really, he was the one who made me cry at one point...he was really struggling with things and now he's grown up and he's doing well and he hugs me when he meets me in the street and yes... (Ella, English teacher)

Ella's narrative reveals multiple experiences of feeling like the outsider and being “different”. This has provided an opportunity for reflection on the relationship between identity and privilege. She recalls living in New York in the 1990s where she took an undergraduate programme at City College in Harlem. She was in her early 20s. Her choice of course and college was coincidental, as she had intended to transfer to a college in a higher socioeconomic area of New York: “I had heard that Hunter was a better, more prestigious college”. She explains that she ended up studying “mostly African American literature because I was late applying for school and I could not afford a fancy school”. Yet, her decision to stay at City College seems to have been the result of influential role models rather than her socioeconomic situation:

I met, for example, bell hooks, Gloria Watkins, and she was my main, I just, fell in love with her and her teaching. We became

friends and I took all her classes. And it was just pure coincidence. I like this about how life goes, like, and I really, I think that when it comes to teaching, she is probably my main influence because I was so young when I went to her classes and it was something totally new to me. (Ella, English teacher)

The coincidental nature of how Ella describes her choice of course and college suggests role models are an important factor in shaping teachers' moral and political convictions to engage with issues of social justice. The extent to which these convictions are developed depends on depth of the experience and the level of criticality applied to the analysis of the cross-cultural experience. Gloria Watkins is a well-known and influential scholar. She has written on the intersectionality of race and gender; she challenges capitalist systems for their role in the production and perpetuation of systems of oppression and class domination; and she understands teaching as the practice of freedom where everyone can learn irrespective of who they are or where they come from (hooks, 1994). Ella's reference to Watkins focuses on the personal relationship that she felt she had with her as a teacher, not as an academic. She refers to another teacher at the college who encouraged her to study extra English classes and to focus on English Literature. This developed her interest in Literature and, in particular, African American Literature, which she now teaches as part of her English class. Her interactions with these teachers influenced her choices as a teacher; yet she does not make any explicit link between the intellectual work of Watkins, her cross-cultural experiences at City College and her pedagogical choices.

Ella describes being in classes at City College with predominantly African American students from middle to lower-income families. She admits that she found this situation "very difficult but rewarding and I think I grew a lot, I matured". By "difficult" she refers to being aware of the differences between herself and her classmates in terms of race, language, ways of interacting and speech and very different life experiences. Yet she does not make the link between her perception of difference and what they suggest about her own identity concerning bias and privilege. Issues of race and socioeconomic status as systemic concerns that impact on students' schooling experience and sense of wellbeing are almost invisible in her narrative. Ella's description of a family trip to Mexico suggests that she is aware that she experiences certain socioeconomic privilege. She explains that she saw the trip as an opportunity to get her children to appreciate what they have: "We don't often think about that maybe...we have so much. So for me, it, or part of the reason for leaving, was to show that there are

different ways of living". She talks about feeling a sense of pride when her son seemed to become aware of his own privileged status: "I like moments like that, like when he said (referring to her son), 'mum these shoes are getting too small, don't you think I should give it to someone, some boy here?'"

Understanding privilege in the context of an individual lived experience can hide systemic influences and impacts. When perceptions of privilege become about what you have and what the Other does not have, this creates a dichotomy that essentialises difference. Experiences of feeling "different" or perceiving difference in lived reality, without critical examination of what underpins these, leads to Othering. Instead of developing critical intercultural understandings, cross-cultural experiences can instead serve to reinforce privileged status and social reproduction. Helga spent a year in France while studying for her master's degree. Her children were enrolled in a French preschool. The cross-cultural experience made her more appreciative of the preschool system in Iceland:

...going to playschool in France, horror of horrors, yes, coming from Scandinavia, I mean, parents were not allowed...I could really feel that I prefer this sense of being together, being equals, parents welcome into the playschool etc., rather than this distinction all the time. (Helga, history teacher)

There is a suggestion that Helga is making claims about the Icelandic preschool system as democratic and the French system as undemocratic. Nordic preschool systems are typically associated with democratic principles that foster equality and participation (Einarsdóttir et al., 2018; Thornberg, 2016). Studies suggest that addressing multicultural needs is more effective at the preschool level (Halldórsdóttir et al., 2016). Yet, perceptions of a school system as "democratic" or "undemocratic" are influenced by experiences of the system. Immigrant parents and their children have struggled to form relationships and to participate in school life in Iceland (Gunnþórsdóttir, 2018; Lay, 2016). Ingimar and Viktor's experiences of schooling in Denmark suggest that distinctions are made between Nordic and non-Nordic children. Research supports their experiences and shows immigrant families, including those with refugee status, do not share the same experience of parents and students from the dominant culture (Gunnþórsson, 2016).

This section has aimed to illustrate how cross-cultural experiences shape teachers' moral and political convictions. That is to say, they inform teachers'

moral and political beliefs and values about the purpose of schooling. Cross-cultural experiences shape teachers' moral and political convictions in ways that challenge conceptions of the role of the upper secondary school teacher as restricted to subject specialist. In the next section, the third theme is presented, which looks at how teachers depend on tacit knowledge to explain their reasons for working with human rights. This has certain implications as regards the impact of teachers' moral and political convictions on their human rights-related work.

#### **5.4 Teachers draw on tacit knowledge to explain their reasons for working with human rights**

Teachers' tacit awareness of why they work with human rights was a recurring code throughout the data analysis process. It is perhaps the most important theme presented in this chapter in that it allows for a better look at how to work with teachers' cross-cultural experiences if aiming for an education process that critically engages with human rights and social justice concerns.

The concept of tacit knowledge was chosen to explain the hesitant and unsure manner that the majority of teachers displayed when discussing human rights, and in particular their reasons for working with human rights. The literature on HRE suggests that a key challenge is the vagueness of and broadness in teachers' understandings of human rights (Zembylas et al., 2016). Literature further suggests that this is the result of lack of preparation and training on human rights (Cassidy et al., 2014; Messina & Jacott, 2013). As Tumi points out:

I guess it's more like something that just unconsciously slipped through because it is a concern with all of us, I mean, all the teachers will all think about this a little bit, something, do we want to do this or this, or then something that has this kind of orientation...(Tumi, philosophy, English teacher)

Tumi's reference to human rights being an unconscious concern for teachers is important. Tacit knowledge has been used across disciplines to explain a person's ability to implicitly know and do things (Castillo, 2002). Michael Polanyi (1966) coined the term to explain knowledge that we carry around with us that we are not able to articulate very well, therefore making it difficult to share. In the context of scientific discovery, Polanyi (1996) used tacit knowledge to explain unconscious processes that guide the search for

solutions or discoveries. As Bjarni points out: "It was not an agenda to promote social justice, but I think you are always promoting social justice and human rights but you don't know you are doing it". Understanding the role of human rights in schools as a problem to be solved is one of the main reasons that teachers decided to participate in this study. They wanted to find a way to articulate and share their experiences of what they perceive as unjust. Simon's narrative in particular reflects urgency in terms of finding a way to solve the negative impact of schooling on certain students, which he identifies as a human rights concern:

I need someone to talk to, therefore I am here, I am trying out things with you, explaining things to you, you know what the school is about, and I'm using you as a guinea pig and trying to explain how I am thinking about the school. (Simon, science teacher)

The need to engage with others to make the implicit explicit suggests that teachers are aware that they are not as informed as they should be. Selma points out "it is unconsciously done because we are not aware of human rights or how it can be addressed in schools". She has reached a point where she is actively searching for ways to develop her understanding of human rights in the context of her work. She explains her reasons for participating in the study as:

I felt that maybe I had something to say and I had my own interest in mind because then I eventually would be able to read your research and find out what other people are doing, what I am missing out in, and so on, and I think it's very, very important because it's something that I have thought of for a long time. (Selma, English teacher)

According to Polanyi (1996), the search for solutions is informed by valid knowledge of a problem. Teachers' honesty and humility about their competence to address human rights is a form of valid knowledge. The recognition of the need to engage, and the need to search for solutions, as expressed by the majority of the teachers, can be understood as an empowering experience. By this I refer to a sense of realisation that life experiences are valid and that story telling is able to generate powerful knowledge that can be used to address what we perceive as a concern that requires attention. Teachers have validation of social injustice from their life

experiences; they are aware that human rights are not being addressed in schools formally and systematically despite being a core part of the general aims of schooling. The capacity to pursue the problem is informed by the sense of an approaching solution; teachers use the interview process as an opportunity to express the tacit as a means of seeking solutions. Polanyi (1966) argues that tacit knowledge operates in anticipation of unknown implications that the solution will bring. A number of the narratives suggest frustration about what can be described as the dialectical relation between knowing what you want or need but not knowing how to go about this. Helga explains:

I wanted to ask you what you meant by social justice because that is something that I would say, yeah, that's me definitely, social justice, but then, what do, what are we talking about?  
(Helga, history teacher)

Helga's comment reflects Polanyi's understanding of tacit knowledge as a form of practical know-how (Polanyi, 1966). Practical know-how represents intuitive responses informed by informal, formal, or unconscious learning. Helga is aware that she places importance and value on social justice as a concept but as she states: "I have never, never thought of it". Ilmur also refers to the fact that prior to this study she had not previously made an explicit connection between human rights and her teaching; she refers to not having "a specific project" on human rights. Yet, her story reflects tacit knowledge about the teacher's role in helping students analyse their perceptions of reality, which she associates with human rights: "I think it is very important that the teacher is teaching something about just the way of living...this course touches a little bit on human rights in that sense".

Teachers' moral and political convictions are shaped by cross-cultural experiences, which are an important part of practical know-how. Practical know-how should not be confused with spontaneous or impulsive action that has no basis or meaning (Polanyi, 1966). It is meaningful in the way that it draws on learning from life events and is influenced by personal and/or professional values and sociocultural norms. The narratives suggest that teachers do not always have the opportunity to explore these personal/professional influences. For example, Helga connects human rights to the history curriculum:

This kind of happened with, happened initially without me meaning to, human rights. It is the thing, all the way from the

French Revolution and through everything that has happened ever since, so the content kind of brings me this approach.  
(Helga, history teacher)

This raises a concern about tacit knowledge that is left assumed and unexplored. Sternberg describes tacit knowledge as “a kind of knowledge that usually remains buried beneath the surface, both individually and organizationally” (Sternberg & Horvath, 1999, p. 231). It may be that people are not even aware that they have tacit knowledge (Kaufman & Grigorenko, 2009). Traditional education systems, in particular those that prioritise subject-based aims over general aims, can create complacency amongst teachers and students because of assumed notions about human rights or over-dependence on tacit knowledge. Research suggests that an assumed human rights position is common in Nordic countries (Osler, 2015, 2016; Vesterdal, 2016). Given that certain subject areas have a more obvious entry point for human rights, such as history, there is also the risk of over-dependence on teachers of certain subjects to address general aims of schooling.

The findings in this section suggest that teachers are aware that they lack human rights and HRE knowledge and they depend on tacit knowledge to address human rights. In fact, they are more familiar with the discourse of social justice than human rights. The findings also suggest that practical know-how is informed by cross-cultural experiences. In a number of narratives, teachers imply that the interview process acts as a form of informal learning that allows them to draw on this practical know-how. As Helga points out “so if you hadn’t sent me something [*refers to the description of the study*], I would be completely blank here, and I hope this goes for some others that you have been interviewing”. Helga would definitely not have been “blank”, but the point that she is making is that engagement and social interaction is crucial to make the implicit explicit. She refers to the research project as a catalyst to engage in reflection, offering an opportunity to develop her tacit knowledge:

Well, first of all I don’t think I am doing it enough...I mean, I am doing it very unconsciously, until starting this project with you, I hadn’t really thought of myself as using, you know, human rights approaches, I haven’t been very conscious of it but it’s just more, part of who I am and what I think is important. (Ella, English teacher)

Tacit knowledge or practical know-how is an important human attribute that provides a useful platform for a critique of how human rights are understood and addressed by individual teachers and subsequently, by schools. While tacit knowledge plays an important role in sustaining teachers' moral and political convictions about the purpose of schooling, it can also perpetuate injustices if these convictions remain unexplored and do not develop into explicit or intentional know-how related to working with human rights in schools.

### **5.5 Discussion: Teachers' tacit knowledge versus critical awareness of their moral and political convictions**

In this section, I argue that tacit knowledge or practical know-how risks diluting the transformative potential of HRE if it remains dormant, unarticulated, and unexamined. Tacit knowledge can perpetuate an unjust status quo and encourage social reproduction. This is because it prevents teachers from examining their moral and political convictions, and how these are shaped by underlying beliefs, assumptions, and values and cross-cultural life experiences. I have provided examples of tacit knowledge related to teachers' reasons for working with human rights. In this section, I draw on Ella's narrative to support this argument.

In the absence of formal HRE training, tacit knowledge represents important "subjective views, intuition and perceptions as well as experience, ideas, values and feelings" (Virtainlahti, 2006, as cited in Puusa & Eerikäinen, 1970, p. 309). Tacit knowledge underpins teachers' reasons for working with human rights and therefore offers an important insight for human rights educators. Gorski (2008) points out, as teachers we are not encouraged "to re-examine the philosophies, motivations, and world views that underlie our consciousnesses and work" (p. 516). He further argues that however well-intentioned, without an explicit commitment to creating a socially just world, injustice and inequities are maintained through negative stereotyping and uncritical understandings of the concepts of privilege and power (Gorski, 2008). Cross-cultural experiences provide an opportunity to develop critical ways of understanding privilege and power, factors that maintain individual and social inequalities. Given that cross-cultural experiences shape teachers' moral and political convictions, it becomes important to understand how these life experiences can develop teachers' tacit knowledge or practical know-how into explicit know-how; in other words, the need for critical awareness of the implications of their moral and political convictions on pedagogical choices.



Ella's narrative suggests that she understands education as a moral practice; she considers social justice and human rights as important components of the purpose of schooling. Her moral convictions are based on a view of teaching that is underpinned by an ethics of care; she wants students to feel secure, not only to enhance learning but because she understands student wellbeing as the responsibility of the teacher. It is only when Ella became involved in this study that she started to reflect on her reasons for placing importance on human rights. The interview process led her to start to make connections between her life experiences and how these may have influenced her pedagogical choices. During this process, she acknowledges that her work with social justice and human rights is an unconscious response informed by an intuitive understanding of the teacher as a moral being with a moral responsibility.

The unconscious nature of her response can be described as tacit. Based on the findings, it seems that the tacit nature of her reasons for working with human rights reinforces Ella's position of privilege evident in her cross-cultural experiences. Despite recognising racial, linguistic, socioeconomic, and sociocultural differences during her travel and study abroad as influential on developing her moral convictions about teaching, at no point in her narrative does she suggest that she felt vulnerable or academically disadvantaged because of these sociocultural factors. Instead, she describes her travel and study abroad as a significant maturing period during which she developed personally and professionally. While her narrative shows concerns related to her own gender bias, it does not suggest critical awareness of how moral and political convictions can reinforce gender, racial, language or other socially constructed inequalities.

A number of studies on teacher education suggest that although studying abroad can improve intercultural and global competences, these experiences can also reify existing hierarchies and inequalities in higher education (Monaghan et al., 2017; Spreen et al., 2020). This is because they can build students' expectations or perspectives that "social problems exist "out there", apart from their own community or nation, rather than understanding their own social context and its relation to other communities" (Monaghan et al., 2017, p. 15). These studies suggest that without being challenged to unpack her experiences concerning white privilege and power, Ella's tacit knowledge or practical know-how risks perpetuation of social reproduction through her teaching, despite good intentions. This is because she has depended on tacit knowledge of what constitutes injustice and justice without the need to examine her pedagogical response or indeed position herself in relation to her cross-

cultural experiences. As a teacher, Ella has not been provided with the opportunity to critically engage with the issues of power and privilege evident in her life experiences. Attending City College informed her decision to design an African American literature course as part of the English programme that she runs. Addressing the Civil Rights movement through literature, with a focus on women's experiences of slavery, was also unconsciously informed by her cross-cultural experiences. Yet she does not make the link between her pedagogical choices, her moral convictions and the issues of privilege and power evident in these life experiences. Her dependence on tacit knowledge risks that the human rights concerns she chooses to work with become addressed in ways that reflect neutrality, colour blindness, meritocracy, and ultimately generate false empathy (Sleeter, 2017). As Howard (2006) points out when speaking as a white multicultural educator to white educators:

We cannot help our students overcome the negative repercussions of past and present racial dominance if we have not unravelled the remnants of dominance that still linger in our minds, hearts, and habits. (p. 6)

References to unequal power relations are evident in all the narratives, suggesting teachers relate these positions of power to human rights and social justice concerns. Yet the tacit nature of their engagement with human rights suggests that teachers have not had the opportunity to explore the power relations in their cross-cultural experiences in any depth. Power relations are complex, diffused, and can affect different people, in different ways, at different points in their lives. If these relations go unexplored, they can be "harnessed to serve the dominant group" instead of used "as a means of resistance" (Coysh, 2014, p. 90). Had Ella been given the opportunity to critically engage in dialogue about her cross-cultural influences in relation to issues of privilege, she would likely have discussed her son's act of generosity when wanting to give his football shoes away from a more critical perspective. As a deeply reflective practitioner, it is likely that she would have discussed generosity as an important virtue while considering the negative impact of understanding generosity as a solution to systemic causes of poverty. She would likely have engaged in a dialogue about uncritical generosity as a form of charity that perpetuates poverty and masks privilege. Ella's cross-cultural experiences are rich in opportunity to explore issues of diversity in relation to power and privilege. When an education system fails to engage with this opportunity, cross-cultural experiences risk being

misinterpreted as “the facilitation of intercultural dialogue, an appreciation for diversity, and cultural exchange”, creating forms of unconscious othering (Gorski, 2008, p. 520).

Ella's story presents a passionate and deeply reflective teacher who strives to make sense of her teaching in order to improve it. Yet, her narrative suggests that she has not consciously decided to address human rights. As with other teachers in this study, she depends on the tacit nature of her moral and political convictions. In school contexts where students and teachers are predominantly white and from the dominant national heritage, allowing privilege to remain invisible is problematic because it makes privilege acceptable. This is not uncommon in the Nordic context (Loftsdóttir, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014); in particular in teaching (Osler, 2016; Vesterdal, 2016) and in relation to race (Osler, 2016). Osler (2016) notes the absence of the terms “race” and “racism” (p. 78) in the Scandinavian context. She relates this to the formation of a national identity post World War II that has never dealt with its role in the genocide of Jews and other minority groups. As Osler points out: “if the word racism is reserved for expressions of hate speech or physical violence, but institutional or structural racism and processes of racialization remain hidden, racism itself goes unchallenged” (p. 80). A system that allows teachers to depend on tacit knowledge suggests that social injustices, including racism, are allowed to go unchallenged by the system.

This chapter began with the quote by Giroux and Purpel (1983) that presents education as “a process through which the hidden, the implicit, the tacit, the elusive, and the unknown become vivid and known to us” (p. 277). They go on to argue that “it is not enough to know and understand—we must know with intention and purpose, and we must act with understanding and meaning” (p. 277). Intentionality when working with human rights suggests the need for ways of thinking and forms of action that tacit knowledge does not allow for. The teachers' stories suggest that they are searching for ways to explore their reasons and practices in order to seek forms of change that they associate with human rights and justice. The interview process, which acted as both an opportunity and a catalyst for critical exploration of their motives, has raised awareness of the need to find ways to support teachers. This support should include making explicit links between cross-cultural experiences that make visible privilege and bias, and moral and political convictions underpinning teachers' reasons for working with human rights and social justice. If we fail to engage teachers in deeper critical reflection of these moral and political convictions and leave them to depend on tacit

knowledge, teachers can unconsciously perpetuate the same injustices that they seek to challenge.

## **5.6 Summary of chapter five**

In this chapter, three main themes were presented that represent the reasons why upper secondary school teachers choose to work with issues of social justice and human rights. These are: teachers' moral and political convictions underpin teachers' reasons for working with human rights; cross-cultural experiences shape teachers' moral and political convictions about schooling; teachers draw on tacit knowledge to explain their reasons for working with human rights. Although moral and political convictions are shaped by cross-cultural experiences, the tacit nature of teachers' reasons suggests undeveloped explicit know-how of the relationship between socioculturally developed values and dispositions, and how these impact on human rights understanding, meaning making and actions. Furthermore, cross-cultural experiences and moral and political convictions do not automatically develop critical intercultural understanding. Teachers' tacit knowledge constrains the intention and purpose needed for transformative HRE because it dilutes teachers' understanding of their actions and the implications.

In conclusion, what is needed is teacher education that is aware of teachers' tacit human rights knowledge and aims to develop this into explicit human rights know-how, informed by critical reflection of teachers' cross-cultural life experiences. As Coysh (2014) points out, HRE is important because of its transformative potential but also problematic because "it can ignore and sustain the political conditions of injustice" (p. 89). The tacit nature of upper secondary school teachers' reasons for working with human rights has certain implications for teachers' pedagogical practices, which is the focus of the next chapter.

## 6 What do teachers' life stories reveal about how they work with human rights?

*According to Arendt, an action, or narration, cannot be seen in isolation or be judged through the intentions of the initiator, since actions receive their political significance in how they are received by others. Human rights educators cannot, therefore, hide behind 'good intentions'. (Adami, 2014, p. 296)*

### 6.1 Introduction

To answer the question, *what do teachers' life stories reveal about how they work with human rights?* I have drawn on my own life story, my analysis of human rights, HRE literature and the policy and school contexts in Iceland, as well as the ten teachers' life stories. The three themes that are presented in this chapter are: teachers' resistance to exclusive school practices that reinforce social reproduction; teachers encourage democratic processes and citizenship skills. This theme I break down into three sub themes: a) student-centred practices are a dominant response to undemocratic processes, b) the absent legal dimension when addressing democracy and citizenship and, c) developing empathy as a democratic disposition. The third theme is, trivialisation dilutes the transformative potential of learning for human rights. The discussion builds on the argument from the previous chapter. Without any specific HRE training, teachers draw on tacit knowledge, informed by moral and political convictions developed by cross-cultural experiences. Dependence on tacit knowledge can perpetuate the social injustices that the teachers seek to address because there is risk that practices reflect what Zembylas et al. (2016) refer to as a retreat to familiar discourses and activities.

The United Nations definition of HRE presents three dimensions: learning *about, through and for* human rights (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011). These dimensions have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) at their core and refer to learning content about human rights, applying methodologies that reflect human rights principles, and enabling actions that challenge human rights violations and promote human rights. HRE is therefore understood as content and

process (Bajaj, 2011a; Bajaj, 2011b; Bajaj, 2017; Tibbitts, 2002; Tibbitts, 2017).

Although HRE as a pedagogical approach or field of education has not been formally introduced to teachers in Iceland, as previous chapters have addressed, human rights have been addressed in varying degrees and in different ways by other social justice education approaches. The 2011 national curriculum guides include democracy and human rights as one of the six curricular pillars. In the description of the pillar, there is a reference to “education for democracy and human rights”, which is presented as “critical thinking and reflection on the basic values of society” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012, p. 19). Underpinned by international and national legal frameworks, the national curriculum implies that teachers have a legal, if not a moral, responsibility to work with democracy and human rights.

## **6.2 Teachers’ resistance to exclusive school practices that reinforce social reproduction**

All the teachers in the study, irrespective of the type of school or subject specialisation, express strong feelings about the negative impact of what they perceive to be a selective upper secondary school system. Selectivity refers to students competing to enter grammar schools where access to subject specialisation is determined by grades in the three core subjects of mathematics, Icelandic and English at compulsory school. School selectivity creates social reproduction based on access to different knowledge, social identities, and ultimately life opportunities (Nylund et al., 2018; Nylund & Rosvall, 2016). In this section, examples are presented of teachers’ resistance to exclusive school practices, which are framed by their understanding of addressing students’ rights to and in schools as a form of HRE.

Helga’s description of her teaching approach emphasises developing students’ self-esteem and sense of security:

I mean you try to create the kind of atmosphere where people feel safe and they are able to speak their minds, ask silly questions, make all kinds of comments, but you really have to work on that, not to...um, put them down. (Helga, history teacher)

Helga describes how a former student described his schooling experience: “when I, [name of student] came to [name of school] I was a drop out from

[name of school]" and "this was the first time that I felt that the teachers spoke to me as if I was a person". Using examples of students who have managed to succeed despite the system is common in the narratives. Teachers use these to explain practices that place importance on addressing internalised feelings of inadequacy in cases when students do not achieve the academic standards set by schools. I define this as a form of resistance because it illustrates an active response to what is perceived as an unjust system. Although resistance to exclusive school systems is evident in the majority of the narratives, the stories of Viktor and Simon are predominantly drawn on in this section. Viktor is a mathematics teacher and Simon teaches science, subjects not traditionally associated with HRE (Osler, 2016; Tibbitts, 2017). These subject areas hold higher status than subjects within the social sciences, humanities, and art streams. They are more resistant to interdisciplinary teaching and learning, and participatory methodologies (Bernstein, 1996; Bjarnadóttir & Geirsdóttir, 2018; Bjarnadóttir et al., 2019).

Viktor and Simon both work in comprehensive schools and, at the time of the interviews, both schools were responding to the introduction of the 2011 National Curriculum Guides and the six fundamental pillars, including democracy and human rights (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2012). Viktor talks about his teaching in terms of building confidence. "When you fail maths, and you're not sure what you are going to do, and your self-confidence isn't high, then you don't allow yourself to experiment and try different things". He rejects the notion of the role of the teacher as limited to "teaching a subject". He explains that he aims to provide a safe space for students to learn in a way that facilitates understanding and application of mathematical concepts. He describes a collaborative approach; students discuss mathematical problems as part of the problem-solving process. He describes an assessment process that gives 0 points for no answer, 1 point for the wrong answer and 2 points for the right answer. He intends to reinforce the message that wrong answers create new understandings. Viktor's description of his practice suggests a form of resistance to traditional methods of teaching mathematics. He challenges approaches that understand maths as "a concept to define those who are able and those who are not able". He encourages students to approach learning as a form of character development: "there is not something as a maths person but about challenging yourself".

Jaworski (2011) encourages teachers to understand maths teaching as a human right. She argues that it is the right of every student "to know and understand mathematics relative to the context and purpose for which it is needed" (p. 5). Understanding mathematics teaching as a human right

contextualises the learning process in students' lived realities. Viktor's description of his teaching suggests that he understands the development of critical thinking as necessary for informed decision-making in life. He describes a statistics class where he engages students in discussions on "western ideas about global gender inequality and poverty indicators by asking them to create surveys". He emphasises the critical analysis component of his practice to illustrate to students "how statistics are used to influence people's minds" and how a mathematical mind can develop their capacity to critique social media. He aims to encourage students to challenge dominant narratives in a world where reality is often confused with "fake news" and "manipulation of social media data".

Viktor's focus on student exploration and experimentation reflects Jaworski's (2011, pp. 50-51) description of teaching mathematics as a moral responsibility: a teacher's desire to enhance learning, to build confidence, to engage students in critical inquiry and to collaborate with colleagues. Mathematics is one of the core subjects at the upper secondary school level. It features in a number of the narratives in reference to its power to determine students' fate as regards persistence versus drop out. As Ingimar, who is a History teacher, points out: "Of all subjects, mathematics is a subject we should discuss, maybe in the last year students are good enough to learn something else but by then the rest have dropped out". There is at least one reference to the importance placed on mathematics in the school system, in the majority of the teachers' stories. Its high status at the upper secondary school level adds a dimension of urgency as regards how teachers' can engage with mathematics in ways that place value on mathematics learning as a moral, social, and political pursuit; rather than an expected standard of cognitive development and student achievement.

Simon shows strong recognition of, and resistance to, the negative impact of selective schooling on students' sense of dignity, "It's almost like you have a machine gun, why do these kids do so badly at school? Why am I seeing these kids, these nice kids drop out in numbers, you know, I mean literally they drop out". The reference to a machine gun is powerful, reflecting Simon's anger and frustration that a student's future is dependent on how a system labels them. A high drop out rate in his school led him to carry out research: "...I have been knowing this since I began teaching. And I didn't have any results, anything, any evidence". Simon followed 750 students over their school life and recorded how many credits they had taken and completed each semester. He compares this data with students' records from their last year of compulsory school. His analysis suggests that if students have passed all final exams at compulsory school, they have a 75%



likelihood of graduating after 3 to 4 years of study at High School. If they have failed two or more subjects, they have a 15% likelihood of graduating after 6 years. Based on his findings, Simon is critical of reducing the upper secondary school system from four to three years, a policy that is currently in effect. As Simon states, the policy favours students who are destined to follow academic paths: "There is no mention of students that are not allowed to go into this study". By "this study" he refers to subject specialisation. He implies that the system blocks students from accessing certain subject streams: "They don't even get admitted to the study because they have so low ability in academic studies...and they are taken into *almenn braut*, general studies, and that means you are a loser".

Simon's reference to being "a loser" refers to stakeholder expectations: "the students, the parents, they argue with the school, why is my child in *almenn braut* [general studies]?" Dominant discourse positions academic paths as superior to vocational paths (Nylund et al., 2018). Simon argues that the over-emphasis on academic achievement in school dismisses students' capabilities in multiple areas: "The school counsellor only has information about you in school [he is referring to academic performance]. It is impossible for them to know that that you are a brilliant ice hockey player or the leader in the scout's movement". Simon recognises students as active members of society rather than as passive individuals confined to a reality created in, and by, the school environment. His description of his teaching suggests he resists accepting a system that he suggests seeks conformity through the noncritical learning of facts:

The most important thing is, if you are teaching in a school for 16 to 20 year-olds, is if you convey that they live in a society; that is obviously the most important thing that you can give your students regardless if they learn anything about gravity or whatever, you know, that's far more important. (Simon, science teacher)

Simon's pedagogical perspective reflects Jaworski's (2011) understanding of teaching as a moral pursuit framed by the right to quality education. He explains his teaching in terms of making abstract concepts and ideas accessible to his students, through experimentation and discussion, based on their lived realities: "I think that using ideas or using the existing idea to explain things before you adopt a new one is a very important idea in learning, teaching, yes, science".

Viktor and Simon's stories are used to illustrate that teachers apply practices aimed at resisting social reproduction generated through exclusive schooling. These practices are embedded in perspectives about teaching as a moral endeavour. Viktor and Simon's practice reflect HRE that focuses on the right to education and ensuring rights in and through education to challenge unjust systems. The second theme I work with that reflects teachers' understanding of how they work with human rights is related to practices that encourage democratic processes and citizenship skills.

### **6.3 Encouraging democratic processes and citizenship skills**

The curricular pillar of democracy and human rights states:

Democracy is important in schools. Firstly, schools have to take into consideration that children and youth will in the future take part in democratic society and therefore it is important for children to learn about such societies. Secondly, in all their working methods schools have to take into consideration that the human rights of every individual have to be respected. It is expected that children and youth learn democracy by learning about democracy in a democracy. (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012, p. 19)

This description of democracy and human rights is problematic. There is a suggestion that the participation of children and youth in society is understood as a future rather than current reality. As previously shown, Viktor and Simon make their students' realities the core of their teaching approach. Their narratives suggest that they understand school and society as inter-related. This is why they seek to resist exclusive practices that foster social reproduction. Although the description of the pillar suggests school as a microcosm of society, there is an underlying assumption that schools are democratic and students will be taught about democracy in order to prepare them to participate in a democratic society in the future. This seemingly contradicts the notion of school and society as connected and reflective of each other's characteristics. There is also a suggestion that democracy and human rights are unproblematic and assumed in schools: students will learn "about democracy, in a democracy" and "the human rights of every individual have to be respected" (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012, p. 19). This reflects a non-critical understanding, or acceptance, of school as a democratic institution underpinned by human rights values. Emphasis seems to be on conformity to fit into this assumed democratic

reality through the development of certain skills and knowledge. The ways that teachers describe their encouragement of democratic processes and citizenship skills, both challenge and feed into these contradictions. I discuss these ways under three interrelated sub-categories. First, student-centred practices to respond to what teachers perceive as undemocratic processes in schools is dominant; second, the absence of the legal dimension when addressing democracy and citizenship is evident; and third, teachers' practices depend on developing empathy.

### **6.3.1 Student-centred practices are a dominant response to undemocratic processes**

Anna describes her teaching as both "indirect" and "direct" HRE; direct HRE refers to the development of dispositions such as "mutual respect", "care", "fairness", "empathy"; her use of "indirect" HRE describes the "hidden curriculum", where she engages with issues of power:

I talk about gender power, which is indirect human rights education...you need to be in control of your life, you need to discover where you are in the hierarchy, you will discover if you are a priority group, and if you are a priority group, you should feel the obligation to work for empowering other groups. (Anna, gender studies teacher)

Anna's reference to students needing to recognise their position in the social hierarchy suggests she challenges a noncritical understanding of the general aims of upper secondary school. Anna explains that she adopts participatory processes to encourage "student voice". By "voice" Anna refers to providing the opportunity for students to influence course content as well as voicing opinions on subjects that she covers: "You don't teach students something as big as human rights, and err, civil or democracy without letting them have a voice and this happens too...it's too rare in the classrooms, that the students have a voice".

Anna's reference to it being "too rare" suggests that teaching in upper secondary schools tends to be more teacher-centred than student-centred, a perspective supported by research (Bjarnadóttir & Geirsdóttir, 2018). The majority of the teachers make references to student-centred practices to challenge undemocratic school contexts. Tumi's reference to a student population made up of predominantly white Icelandic heritage students from middle and upper socioeconomic status families is used to suggest that

school systems constrain deliberative democracy, which depends on diverse realities:

It's not an ideal system for a democracy...I would like to see more diverse and more mixed populations in the schools...this creation of elite schools in the last couple of decades, it's not an ideal development. (Tumi, philosophy and English teacher)

The school council comes up frequently in reference to undemocratic school processes that favour the dominant culture:

It's a democracy that is limited to this sort of, this procedural, you know where they have these elections and they have popularity contests and stuff like that, but it's not, it's not so much about the empowerment of each individual student, where they, where they would be, so I think many students they feel that they are, there are cliques that are controlling and they feel disenfranchised... (Tumi, philosophy and English teacher)

The student council system is an important feature of the upper secondary school and outlined in the 2008 upper secondary school act (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008) and the 2011 National Curriculum Guides (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). Student councils are often used to represent the democratic nature of schools. This can easily create assumptions about the democratic nature of the school system in Iceland. Tumi describes certain events developed by the student council as "borderline, you know, sexist...I don't know, I'm not saying racist, but, you know, [he grimaces], scary, a little bit, icky". Selma shares Tumi's suggestion that student representation is dominated by certain groups of students. She talks about hierarchy amongst students in terms of "the pecking order". She applies student-centred methods to engage her students in discussions on dominant sociocultural norms. Her pedagogical intention is to raise awareness of multiple realities:

They can talk about popular culture and so on forever in English, but when it comes to talking about themselves and their country, they are not so good at it. So what we did was create our own course material based on that idea, how can they achieve fluency in speaking about their country and looking at their country from sort of the outside, peeping through the

window at stereotypes about Icelanders, so that's one part of it and the other is to look at, I wouldn't say outsiders, but look at other societies that have English as a native language but that are very small, you would say yeah, a minority, like native Americans in North America, and Aborigines in Australia, so what do we have in common? (Selma, English teacher)

Selma's focus on the local and the social suggests a contextualised understanding of human rights that is shared by a number of teachers. As Selma points out:

Human rights are too often associated with the impoverished or the poor or developing countries, which is of course a normal natural thing. But I think just because we are born in Iceland, it doesn't mean that human rights do not concern you here. (Selma, English teacher)

Drinkwater (2019) argues that many conceptions of democracy applied in schools are combined with citizenship in a way that dilutes the true essence of democracy as a local and social concern, as well as a political concept. She argues that in school contexts where the student population is from the same mainstream culture, democracy is not being practised if students are not engaging in critical questioning, debate, and dialogue that affects them. Student-centred practices aimed at democratising schools need to be located in broader historical, political, and social narratives that highlight inequities and marginalisation (Drinkwater, 2019).

As Tumi points out, the student council system often encourages inequality. Bjarni describes an annual multicultural event organised by the school council: "We have had a dance from girls from Vietnam, cooking, cooking classes from Asia and tapestry from Eastern Europe, and just, so we are promoting other cultures by letting the students do it themselves". Gorski (2008) recognises the good intentions behind what is often referred to as the "sari, samosa and steel band syndrome" (Donald & Rattansi, 1992, p. 2). Emphasis is placed on simplistic views of culture and ethnicity that perpetuate rather than challenge prejudice and discrimination (Aikman, 1997; Gorski, 2006; Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 1991). In school contexts that have dominant sociocultural realities, "democratically" elected school councils are not necessarily democratic if they do not ensure representation. Instead, they can create "silences around certain forms of diversity" (Osler & Starkey, 2010, p. 117).

Tumi's narrative provides an interesting example of how he draws on student-centred pedagogy to generate awareness of the need for diversity in democratic processes. He developed a game that focuses on student interaction and decision making as a social and political process: "The process of the game is in many ways a democratic one because there is a lot of autonomy on the behalf of the students and the students have more to say about what's going on". Tumi explains the influence of John Dewey when designing the game. Dewey (n.d) presents democracy as a way of life that is evident in our attitudes, beliefs, and ways of being towards others; the fundamental principle is cooperation. This includes "disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself" (1996, p. 341). Tumi's game provides a space for students to interact with other group members; they learn to behave as group members within a context of common norms that allow for a certain freedom to develop: "of course there are rules, but within these rules they can do all kinds of things, the game is richer, democratically richer". Tumi's teaching aims to encourage active listening to develop ideas drawn from a diverse pool of realities. This process reflects what Biesta refers to as "a form of political communication" (2007, p. 4) characterised by the giving and taking of arguments by participants "who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality" (Elster, 1998, p. 8). The rationality and impartiality are suggested in Tumi's description of providing a space where "the field is levelled". The space allows students to participate collectively to create a functioning society that represents individual perspectives and needs. This raises awareness of individuals or groups who are at risk of not fitting in or who are represented by a dominant order. In the context of working in schools where diversity is not visible, as is the case in Tumi's school, the game has the potential to offer a new perspective that challenges the notion of one dominant sociocultural reality as representative of a democratic society. As Tumi explains, "when you process the whole thing, you have an opportunity to be critical of the system", providing what Tumi refers to as a "critical distance" to apply "more democratic power, than they normally have". By this, he refers to creating a context where students become aware of the implications of choice in a truly democratic society. He explains that choices are analysed and critiqued through meaningful interactions with the intention of "changing the system" to ensure fair representation of voice and needs.

As Drinkwater (2019) argues, many societies and school systems are uncritically associated with democracy. The teachers' narratives provide examples of how they engage with student-centred pedagogy to challenge

undemocratic processes. However, caution is needed in assuming that student-centred pedagogies alone are sufficient to ensure democracy and human rights in schools, as the findings in the next section suggest.

### **6.3.2 The absent legal dimension when addressing democracy and citizenship skills**

Learning *about* human rights is one of the three dimensions in the United Nations definition of HRE (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011). Some studies on HRE suggest that there is overemphasis on human rights being taught as legal facts and on vertical authority to address rights and responsibilities (Keet, 2012; Zembylas et al, 2016). My study finds that the legal dimension is generally absent from the teachers' stories when they talk about how they address democracy and citizenship skills. Their practices reflect fostering horizontal and democratic relationships. There is no explicit mention of working with the legal dimension of human rights, except by Ingimar and Helga in the context of teaching history, and Selma in relation to themes drawn from literature. For example, Anna focuses on developing relationships of mutual and reciprocal responsibility:

If you want social justice you need all the people, educated, in, in, what is it to be a citizen in one's life, what rights do I have and what responsibilities, do I have, both towards myself and my fellow citizens. (Anna, gender studies teacher)

She recognises that she places more emphasis on horizontal than vertical relationships when addressing issues of power imbalance in her gender studies class. She explains that she has not explicitly addressed issues of accountability to ensure rights and responsibilities, despite being aware of the power of legislation:

I have thought about it in feminist work. I always say the laws they have fundamental value, because I based my work on that law...we need to know, and I wouldn't have done anything if I hadn't known the law...but I have not, you know, in my work as a teacher, I have not put any effort or focus on that, but this conversation makes me just start thinking about it. (Anna, gender studies teach)

Ilmur also acknowledges the absence of the legal dimension of human rights in her cultural literacy class: “I am familiar with it but it is not something that I thought of, you know, as being of importance”. She emphasises generating horizontal relationships to develop intercultural awareness of diversity. She explains that using the context of design offers a comfortable distance. It allows students to engage in critical introspection of the way that they understand their reality in relation to forms of art. She describes a pedagogy that develops thoughts on “where we come from, how diverse it can be, what we think to be right and wrong towards others”.

As some teachers point out, there are some subjects that better facilitate a focus on the legal dimension of human rights. In her English class, Selma uses literature to discuss constitutional rights. She uses the example of the novel *Animal Farm*, which provides the opportunity to engage students in discussions about the role of legal frameworks to protect people’s rights. “Usually, the example that I bring up when we talk about human rights is the Constitution and the disabled because there you have obvious examples of human rights being violated”. These “obvious examples” of how to work with human rights are also suggested by Helga and Ingimar who both refer to human rights as content in history teaching. Helga talks about history teaching as naturally addressing human rights without the teacher consciously thinking about this. Ingimar, on the other hand, is critical of introducing students to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights suggesting that he is aware of what Keet (2012) and Zembylas et al. (2016) refer to as a declarationist approach, an uncritical reading of human rights:

The textbooks represent a guarantee of quality and democracy - they are teaching us something that is important for us to know as citizens in a democratic society. They do not teach us anything that goes against our ideals of human rights. But if there is this distance between textbooks and students, then maybe students are subjects in a machine of, maybe not dictatorship, but some authoritative system. So, we have these rebellions...they talk to each other. (Ingimar, History teacher)

Ingimar is suggesting that history textbooks can present human rights content about laws and democratic societies in ways that develop student complacency. He connects this to the role of the teacher in helping students to question how concepts such as participation, democracy, citizenship, and social justice are presented in texts. Despite being “ideals” that students



perceive as inherently good, Ingimar challenges texts that use human rights related terms as representative of an assumed national identity and reality.

It becomes problematic when studies suggest that schools overemphasise the legal dimension of HRE without engaging in a discussion on the power of knowing one's rights from an accountability perspective. There are a number of historical examples where the legal dimension of human rights has been used to pursue and achieve justice. These can be drawn from the Civil Rights movement and cases taken from the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. In his study of three teachers, Zembylas et al. (2016) argue that teachers depend on legal documents such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in ways that show "superficial knowledge of the history and key documents of human rights" (Zembylas et al, 2016, p. 3). This is explained as the declarationist approach, a term associated with the work of Keet (2012). As Ingimar's story illustrates, unlike the teachers in Zembylas et al's study (2016), he is aware of the dangers of blind acceptance of human rights content. These authors also critique teachers for emphasising vertical authority that encourages students to follow rules and regulations, instead of promoting horizontal or democratic relationships. By this they refer to Dewey's principle of cooperation and the need to engage in dialogue to work out arrangements "through courts, social movements, legislation, etc." (Zembylas et al, 2016, p. 16). The teachers' stories suggest that they focus on horizontal and democratic relationships. However, what is absent in their work is the role the legal dimension of human rights can play in ensuring horizontal democratic relationships. Although Zembylas et al. (2016) acknowledge the need for a legal dimension in such relationships, they underplay the role of vertical relationships to address issues of accountability.

The legal dimension of human rights emphasises the importance of vertical relationships to ensure accountability for the realisation of rights. Human rights represent a legal, as well as moral and political, responsibility to ensure human wellbeing. There is a danger that critiques of the legal dimension of HRE may trivialise the importance of learning *about* human rights; this suggests the need to distinguish between learning *about* human rights as abstract legal entitlements and *about* human rights as a tool to legally address human wellbeing. Understanding the relationship between action or inaction of governments, non-government entities, and/or individuals, and human wellbeing is an important part of HRE; it raises questions about responsibility inherent in the cosmopolitan principles of reciprocity and solidarity (Osler & Starkey, 1996). Osler (2016) argues that if people do not know their rights, it is difficult to expect them to make claims

or to hold themselves or others accountable for violations of these rights. History has shown that the legal dimension of human rights can be an effective tool to ensure justice against discrimination and bias (Osler, 2016). It fosters solidarity to seek accountability. The absence of teachers' awareness and knowledge of the powerful role of learning *about* human rights, knowledge that includes the risks associated with uncritical and blind acceptance of legal rights and legal systems that violate human rights, dilutes the transformative potential of their practice. In the next section, I discuss how teachers' work with students to develop empathetic dispositions can also dilute this potential.

### **6.3.3 Developing empathy as a democratic disposition**

Many studies suggest that teachers' limited or uncritical understanding of human rights or HRE risks perpetuating the injustices that teachers seek to address (Bajaj, 2011b; BEMIS, 2013; Fritzsche & Tibbitts, 2006; Gerber, 2013; Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011; Osler, 2016; Osler & Starkey, 2010; Tibbitts, 2002, 2012; Waldron et al., 2011). Other studies point to teachers' inability to explain human rights concepts or the vague nature of their understanding as impediments to transformative HRE (Al-Daraweesh & Snauwaert, 2015; Keet, 2012; Zembylas et al., 2015, 2016). As I have already stated, teachers' practices emphasise fostering horizontal relationships with an emphasis on developing students' democratic disposition through everyday human relations or social behaviour. There are multiple references in the teachers' stories to the sociomoral development of students. For example, teachers refer to generating "mutual respect", "care", "fairness", and "empathy" when they describe their practices.

Ella focuses on developing students' sense of moral responsibility towards injustice: "If we were...talking about literature again and then, someone comments on a character's action, and I say yes, okay, but can you see yourself in that position, what would be your reaction?". Ella is referring to her class on African American Literature. She explains how she wants to develop students' understanding of prejudice and bias by creating contexts where they can step into the shoes of the characters from the book. Characters include African Americans who experience individual and systemic racism. The focus on experiencing the vulnerability of the Other is common in HRE practices that aim to develop empathetic responses (Tibbitts, 2002, 2017). In contexts where teachers are working with a relatively homogeneous student population in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and physical and mental abilities, creating contexts for

students to explore the reality of others in relation to their own is important. However, developing empathy should not be confused with generating sympathy, which can perpetuate unhealthy divisions as a result of different lived realities.

Helga provides opportunities for students to develop empathy, a disposition that she understands as an important civic skill: "So that's probably what I am hoping for, just a kind of better understanding towards those who are different in some way, in school or out of it". She describes an elective human rights course that she runs with a colleague as a "kind of citizenship thing". Students experience 24 hours living as a refugee during a simulation activity facilitated by the Red Cross:

It's tough. It is really tough. It has, I have done it twice with students and it has made an enormous impact, being a refugee for 24 hours, being deprived of food, sleep, and everything, I mean I couldn't believe when I participated for the first time, I couldn't believe the Red Cross was actually doing this to my students, but at the end of the day, it was fantastic, and they really needed to talk about it so much at school afterwards and they said this has changed my life and they were looking at stories in the media, refugees being found down at the harbour trying to get into trawlers, trying to go to Canada etc. and they said we see it so differently now. (Helga, history teacher)

This is an interesting example of getting students connected to what is taking place in Icelandic society. Helga is focused on developing an empathetic stance amongst students towards the plight of refugees. Understanding empathy as an emotional response to human suffering is common in the narratives. Helga describes using her students' stories to foster a deeper understanding of the social reality of others: "It was good for them [the students] to hear him tell his side of the story, his family's side of the story". In this example, Helga describes drawing on her student's experience of living in a war context to challenge negative stereotypes appearing in the media about immigrant populations. This approach to generating empathy differs from the Red Cross simulation experiment, in that it is contextualised by commonalities; by this I mean students share identities as students, from which they are able to explore their differences.

Generating empathy to gain an understanding of an unfamiliar reality in contexts that do not start with a common ground is more problematic. Contexts that the teachers work with include women's rights and gender

inequalities, racism, refugees and asylum seekers, and geopolitics, encompassing both local and global contexts. In one elective class, Bjarni chose to present a session on the Cambodian genocide that took place between 1975-1979. He wanted to generate empathy amongst students for human suffering in a “distant reality”. Bjarni explains that he wanted to challenge the perception that human suffering is “not as serious a matter as things that happen in your backyard”. He went on to say: “We have been taught about the Jews and the Holocaust, you know, from since they were born, and so we can probably imagine that, but this reality, I don’t think they understand it”. Bjarni raises the challenge of students’ lack of familiarity with the context: “they don’t know anyone from Cambodia. They don’t know where it is. They have never been to Asia”.

Empathy is an important, if not fundamental, component of our social and emotional being (Zembylas, 2013; Zembylas & Papamichael, 2016). Several scholars have pointed to emotions as essential in HRE (Al-Daraweesh & Snauwaert, 2013; Monaghan et al., 2017; Monchinski, 2010; Rorty, 1998; Zembylas, 2017). However, how emotions are used to develop value systems plays an important part in the transformative nature of the response. As Zembylas (2017) points out:

Suffering, which is in part an effect of socioeconomic relations of violence and poverty, is problematically assumed to be alleviated by empathetic identification with others, yet there is no assurance that the feelings evoked will not be those of pity, a feeling which does not lead to any action. (p. 12)

Social reproduction of inequities and injustices can inadvertently happen when teachers seek to develop certain values in certain learning contexts. In particular when these contexts do not necessarily reflect democratic values (Osler, 2016). Working to generate mutual respect and develop empathy does not come without the risk of Othering. When human rights are taught in the context of the Other, they can perpetuate the notion that human rights are distant from one’s own reality (Osler, 2016). Adami (2014) suggests that such an experience can generate perceptions of being a defender of human rights; where the defenders are “a homogenous ‘us’ restricted to certain kinds of national, ethnic, cultural, religious or socioeconomic belongings” (p. 293). They come to see themselves as fighting for the rights of those who do not share these characteristics, perpetuating power imbalances that contradict teachers’ attempts at fostering “mutual respect”, “care”, “fairness”, and “empathy”.

Psychological tests with children have shown that empathy is not naturally shared equally with all people and we do not feel the same concern towards someone whom we have never met (Decety & Cowell, 2014). Generating empathy for human suffering in the context of literature, historical events, and simulation activities, and in predominantly homogeneous school settings, does not necessarily move our concern from those we know to those we do not know. Nor does it automatically lead to critical active responses to suffering (Abrams, 2011; Adami, 2014; Baxi, 2007; Sliwinski, 2005; Zembylas, 2011, 2017).

Teachers' lack of opportunity to explore their practices can generate forms of Othering when the intention has been to generate student empathy towards the situation of others. When empathy is understood as a necessary democratic disposition and citizenship skill, without a deeper analysis of the causes of injustice, the critical and cosmopolitan nature of human rights can become trivialised. In the next section, I discuss how trivialisation can dilute the transformative potential of learning *for* human rights, the action oriented component of HRE.

#### **6.4 Trivialisation dilutes the transformative potential of learning for human rights**

Zembylas et al. (2016) refer to teachers' vagueness when discussing human rights as "trivialization of human rights" (p. 17). This vagueness is evident when teachers implement a broad range of practices without being knowledgeable about how these connect or relate to human rights. These practices include a focus on classroom behaviour, students' relations in the playground, and talking about students' rights. They argue that "trivialization" is the result of teachers' lack of conceptual human rights knowledge.

Learning *for* human rights includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011). Tibbitts (2005, p. 3) draws on an empirical study carried out by Edward W. Taylor who identified several essential practices and conditions to transformative learning. The teachers' practices that I have discussed reflect Taylor's reference to promoting a sense of safety, openness, and trust; student-centred learning that aims for student voice, participation and collaboration; critical reflection; and creating empathetic and caring environments. However, the narratives also suggest that these features can become trivialised when they are not grounded in a critical analysis of human

suffering and its causes. Critical analysis of oppression and vulnerability can lead to forms of activism. Activism can be understood as an intention to “create a means and a space from whatever elements or resources are available in order to resist or subvert the strategies of more powerful institutions, ideologies, or processes” (Madison, 2010, p. 3). Attempts at forms of activism that are not grounded in critical analysis of broader historical and sociocultural contexts lack the cohesiveness of collective action underpinned by a common social justice intention.

Ingimar describes an attempt to get his students involved in public protests:

For me, it was a political objective and I actually at least two times, I organised a *hvað er mótmælaganga?* [What is *mótmælaganga?* [a demonstration]]...the 1st December is an international day against violence and at least two times I decided that we would have a team on these issues...the students found something, read it and write about it and then we would show up at the town hall square. These arrangements were at five o'clock on Friday and I said those who are interested should show up and it was usually girls, between five to ten girls who were most interested out of a class of some 70 to 100 second-year Social Science students. (Ingimar, history teacher)

His reflection on this attempt at generating student activism illustrates an awareness that activism cannot be forced or restricted to an isolated event. He presents his attempts in terms of underestimating his own role in generating student motivation to participate: “students do not want to take over, they just want something to happen that is interesting”. Ingimar is aware that participation without critical reflection is dangerous in that it can create complacency about injustices understood as human rights concerns:

I don't know if that is part of how slowly it (referring to human rights), or somehow this marginal position...it somehow is pushed to the margins, this discussion of fundamental things...for example, Iceland has a horrible history of how it deals with political refugees and we are still in that business. (Ingimar, history teacher)

He explains how these initial attempts to engage students in forms of public protest led him to think critically about his teaching. He thought more

deeply about the need to involve students in deep discussions on values reflected in sociocultural systems and how these can conflict with human rights values. This suggests a move towards developing student critical consciousness. As Tibbitts points out, activism needs to be underpinned by “a willingness to bring tensions and conflicts into the group” (Tibbitts, 2005, p. 4).

Working with tensions and conflicts that can arise when addressing sensitive or controversial concerns is a concern that teachers frequently encounter (BEMIS, 2013; Cassidy et al., 2014; Struthers, 2016). A number of teachers refer to this challenge, in particular concerning their work around developing empathy. Helga and Selma suggest that it is not a matter of not wanting to engage students in deep discussions about sensitive concerns, but more about not knowing how to go about this. Ella talks about teachers' reluctance to work with unfamiliar, sensitive, and controversial topics because “many teachers have, that insecurity”. She explains that there are certain topics such as racism that teachers are not prepared for:

Someone might either be really racist or have a really difficult experience and you are opening up fragile issues and concerns and I think of, many language teachers, they are like, whoa, I should just be teaching English. (Ella, English teacher)

Tibbitts (2005) identifies dealing with tensions in a group as a way to defy compliance because they “help to deepen our understanding of the subjective experience of others” (p. 4). Without the right kind of support, teachers are more likely to address human rights issues more broadly and generally, leading to trivialisation of human rights concerns. Zembylas et al. (2016) find that teachers tend to discuss human rights in terms of “more familiar discourses and practices such as those of intercultural or anti-bullying education” (p. 17). They suggest that these provide teachers with the “missing pedagogical “safety” that helped them deal with the challenges they faced” (Zembylas et al., 2016, p. 17). By challenges, they refer to the tensions and conflicts that can arise when teachers address sensitive or controversial concerns, as suggested by Ella.

The practices of the teachers suggest that they tend to focus on isolated and individual personal development rather than student activism. For example, Viktor and Simon develop students' self-esteem to encourage resistance to exclusive school practices; Selma focuses on developing student critical thinking to raise awareness of social inequalities both in school and more broadly; Ilmur and Tumi focus on self-exploration of perceptions of

culture and democratic decision making to encourage learning to live together in a pluralistic society; and Ella, Bjarni, and Helga develop student awareness of human vulnerability to foster empathy. These practices reflect learning *through* human rights rather than learning *about* and learning *for* human rights. Research suggests that this last HRE dimension tends to be neglected or diluted, in particular in formal schooling (Tibbitts, 2017).

Anna's narrative shows greater political intention towards social change in her pedagogical perspective. She believes that teachers avoid sensitive or political issues because they have not critically engaged in understanding these, in particular concerning their own lives. She talks about a balance between "feeling secure in your skin", being "sort of vulnerable" and generating an environment of "mutual respect". She describes getting her students involved in gender equality days organised at the school. Activities include writing articles on local gender concerns, for example, pornography, hate speech, and media stereotyping. Students are also encouraged to lobby for equal rights within the school context. Anna's approach reflects what Ingimar feels he was missing when he tried to organise his students to engage in public protests. Anna talks about developing deep critical discussions, but she is also aware that student activism cannot be forced:

It is really, sort of, I put something out, they react and we discuss...sometimes, well...I, of course, I can't be sure all the time, and you, you can be in my classroom for a whole semester and, and, if, if you are determined not to be, not to relate, you cannot relate, you know, I try to take them all to me and, and err, err, make them all be a part of what, my agenda is, but err, yes... (Anna, gender studies teacher)

Anna's statement acknowledges the fine line between pursuing a normative human rights agenda and developing student agency. Students can be a part of a process of critical dialogue and reflection. However, there is a need to respect students' responses in a way that provides space for them to "become subjects of their world" (Darder et al., 2009, p. 13). Biesta (2006, 2013, 2020) refers to this as a process of subjectification, a term that he uses to challenge forms of socialisation common in formal schooling. Socialisation that aims for conformity rather than criticality is not transformative because of its instrumental intention. Activism for Anna seems to be embedded in students' capacity for critical consciousness rather than development of prescribed civic, ethical, and social competences. She understands the role of the teacher as feeding this consciousness while being



aware of power imbalances that can be generated through teacher/student relations:

Teachers should be aware of the power she has, err, she should really handle it with real care because you can destroy so much with the power if you abuse it...I always try to make them, make students aware of the power within them. (Anna, gender studies teacher)

Given the tacit nature of teachers' engagement with human rights, it comes as no surprise that the transformative potential of teachers' practices remains a challenge in formal schooling. All of the narratives show pedagogical intention to generate change of some sort in response to what teachers perceive as unjust. It could be argued that their teaching is transformative because of the impact on individual students. However, I would argue, teachers' tacit individual and isolated responses that remain unexplored and uncritiqued are not transformative in the context of HRE, in particular when they fail to engage with learning *about* human rights.

## **6.5 Discussion: Learning about human rights and HRE can develop the transformative potential of teachers' practices**

This section builds on the previous chapter where it was argued that tacit knowledge, or practical know-how, risks diluting the transformative goals of HRE, if it remains dormant, unarticulated, and unexamined. Dependence on tacit knowledge can perpetuate the social injustices that the teachers seek to address because there is risk that practices reflect what Zembylas et al. (2016) refer to as a retreat to familiar discourses and activities. In this chapter, the argument is made that learning *about* human rights and HRE can develop tacit knowledge into critical know-how, which will develop the transformational potential of teachers' practices.

Although HRE may share conceptual and theoretical similarities with other forms of social justice oriented education, it differs in its pedagogical intentions. HRE cultivates skills, values, and stances with the intention to eliminate human rights violations and develop a culture of human rights. The retreat to more familiar discourses is described by Zembylas et al. (2016) as a "restricting" pedagogical perspective. By this they refer to a tendency amongst teachers to avoid engaging with fundamental rights and to instead focus on everyday rights and responsibilities in the context of schools and families. The ten teachers' practices represent resistance to exclusive

schooling and reflect student-centred pedagogy to encourage democratic processes and citizenship skills. Yet, as individual practices, they lack the emphasis on student agency explicitly aimed at both personal and social transformation in line with Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996), and characteristic of the activism/transformation HRE model (Tibbitts, 2017). In this sense they reflect aspects of Tibbitts (2017) values awareness/socialisation model with a mix of participatory and empowerment methodologies. Participatory/interactive methodologies promote student-centred learning and critical thinking but not necessarily student agency, while empowerment methodologies foster agency to recognise causes of oppression and ways to influence social change, but not necessarily as a form of instrumental activism (Tibbitts, 2017).

Zembylas et al. (2016) argue that teachers in their study emphasise vertical authority to ensure rights in order to avoid dealing with controversially sensitive and challenging dialogues. The reference to vertical authority is interesting in the way that it is used in the Zembylas et al. (2016) study. They use it to refer to teachers' drawing on rights discourse to tell students that, for example, it is wrong to hurt other people's feelings because of accepted and agreed upon norms. This reflects what Tibbitts (2017) refers to as HRE as "socialization towards prosocial behaviour" (Tibbitts, 2017, p. 86). They argue that horizontal or democratic relationships should instead be developed to engage students in discussions about rights. These discussions should include addressing the legal dimension of rights. Although, I agree with their analysis as regards the need to develop horizontal and democratic relationships that encourage dialogue on injustices, including the role of legal human rights, what is missing in their analysis is the role of accountability when addressing rights.

The notion of accountability is inherent in human rights and HRE. The cosmopolitan principles of reciprocity and solidarity suggest a universal responsibility for human wellbeing. This universal responsibility is not based on metaphysical notions of human rights or an understanding that they represent absolute truths, as suggested by Critical Human Rights Education (CHRE) scholars. These scholars critique human rights when understood as "monolithic truths" (Zembylas, 2017: p. 4) and assumed universals (Al-Daraweesh & Snauwaert, 2013). Keet (2012) suggests learning *about* human rights is declarationist by which, he means overemphasis is placed on the legal dimension of human rights (Keet, 2012). Universal responsibility is based on historical struggles for justice that have shown that if people do not know their rights, it is difficult to expect them to make claims or to hold others accountable for violations of these rights (Osler, 2016). Osler (2016)

argues for HRE that engages with vertical as well as horizontal relationships. This argument implies that the legal dimension of HRE plays an important role in generating student and teachers' responses to injustice, as individuals and as a collective.

When learning *about* human rights is linked to ensuring accountability for human rights violations, it is possible to critique the position adopted by CHRE scholars. Based on teachers' practices in this study, there is no evidence of a declarationist approach or understandings of human rights as assumed universals. Rather, the findings point to practices that are informed by tacit knowledge fuelled by moral and political convictions that have developed as a result of cross-cultural experiences. This has resulted in an interesting mix of moral and political responsibility towards students. Teachers' practices include those that resist exclusive schooling and that encourage democratic processes and citizenship skills through horizontal and democratic relations. The findings suggest, however, that these practices would benefit from knowledge about human rights and HRE to avoid trivialisation that dilutes the transformative potential of teachers' pedagogical responses.

Accountability suggests a universal responsibility to protect all human beings against vulnerability. Kirchsclaeger (2014) refers to the principle of vulnerability as justification for human rights and the universality of rights. He proposes an understanding of human rights as the result of a reaction; as human beings, we seek consensus around means of protection against vulnerability. Given that this protection requires intercultural understanding, human rights can be understood as contextualised in the complex interweaving of strands of social life, which create the lived human experience. Accountability to ensure this protection against vulnerability is therefore an important part of the pedagogical HRE process. The teachers' narratives suggest that they address issues of accountability as individuals through their pedagogy but not in the context of the system.

Certain articles in the 2008 education act raise important questions related to accountability to ensure students' right to quality education, and rights in and through education.

Article 32 on admission states:

Students who have completed compulsory school or received equivalent basic education or reached the age of 16 shall have the right to be admitted to an upper secondary school. Those entitled to enrol at an upper secondary school pursuant to this paragraph shall also be entitled to pursue upper secondary level

studies until the age of 18, cf. the provisions of Articles 2 and 33.  
(Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008: article 32)

Article 33 on students' rights states:

Upper secondary schools shall in all respects operate in a manner promoting a sense of security in students and the development of their potential. Schools shall organise their activities so as to respect general occupational safety principles. Students shall have the right to express their views on the study environment, learning arrangements, the organisation of schooling, and any other decision concerning them. These views shall be taken into account where possible. (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008: article 33)

These articles are used here to illustrate how policy can be used for advocacy purposes. HRE is not just about content, but also about methodology; the way in which the legal dimension of human rights is presented to students determines the transformative nature of HRE (Tibbitts, 2017). Yet in order for this to happen, teachers need to be aware of the power of the legal dimension of human rights and indeed HRE, as well as its weaknesses.

Viktor and Simon apply pedagogical practices that resist selective schooling processes; their practices are endorsed and justified by the law, in that they seek to promote “a sense of security in students and the development of their potential” (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008, article 33). Although students have the right to be admitted to an upper secondary school according to article 32 (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008, article 32), this does not mean that they can go to the school of their choice. The law allows schools to impose special conditions as regards “preparation and academic achievements for admission to specific study programmes” (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008, article 32). Jóhannesson and Bjarnadóttir (2015) point out that it is “a democratic right that the students themselves should decide what kind of study program – academic, college-preparatory, industry-oriented, practical – suits their interests and future plans” (p. 12). Learning *about* human rights offers Simon and Viktor an opportunity to engage with these laws in critical ways. It offers them a context to engage with the multiple interpretations of the law, and questions around whose agenda is being addressed, who benefits from the law, and who does not. This represents a form of praxis, leading to individual

and collective consciousness, which is associated with human rights activism and, ultimately, social change (Tibbitts, 2017).

All of the teachers apply student-centred pedagogy and practices that aim to encourage democratic processes and citizenship skills. Student-centred learning can be associated with teaching and learning that emphasises learning as a social process towards increased agency, in line with constructivist theories; it can also be associated with empowerment and emancipation, suggesting a humanist conception of learning (Tangney, 2013). Empowerment and emancipation in the context of HRE can also be aligned with critical pedagogy, which assumes a student-centred approach. What distinguishes constructivist, humanist and critical pedagogy approaches as regards conceptions of agency and empowerment is the latter's explicit focus on education as a means to challenge oppressive forces. While in constructivist and humanist pedagogies, the student is an active participant in terms of the learning process, in critical pedagogy, the learner is an active participant in addressing oppression (Darder et al., 2009; Freire, 1996; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). Although humanistic education can focus on a concern for humanity (Veugelers, 2011), the emphasis tends to be on students' emotional wellbeing (Khatib et al., 2013) and intellectual development; addressing rights becomes an implicit or unintentional part of the pedagogical approach.

The narratives suggest that teachers draw on student-centred pedagogies more aligned with humanist understandings of education. In some cases, the emphasis is on the learning process itself, used as a means of developing knowledge and skills in the specific subject area in order to build confidence and self-esteem (Viktor and Simon); in other instances, it is applied to ensure wellbeing and generate empathy towards vulnerable others (Helga, Ella), to raise critical consciousness as regards cultural diversity (Ilmur) and connections with global others (Bjarni), to develop understandings of associated living (Tumi), to increase student voice and critical thinking (Ingimar, Selma, Anna), and as reflected in the majority of the narratives, to foster sociomoral dispositions. There is some evidence in a few of the stories of the learner understood as an active participant in addressing oppression. For example, Anna and Ingimar have directly engaged students in forms of activism and Selma talks about engaging students in conversations about hierarchies in schools and societies.

The notion of student voice or agency as a democratic principle is common in Nordic models of education, including Iceland (Harðarson, 2010). The 2008 upper secondary education act (Act on Upper Secondary School,

2008) and 2011 curriculum for upper secondary schools (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2012) place more emphasis on student influence than in previous legislation and policy. Article 33, amendment number 68/2012 states that:

Students shall have the right to express their views on the study environment, learning arrangements, the organisation of schooling, and any other decision concerning them. These views shall be taken into account where possible.

Yet, as the narratives suggest, student participation and influence is embedded in school structures that favour dominant cultures. This is evident in the school council system at the upper secondary school, as critically discussed by Tumi and Selma. Biesta (2011) argues that the concept of student voice has come to be understood as an individual rather than a systemic or structural concern. Other teachers' narratives suggest that they lack the knowledge about human rights and HRE that would help them to contextualise student voice as an integral component of justice in school and in broader society. For example, it would lead teachers to critically question annual multicultural days that celebrate customs and traditions. Learning *about* human rights in the context of hierarchy and power imbalance helps the educator understand student voice or agency as more than about participation in an event. Becoming knowledgeable about human rights and HRE, and its moral, political, and legal dimensions, therefore plays a crucial role in developing the transformative potential of teachers' practices.

Rights-based education frameworks serve as important tools for teachers. For example, Katarina Tomaševski's (2001, 2003) 4-A scheme that addresses the *availability* of schools and resources, *accessibility* to these, *acceptability* in terms of ensuring student safety and wellbeing, and *adaptability* by monitoring how a school system responds to ensure availability, accessibility and acceptability. Her framework suggests schooling is a matter of human rights because it is underpinned by international laws relating to educational rights: the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (see article 26), the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (see articles 13 and 14) and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (see article 18). Being knowledgeable about the legal dimension gives teachers a tool to hold stakeholders accountable to their human rights obligations. Rather than understanding developing teachers' knowledge on the legal dimension of human rights as declarative,

it should be understood as relational; teachers critically engage in dialogue on the advantages and challenges of human rights as legal constructs.

Challenges include awareness that having human rights laws does not guarantee the realisation of rights. In many instances, there are violations of human rights despite the law. For example, article 33 of the 2008 education act states that upper secondary schools shall in all respects operate in a manner promoting a sense of security in students and the development of their potential. Yet, research illustrates that schools fail to offer this protection; students with special needs (see Jónsson, 2016; Óskarsdóttir et al. 2019; Sverrisdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2018) and students with an immigrant background (Tran, 2015) have their legal rights violated in Icelandic schools. While the law is important, there is also a need to challenge the lack of in-depth and critical analysis of rights in the context of education (Tomaševski, 2006). Engaging teachers in a critique of human rights legal frameworks develops a form of praxis that can lead to individual and collective consciousness towards social change based on knowledge, but also necessary skills and attitudes towards human rights.

Learning “*about*” human rights is connected to learning “*through*” and “*for*” human rights. HRE emphasises both content and processes related to human rights (Bajaj, 2011a; Bajaj, 2011b; Tibbitts, 2017). The interconnectedness of learning *about*, *through*, and *for* lies in how each mutually supports the other. The history of human rights, including its philosophical and theoretical roots, and its critiques, is important content. It is this content that informs the nature of the development of skills and values. Human rights content introduced through critical pedagogies ensure that content and processes develop a critical consciousness of issues of power. Education paradigms associated with humanism tend to ignore the role and impact of power relations on human wellbeing. The emphasis is instead on emotive and intellectual responses to wellbeing. Introducing content through critical pedagogies in teacher education can make teachers more aware of their pedagogical perspectives and pedagogies, and the implications for rights. This allows teachers to develop creative and critical conceptions of human rights that generate what Al-Daraweesh and Snauwaert (2013) refer to as human rights praxis. They argue for a contextualisation of human rights and HRE that connects critical pedagogy with praxis-based concepts of social change (Al-Daraweesh and Snauwaert, 2013, p. 410).

Freire (1996) believed that education is a process that should provide the opportunity to adopt a position of agency, understood as the capacity to

engage in a culture of questioning. Human rights and HRE therefore needs to be understood as a process of critical inquiry of human vulnerability. Understanding critical inquiry as a necessary characteristic of learning *about* human rights can develop the transformative potential of teachers' practices, without imposing a dominant and conservative moral understanding of HRE. Increasing teachers' agency to critically question their pedagogical perspectives and practices, based on an analysis of power inherent in the moral, political, and legal dimension of human rights, is perhaps a way of developing tacit knowledge into critical know-how that develops pedagogical intention to address human rights.

## 6.6 Summary of chapter six

Teachers' practices, as described through their stories, predominantly reflect learning *through* human rights in that they emphasise horizontal and democratic relationships. Student-centred and participatory processes that foster sociomoral development for different purposes are evident in the stories. These purposes include education as a form of resistance to exclusive school practices and to encourage democratic processes and citizenship skills. There is more emphasis on *learning through human rights* and the dimensions of *learning about* and *for human rights* are less obvious in the narratives. This can be related to teachers' lack of training on human rights and human rights education.

Teachers' practices are dependent on tacit or practical know-how, which is not the same as human rights knowledge. This chapter has argued that this dependence dilutes the transformative potential of teachers' work. Teachers' lack of human rights and HRE training encourages them to revert to familiar discourses and practices, which trivialises human rights. By this I refer to forms of intercultural understanding, development of democratic and sociomoral dispositions, including affective skills, reflective of the values awareness/socialisation model of HRE (Tibbitts, 2017). Without an intentioned human rights frame that seeks social change, despite good intentions, teachers' practices risk perpetuating the very injustices that they seek to challenge. As Adami (2014, p. 296) suggests, it is not enough for human rights educators to have "good intentions"; their actions or narrations should instead be judged on their effect. This suggests the need for accountability, which is not possible without recognition of the role that human rights and HRE can play in the education system. In this sense, rather than human rights educators hiding behind "good intentions", as Adami (2014, p. 296) suggests, it is perhaps more a question of the education system



itself that is hiding behind progressive educational discourse in the national curriculum guides, and in particular the six fundamental pillars.

The education system is the focus in the final findings chapter, where I discuss teachers' perceptions of systemic challenges, and the implications for transformative HRE.



## 7 What do teachers' life stories reveal about the systemic challenges that they face?

*The advocates of substantial development in aims or content will never get anywhere if they fail to understand and even sometimes respect the inertial constraints that prevent changes from taking place. (Jónasson, 2016, p. 1)*

### 7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, findings on teachers' reasons for working with human rights and their pedagogical perspectives and practices were presented and discussed. So far, the argument has been put forward that teachers' practices fall short of being transformative because they depend on tacit knowledge and overemphasise learning *through* human rights. Teachers' lack of opportunity to learn *about* human rights or HRE in critical and context-based ways encourages teachers to revert to safe discourses and practices. These include focusing on student-centred pedagogy to promote intercultural understanding, democratic and sociomoral dispositions, including affective skills, reflective of the values awareness/socialisation HRE model and participatory HRE methodologies (Tibbitts, 2017). The dimensions of *learning about* and *for human rights* are less obvious in the narratives. In this chapter, to answer the question, *what do teachers' life stories reveal about the systemic challenges they face?* I have drawn on my own life story, my analysis of human rights, HRE literature and the policy and school contexts in Iceland, as well as the ten teachers' life stories.

This chapter focuses on the role of the system in constraining or facilitating the transformative potential of teachers' work with human rights. "The system" refers to the upper secondary school, its curriculum, management and administrative processes, and influential factors that shape the school environment. The reference to systemic challenges includes the way in which upper secondary school culture impacts on teachers' pedagogical choices. This makes the findings particularly relevant to the two compulsory courses offered as part of the upper secondary school teaching Postgraduate Diploma that I discussed in chapter three. The findings in this chapter indicate that the school culture fails to address teachers' lack of human rights knowledge and does not provide the necessary space for

sharing of knowledge and experiences, for cooperation and collaboration and experimentation to develop and sustain teachers' human rights practices. As I discuss, this suggests that teachers are not expected to engage with human rights, in particular in ways that would generate transformation that challenges the status quo, and which is reflected in curriculum discourse.

This chapter addresses the tensions between the established structures of a system, school culture and teacher autonomy. Two themes represent teachers' perceptions of systemic challenges. The first is, teachers' understandings of the purpose of schooling conflict with stakeholder expectations of upper secondary school education. A sub-theme addresses subject specialisation that pushes democracy and human rights to the periphery of the curriculum. The second theme is, teachers' "self-regulation" (a term drawn from one of the teachers' stories); regulation that dilutes teachers' moral and political convictions. These findings are used to argue that despite human rights and democracy representing a core curriculum pillar in policy documents, there is lack of support at the school level to make space for HRE, let alone support the development of the transformative potential of individual teachers' practices. New content and themes, such as human rights, are pushed to the periphery of the curriculum. This allows the insidious nature of the education system to sustain harmful practices by allowing educational and social inequities to persist and fester, while promoting social justice discourse.

## **7.2 Teachers' understandings of the purpose of schooling conflict with stakeholder expectations**

The 2008 education act (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008) and 2011 curriculum for upper secondary schools (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2012) support a decentralised competence-based education system with subject specific and general aims. The general aims of education are represented by the six fundamental pillars, which include democracy and human rights:

The fundamental pillars also refer to a vision of the future, ability, and will to influence and be active in maintaining society, change it, and develop...they are to promote increased equality and democracy and to ensure well-educated and healthy citizens, both for participating in and for changing and improving society, and also for contemporary employment. (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2012, p. 14)

I and my colleague have argued that despite transformative discourse, as illustrated by references to “rewriting the world”, “shaping society” and “capability for action”, the philosophy that underlies the official curriculum lacks consistency in terms of promoting critical forms of education (Gollifer & Tran, 2012, p. 14). Policy documents can encourage good intentions that risk the perpetuation of social hierarchies and inequitable distributions of power and privilege (Gorski, 2008, 2009). The findings in this study support research that suggests that teachers practices are impacted on by the contradictions between the “intended” official national curriculum guides and the “implemented” school curriculum (Mullis et al., 2007; Lefever, 2009):

I am constantly worried about not teaching English properly because I am taking my students on a journey around the world...why am I not asking them to write an essay? The guilt, how to balance these two things, teaching about global perspectives, human rights, and the English part? I enjoy so much when discussing with my students that sometimes I forget what I am paid to do. (Selma, English teacher)

Selma's reference to forgetting what she is paid to do reflects tension as regards how teachers perceive their role and their perception of what is expected by the upper secondary school system, and education stakeholders, such as students and parents. As Ella points out, other teachers can exert pressure that leads to this sense of feeling that you are “not doing what you are supposed to do”. She recalls responses from English teachers when discussing how to incorporate the fundamental pillars into teaching: “don't bring in that word, what do you mean when you say that – sustainability, human rights, what are you talking about, we teach English”. Similarly, the expectation of students can put pressure on teachers to focus on the traditional didactic approach to subject teaching. Ella describes how her students challenge her use of discussion and argue that they want to be “taught” and not be “the teacher”. When pedagogical approaches conflict with students' expectations of teaching and learning, this can create tensions for both students and teachers alike.

I also think that we have to admit that when we are talking about things like, that then we are on their level, we are not, you know, then we are just there to learn with them, like um (pause), um I can't, but then the old fashioned role of the teacher disappears, I think because then you have to admit that,

that everyone's opinion is just equally as important and I don't have the answers either. There are no answers and that is very uncomfortable for many students, especially like since students ask, so what is the answer then, you know, when we do poetry and things like that... (Ella, English teacher)

Given that human rights is not a specified subject in the curriculum and that teachers are not formally prepared to work with human rights, it becomes a matter of individual choice as regards if or how human rights should be addressed. As their practices suggest, most teachers relate HRE to student-centred pedagogies that encourage student participation and active engagement. Simon's practice aims to intentionally challenge what he perceives as dominant pedagogical expectations. For Simon, teaching science as an absolute truth conflicts with his own understanding of pedagogy as a process of critical discovery: "nature doesn't have a manual, everything is made by man". In the following comment he refers to the influence of stakeholders' expectations of science teaching on teachers' engagement with general aims such as human rights and democracy:

Because they think everything that they are doing, they mention, even talk about in the classroom, needs to be in the sense scientific, that you must be able to measure it... I think that maybe some science teachers, not social science teachers, but science teachers, are sort of...referring to this notion, that these are political, almost religious words, human rights...I think that's one of the reasons they don't define themselves as being able to and they define their discipline, their subject as sort of distant or err, or, even nonrelated. (Simon, science teacher)

Anna is also concerned that those who have the most decision-making power in schools do not seem to recognise the value of social-oriented themes evident in the fundamental pillars: "I think my biggest challenge has been you know dealing with the authorities...I wish they understood the importance of this, this, education". She is referring to human rights and equality, and more specifically her course on gender equality and women's rights. As she points out: "What is the role of this part of the educational system? Is it to prepare people for university?" She suggests that the lack of support leads one to wonder what the true priorities are, despite what the curriculum says: "It's amazing, I mean how can you have a law in this country and you don't prepare teachers to follow them"?

The conflict between how teachers understand the purpose of schooling and their perception of how this is understood by other stakeholders is also evident in Tumi's narrative: "Parents also tend to be sort of, you know, there are all sorts but they tend to be conservative". By this, he refers to parents who expect upper secondary schools to focus on subject specialisation rather than broader general aims. The importance of parents being supportive of their work is evident in a number of the narratives, as a form of justification:

Parents listen to their children. So I've just had a month ago or so, I had a letter from a mother saying...my son talks about school...and he is constantly talking about his African American class...the class has made him think about new issues...that's nice to get a feedback like that from the home. (Ella, English teacher)

External financial input can influence how a school operates and create conflicting understandings of student autonomy. Tumi refers to student councils being supported by business and suggests that there are tensions between the role of teachers and student expectations of having voice. He talks about funding from private sources to the student councils:

It's also an interesting thing about Icelandic school culture, this split between the social and the academic...it's like a corporation, you know, they're, the *nemandafélag* [student council], they have internal (worth - inaudible) for millions and millions and millions, and they're heavily sponsored by business. (Tumi, English teacher)

Tumi suggests that student councils have a great degree of autonomy. This may be in part due to an understanding of democracy as synonymous with student participation and voice. Tumi's concern is that student autonomy is too easily confused with no need for supervision or guidance. When students generate their own funds for projects and activities, teachers struggle to advise because their involvement seems to contradict the emphasis on student participation supported by educational policy:

I know there's a couple of women, female colleagues of mine who are, they are constantly struggling with this and they have tried to proofread and advise them and sort of work with it, but

it's, but still it's interesting in that they are so free and autonomous in their social activities. (Tumi, English teacher)

The disengagement between stakeholder expectations and teachers' understanding of their role creates a challenge for transformative HRE. Teachers who want to work with human rights need to find a way to respond to these conflicting expectations. One of the most common conflicts that teachers raise is the prioritisation of subject specialisation over general aims of education, as is now discussed.

### **7.2.1 Subject specialisation pushes democracy and human rights to the periphery of the curriculum**

The teachers' narratives suggest that education stakeholders tend to favour subject-based aims over general aims. This suggests, that of the three upper secondary school objectives, the all-round development of all students is less of a priority than active participation in democratic society, and participation in working life and further studies (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008, art. 2). The teachers' narratives further suggest that active participation in democratic life is understood in terms of "socialization towards prosocial behaviour" (Tibbitts, 2017, p. 86). Democracy and human rights can easily be pushed to the periphery of the curriculum in a system that favours subject specialisation over general aims. As a number of teachers point out, subjects such as mathematics, Icelandic, and English, which Tumi refers to as "the masters of the universe", overshadow other subjects. Several human rights scholars have argued that human rights tend to be restricted to certain subject areas, such as philosophy, social sciences, and history (Covell & Howe, 2020; Osler, 2016; Tibbitts, 2002, 2017), with a tendency towards the values and awareness/socialization model and participatory methodologies (Tibbitts, 2017). In Iceland, human rights have tended to be addressed through life skills when taught as a compulsory subject, and in history, social studies, or electives developed by teachers (Halldórsdóttir et al., 2016). In Tumi's school, subjects such as philosophy are electives and rarely offered because of lack of interest from students. He argues, "I would like to see happen here, is that either social studies or philosophy or something of that type would form part of the core for everybody". He believes that this would provide the opportunity for subjects such as human rights to become a recognised and respected part of the upper secondary school curriculum.

It's maybe, it's the biggest challenge for the, for the *framhaldsskólar* (upper secondary school), you know, if we want



to, you know, do something like democracy, you need to have a sort of, maybe not a unanimous, but you need to have a very broad and general understanding and commitment to it, and the whole school, I mean it's well and good to have a, like an Icelandic democratic project in English in the third week or something, and I mean it's good, and I am not saying that it's not good, but it's not a, it's very weak, it's a small, and then you need, I guess you need teachers who are committed to it but then you also need the leadership to chime in. (Tumi, English)

Tumi perceives the prioritisation of certain subjects over others as problematic; it creates the belief that certain subjects have more value than others. Tumi's suggestion that either social studies or philosophy becomes a core subject is interesting. Life skills was previously compulsory at all levels of schooling in Iceland, until the introduction of the 2011 national curriculum guides. Yet, this did not seem to result in upper secondary schools placing greater emphasis on general aims and competences. Expectations of students and parents as regards which subjects should be prioritised are instead influenced by market and university demands (Nylund et al., 2018). This leads to prioritisation of subjects, which perpetuates social hierarchies and inequalities. As Ingimar points out in reference to the traditional grammar school where he worked for many years: "we just throw out about a fourth of our new students, that's how we solved the problem of someone who was not good or did not make it in the exam". This has created a vocational-academic divide in Nordic countries (Nylund et al., 2018) that feeds social stratification.

Research in Iceland suggests that a student leaving before completion of an academic programme is discussed in terms of not meeting the required standards (Blöndal et al., 2011), rather than a human rights concern. Bjarnadóttir (2019) has argued that student drop out in Iceland, serves to maintain the elite status of certain subject fields, such as the natural sciences. Selma, who works in a grammar school, illustrates how stakeholders are able to justify subject specialisation despite its impact on creating and perpetuating inequities:

It's like when I am teaching my students, all animals are equal but some are more equal than others and there is a hierarchy, and I feel very strongly that in my school this is particularly difficult, because our students who graduate the most, they show and they prove themselves to be very much prepared and

apt when it comes to science so we can't change anything about science because they have a very strong argument, they say our students are the best. (Selma, English teacher)

Despite the 2011 national curriculum guides encouraging interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning, subject specialisation encouraged in previous curricula guidelines continues to dominate at the school level. The teachers' narratives illustrate that strong subject specialisation is prioritised, and courses that teachers develop to address general aims of education, are offered as electives. For example, Ella's African American Literature class, Bjarni's Cambodian genocide class, and Tumi's democracy game:

I think it applies to all the *framhaldskólar* [upper secondary schools] in Iceland that the culture is very subject-based...so if, if you had an English department that was minded towards, that wanted to, was very ambitious in implementing the *grunnþættir* [curriculum pillars], this would have a very strong impact on the school as a whole. (Tumi, English teacher)

Selma points out that subject specialisation constrains collaboration between teachers and creates subject boundaries, placing dependence on teachers of certain subjects to address the fundamental pillars:

The act said that the only requirements were English, maths and Icelandic and 45 credits altogether, and the rest is up to you in the schools, so, yeah the core subjects, so this is such a political thing, and err how do you sort of, what do you put in that recipe? Do you throw Danish out? And I think because of what we call, and I might be oversimplifying things now, but I, it helps me to think about things this way, the Balkanisation, just being a peninsular and not a, or a group of islands, and what are you doing on my island, you have no idea what I am doing in my subject so could you please get out. So, you, we lack this solidarity or common pedagogy that you can find in *Grunnskóli* (compulsory school) or *Leikskóli* (preschool). (Selma, English teacher)

In the absence of training on how to work with human rights at the upper secondary school level, human rights teaching becomes dependent on individual teachers or subject areas that are understood as conducive to the

teaching and learning of human rights. In a study on HRE in Finland (The Finnish Human Rights Centre, 2014), students and teachers at the upper secondary school level associated human rights with certain subject areas, such as philosophy and religious education, as well as history and social sciences. Toivanen (2007, 2009) has argued for human rights both as a subject and as a crosscutting theme, suggesting the need for interdisciplinary planning, as is proposed in the Icelandic national curriculum guides (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). The majority of teachers in the study welcome interdisciplinary planning and collaboration; yet they recognise that working with other teachers from certain subject areas is problematic because of the ingrained tradition of subject specialisation at the upper secondary school level. As Ilmur points out in reference to the idea of teacher collaboration: "It's something that I think is, a very great importance to have in some sense, you know, in each course, but I can imagine it being difficult, depending on what you are teaching" (Ilmur, cultural literacy teacher).

Ella also recognises that certain subject teachers are more resistant to change, in particular, teachers of the core subjects including English, her own subject area:

I think in the social science department, it's sort of straightforward and all the teachers there are willing and doing a lot of work in that field already, but the language and science and maths department, it's a bit more complicated. (Ella, English teacher)

At the time of the interviews, formalised training to support the integration of the curriculum pillar of democracy and human rights was limited. Helga talks about being involved in a European Association of History Teachers that addresses human rights in the context of history teaching. She is the only teacher to refer to specific human rights training related to her subject area, and she also talks about resources accessible from the Council of Europe and the United Nations. Scarcity of adequate HRE resources and/or relevant HRE training is a common challenge for teachers (BEMIS, 2013; Cassidy et al., 2014; Decara, 2013; Osler & Yahya, 2013; Rinaldi, 2017; Struthers, 2015). Several of the teachers mention resources developed to support the introduction of the curriculum pillars; for example, the teachers' guides on democracy and human rights (Menntamálaráðuneyti, 2008; Jónsson & Sigurðardóttir, 2012). However, the teachers have either not read

these or find them over-theoretical and/or unrelated to their teaching contexts:

There's very little practical advice about how to go about implementing and also a certain tone of, I don't know...they start by saying something like, schools are never really democratic, cos, in the end, it is the authorities who decide, so...maybe too careful or something, do you, do you, but they're too sceptical towards their own subject matter if you like, in a way, but I haven't really, and I haven't used it, you know that well, not really. (Tumi, English teacher)

Tumi's statement reflects what other teachers imply about the availability and acceptability of human rights resources and materials. Different specialists were responsible for writing each of the teacher guides for the six fundamental pillars. My review of the guide for the pillar of democracy and human rights (Jónsson & Sigurðardóttir, 2012) leads me to conclude that it provides both theoretical and practical information; it raises important philosophical questions about human rights and also provides practical activities for schools and teachers taken from a variety of international sources. Tumi's reference to the tone of the guide as "sceptical" suggests a call for criticality when working with human rights and democracy. The issue seems to be less about the content of materials and instead how these materials are used to introduce democracy and human rights to subject teachers. The guide seems to encourage a critical perspective of human rights and democracy, challenging passive acceptance of human rights as universal norms. However, I have found no evidence of this guide being used in compulsory teacher education for upper secondary school teachers.

Research has shown that short-term and one-off introductions to changes in the curriculum are insufficient to generate change in teachers' human rights beliefs and practices (Osler, 2016; Osler & Starkey, 2018; Rinaldi, 2017; Tibbitts & Katz, 2018). As chapter five argues, teachers depend on tacit knowledge. Ilmur, for example, describes herself as "not specifically working with human rights" but that rather they are "something that comes up and something that we discuss". Research suggests that teachers look for convenient opportunities afforded by the curriculum to integrate human rights (BEMIS, 2013). Looking for convenient opportunities to address human rights in school contexts that prioritise and maintain a tradition of subject specialisation is a significant systemic challenge raised by the teachers. The core fundamental pillars of the intended curriculum, including democracy

and human rights, cannot compete with ingrained notions of the purpose of schooling and stakeholders' expectations that these be adhered to.

As the teachers' narratives illustrate, this has left general aims such as human rights, hanging onto the periphery of the curriculum, rather than at its core, in line with educational policy. A second significant systemic challenge that teachers have identified is what Tumi refers to as the "culture of self-regulation", which is now discussed in the following section.

### **7.3 Self-regulation dilutes teachers' moral and political convictions**

In the previous chapter, I suggest that teachers' lack of human rights knowledge leads to trivialisation of human rights because teachers easily retreat back to familiar discourse and activities that have been made acceptable by the upper secondary school system. When individual teachers depend on tacit knowledge rather than explicit human rights knowledge or a robust theoretical base, there is a risk that the environment in which they work will impact their practice, irrespective of their intentions. Trivialisation of human rights is a product of the environment as much as the need to develop teachers' knowledge of human rights and HRE.

Autonomy can bring increased conservatism rather than radical reform. Tumi suggests the decentralised education reforms that grant schools and teachers the freedom to develop school level curricula, programmes and courses is in some ways more restrictive: "you would think that this might lead to more diversity and more liberalism but I think in a way it makes the system more conservative". Tumi explains this with the term "a culture of self-regulation", which he uses to describe a school system that places a great deal of responsibility on individual teachers.

In a context where the traditional upper secondary school model persists, tensions emerge between teachers' use of their individual autonomy and expectations of the traditional purpose of upper secondary school:

I come into a culture and I come in with some ideas, things have changed, they've changed very slowly but... but then you settle into this rhythm, a routine, right, so you, you, so it's, and there's nobody from above or from outside coming to tell you or saying you have to have some grunnþættir (the fundamental pillars)...but the real core of what's going more or less just stays the same because, because of this autonomy. In the end, most headmasters tend to be relatively conservative, I think, and

then, then, the relatively, the conservative teachers, they are the ones who win out in the end. (Tumi, English teacher)

Tumi's experience suggests a school system that aims for preservation rather than transformation. The use of the term conservative is interesting in his description of school directors. In a paper on resistance to curriculum change, Jónasson (2016) defines the term conservative as:

Explicit or implicit, cultural, social and often systemic factors, such as the curriculum, that happen to be dominant or held in high esteem in a given society, and which are generally taken for granted with an appeal to tradition or habit. (p. 3)

This definition fits well with the teachers' references to an upper secondary school system that maintains subject specialisation, despite the fact that this creates unhealthy hierarchies. Viktor talks about a system that labels students into "able" and "not able". A number of teachers discuss feeling as if they are fighting against the system when they exert their right to work with human rights issues. The majority feel that they are working as individuals and find themselves having to explain their focus on human rights to teachers who support an unchanged upper secondary school system. Ella and Selma refer to teachers who argue that human rights and certain subject specialisations do not work together. Certain subject areas, such as science and mathematics, are not commonly associated with teaching human rights. However, as the narratives of Simon, a science teacher, and Viktor, a maths teacher, suggest, it is not the subject that is constraining but the expectations of the purpose of schooling and the mindset of the teacher.

Anna understands the culture of self-regulation as problematic in that it does not hold teachers accountable for not working with general aims; yet on the other hand, it provides her with the space that she feels she needs to address social justice:

The thing is that, which is partly good and partly bad, the thing is the school culture, and this is not just in [name of her school], this is throughout, more or less, the thing is a teacher, if you have a job as a teacher, you get students and you go into the classroom and you do what you damn well please. It is good for me and then I can do all of this, but it is bad in the broader context. (Anna, gender studies teacher)

By “broader context”, Anna is referring to the upper secondary school system. As she suggests, the need to self-regulate implies that autonomy without accountability can be problematic for human rights. Simon points out, “I am deeply worried about my school. There is no discussion...I think that the leadership of the school is taking no responsibility”. He is referring to working alone to ensure all students have access to quality education, which he understands as a whole school responsibility, and not for an individual teacher to address. Bjarni's perspectives support the suggestion that teacher autonomy without active leadership does not necessarily create a supportive environment to address human rights and democracy. As in the case of the student councils, autonomy without certain parameters can create or perpetuate unjust practices.

There's no resistance from the board of school or school board, they are in favour of different methods, the resistance is mainly from other teachers. They just, probably due to, they're afraid of doing something else, they are comfortable in their box, and also what is our timetable, is in the way of doing things that are not normal. (Bjarni, geography teacher)

When Bjarni talks about “no resistance” from the leadership and Simon talks about “no responsibility”, they are in essence, talking about the same problem. General aims are left to the discretion of individual teachers; this is the “culture of self-regulation” that Tumi refers to.

As Tumi suggests, no resistance does not necessarily mean commitment to ensuring that the fundamental pillars are integrated into all aspects of schooling. Both Bjarni and Tumi point out that school procedures, such as timetabling, impede structural change that curriculum reform requires:

I mean the administration doesn't oppose it, I mean, I think they're more positive, but they are not that interested...I think it might, you might find it a lot in *framhaldskólar* [upper secondary schools], there isn't a lot of professional leadership, you know, you find that the administration is very money, umm organisational, *stundaskrá* [timetabling], and all this stuff, but your headmaster who would sit down and talk passionately about the *grunnþættir*, [fundamental pillars] I don't think so, you know, at least not in my school. (Tumi, English teacher)

The core academic subjects shape the timetable and also assessment processes. As Ella points out: “I can’t make a multiple-choice exam if I am going to examine if a person has thought about or developed ideas about racism”. She implies that the use of multiple-choice as a common assessment process in her school is detrimental to working with general aims such as human rights. As a self-regulated teacher, Ella uses student journals as a form of assessment in her elective courses yet she is conscious that this would not be acceptable in the compulsory English courses. Self-regulation seems to be insufficient to challenge a system that does not prioritise general aims. Tumi suggests that dependence on self-regulation allows the system to dilute teachers’ moral and political convictions:

We spend an enormous amount of time creating our exams, making sure that they are reliable...we could be spending a lot of energy on doing more, having more interesting modules or lessons where, and I don’t think it is, it’s not about, I mean, I don’t think, that’s just as academic, you know, it’s still very academic, I’m, you know I think the academic points are very important but this technocratic concern with reliability is kind of stifling, you know, in a way, and it’s not, it’s undemocratic because, if you want things to be so reliable you are going to lose some of the potential for democracy and creativity, as well, I think. (Tumi, English teacher)

The link that Tumi makes between democracy and creativity is important. Tumi is concerned that the “hands-off” leadership approach in terms of general aims, means that innovative attempts made by teachers will not be sustained:

Interesting things could be happening but they are not supported and they are not opposed so they, and, and little change in the staff, it might disappear because if you are getting a couple of new teachers, who are not interested or do not understand or whatever, they would just throw this stuff out and then, so the change wouldn’t be sustained. You know what I mean? (Tumi, English teacher)

Tumi is making a crucial point about the circumstances needed to ensure a sustained human rights educational approach. As Covell and Howe (2020, p. 192) point out, effective HRE (which I take as HRE that aims to prevent



human rights violations and foster a culture of human rights) is dependent on “school culture and practices that are infused with and guided by human rights values and beliefs”. The problem is that the concept of human rights as an explicit school goal in Iceland seems to be dismissed by the schools themselves. Covell and Howe (2020, p.192) draw on international research in North America, South Africa, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom, to suggest that, “teachers are ambivalent about, or even opposed to human rights education in schools”. While this reflects what some teachers in this study suggest about their colleagues, analysis of the narratives reveals that effective HRE is less dependent on individual teachers' attitude to HRE. It is more dependent on schools making a decision to use and support the increased autonomy that decentralisation brings to promote human rights as a core of upper secondary schooling.

Upper secondary school teachers have faced a complex reality during school reform processes and ideological shifts in Iceland (Ragnarsdóttir, 2018). Teacher frustration or burn out, as a result of educational reform (Ragnarsdóttir, 2018), and reduced satisfaction and heightened occupational stress at the upper secondary school level (Ragnarsdóttir, 2018; Ragnarsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014) may play a role in challenging HRE in upper secondary schools. Tumi describes an undemocratic school system that stifles creativity and teachers' motivation: “we just want to be professionals and we want to do our work well, but we want to do it within certain rational limits”. He goes on to say:

We want to have a life, and we want to have a family as well...when you create this enormous amount of work for yourself, it limits your ability for your potential for professional growth, right, because if you, if you have so many papers to mark, you won't be taking any courses, you won't be reading any books, you won't be reading Freire or Boal...I think also as part of the organisational culture, that it's not just in [name of his school]. (Tumi, English)

The findings suggest that dependence on self-regulation is a challenge to HRE because it can dilute teachers' moral and political convictions towards justice concerns in a context of weak institutional support. A number of teachers, Anna, Viktor, Bjarni, Helga and Tumi, talk about the freedom within the school to pursue their individual human rights interests in their teaching. However, this is not sufficient without being part of a whole school response to human rights. When Tumi refers to an increased workload, he is referring

to a school system that constrains opportunities for teachers' personal and professional growth. The majority of the narratives suggest that the result is dilution of teachers' moral and political convictions. Ingimar's narrative best illustrates this dilution. Ingimar refers to the autonomy in curriculum decision-making as a double-edged sword: "We can easily as a single teacher introduce elements in our teaching of our choice and no one stops us". Yet as the teachers' stories have illustrated, this possibility is thwarted when the institutional culture controls the system, including in ways that restrict support to teachers who want to engage with general aims. The teachers' stories reflect a degree of humility in the way that they refer to the need for support to develop relevant competences to better engage with human rights in their work. The lack of support and the subject-based system influenced Ingimar's decision to leave teaching at the upper secondary school level:

It was the system and the expectations both of first myself, I could work with that, and I found out that this is what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it, but both the system, the administrators and students, they have expectations of how a good class in this old selective upper secondary school that I teach in, should look like. (Ingimar, history teacher)

Curriculum policy may provide opportunities for teachers to pursue their moral or political convictions about the purpose of education. However, engrained traditional school practices, student and parental expectations, and labour market and further education demands, can conflict with individual teachers' commitment to social justice. Although Bjarni understands working with human rights issues as an important part of his role, he also recognises how easily teachers come to accept school culture, which can lead to dilution of political and moral convictions:

My political views, they have always been, you know, but, I just, I did everything like everybody, others did. I just came into the machine and became part of it, and did precisely the same thing that other teachers did. I just became part of the system. (Bjarni, geography teacher)

There is a dialectical tension between a system that encourages self-regulation and sustained commitment to address general aims, such as democracy and human rights. Given the tacit knowledge that underpins the

teachers' reasons for working with issues of social justice and human rights, and the lack of human rights and HRE knowledge and training, teachers' experiences of the system suggest that they lack the agency needed to develop and sustain the transformative potential of their practices; in particular in a school context that does not buy into the need for a holistic whole school commitment to address human rights and social justice.

#### **7.4 Discussion: Individual teacher responsibility versus a whole school approach**

This section builds on the discussion presented in the previous two chapters. The intention is to provide a deeper analysis of individual teacher responsibility versus school responsibility to support human rights teaching and learning in upper secondary schools. This analysis allows me to argue for a pedagogical shift towards human rights content and contexts in teacher education in Iceland, where there is currently very little explicit emphasis on human rights informed by an HRE approach.

Jónasson (2016) argues that curriculum reform faces inertial constraints, understood as assumed acceptance of a system that acts as its preservation. The strength of old ideas renders new ideas as fuzzy. The narratives illustrate how teachers feel restricted in their work with human rights because of the strength of the subject-based curriculum and stakeholder expectations. When new emphases and approaches are introduced in weak or vague ways, they only serve to strengthen systemic conservatism (Jónasson, 2016). References to interdisciplinary planning, competency-based curricula, creativity, critical thinking, and human rights, for example, without developing teachers' understanding and knowledge of these, weaken the potential to integrate these into existing curricula; new ideas become difficult to handle in practical ways (Jónasson, 2016). The teachers' stories suggest that tacit knowledge about reasons for working with human rights, lack of human rights and HRE knowledge, and self-regulation in a context where expectations of a traditional subject-based curriculum are dominant, can dilute teachers' moral and political convictions to engage with human rights in their work, as individuals. Teachers in this study, who have self-identified as working to address human rights and social justice, describe an education system that encourages compliance to the existing order. The conservative nature of the system will "practically ensure that new things, new materials, new content will only have a very marginal space within the curriculum" (Jónasson, 2016, p. 5).

Parker (2018) points to the undeveloped nature of human rights in the curriculum as a major constraint to HRE in formal schools. In particular, when established subjects, the “masters of the universe”, as Tumi refers to them, are robust and well-developed. Parker (2018) argues that this is largely due to lack of interest in questions about the selection of knowledge and skills for teaching and learning in schools. The national curriculum guides include core competences for democracy and human rights but none of the teachers referred to these in reference to their work. It could be asked, why should they if emphasis is not placed on these in relevant texts or the professional development of upper secondary school teachers in any comprehensive or coordinated way? Why should they if the school culture does not provide space for discussing such human rights competences? Weak institutional responsibility has led to individual teachers’ depending on tacit knowledge and working with more familiar participatory pedagogy associated with Tibbitts’ values awareness/socialisation HRE model. Jónasson (2016) suggests that inertial constraints support existing curriculum knowledge and skills, leaving no room for new subject matter. We could add, or room for new forms of pedagogy.

Competing discourses in the education field can silence discussions about human rights as part of the knowledge-formation in the curriculum (Parker, 2018). The first of three examples Parker refers to is the mainstreaming of radical critical education discourse. By this, he implies that a focus on hegemonic systems that perpetuate social reproduction has become acceptable in conservative education systems, in ways that make critical education approaches ineffectual; they go unchallenged. Parker also points to learner-centred and culturally relevant pedagogy discourse as accepted and uncritiqued additions to the curriculum. Assumed acceptance of certain pedagogies and related discourse, challenges HRE to find its own place. Multicultural, citizenship, inclusive, democratic, and sustainable education are fields in their own right in the Icelandic context, even though they all share a focus on issues of social justice. HRE adds another social justice discourse into a context of already competing education ideologies. The third competing discourse that Parker (2018) refers to is what Biesta calls “learnification” (Biesta, 2017, p. 27); “teaching has become understood as the facilitation of learning” and “education as the provision of learning opportunities or learning experiences” (Biesta, 2009, p. 37). Biesta (2017) and Parker (2018) suggest that learning in schools has come to be understood as a process whereby the individual learner seeks out knowledge and skills determined essential by dominant societal influences. The findings in this chapter related to stakeholder expectations reflect this

understanding. Teaching is understood as facilitating, scaffolding, assessing and evaluating the learning process (Parker, 2018, p. 10). Working with human rights becomes problematic in schools with established credit and assessment systems that determine what (the content) and how (the processes) students should learn, as several teachers in this study suggest. In such systems, human rights are left to individual teachers who need to squeeze human rights content into electives or depend on student-centered and participatory pedagogies. Based on my findings, I suggest that the current upper secondary school system and culture are dependent on self-regulated individual teachers who apply student-centred pedagogy to address human rights in schools. Given the absence of HRE as a recognised field of education, it may be that schools perceive that they are fulfilling their obligation to the fundamental pillar of democracy and human rights in the context of subjects such as History, electives organised by teachers and student-centred and participatory approaches encouraging student voice.

As discussed in chapter three, Harðarson's (2013) doctoral study found that natural science, mathematics, and history teachers understand general aims, such as equality, as an inherent part of subject teaching; intellectual development and moral and democratic values are internal to subject learning. Understanding general aims, such as equality, democracy, and human rights, as an inherent part of teaching academic subjects, strengthens justification for the existing subject-based curriculum. It also makes it acceptable to leave human rights on the periphery of the curriculum and for individual teachers to depend on tacit knowledge to work with human rights. Parker's (2018) arguments suggest that it is not sufficient to understand HRE as an assumed part of the learning process, or as a matter of intellectual inquiry that comes as a result of learning traditional and established subjects in the curriculum. He calls for a developed and defined HRE curriculum in its own right that represents a coherent knowledge structure and theoretical base: a human rights episteme. This suggests the need for a whole school approach to HRE to ensure an HRE curriculum.

A number of HRE scholars have identified school practices as a major challenge to HRE in that they do not themselves reflect human rights values, beliefs and principles (Covell & Howe, 2020; Osler, 2016). This is evident from the narratives of the teachers. These suggest that the upper secondary school culture in Iceland maintains hierarchies related to subject specialisation, student academic performance, familiar pedagogy and student representation on the student council. The upper secondary school system allows undemocratic processes to persist by providing space for student autonomy and voice but through undemocratic means. Carter and

Osler (2000) argue for fundamental changes in how schools are run and in school cultures in order to successfully embed rights-based policy frameworks. Amnesty International (2012, 2019b) and UNICEF (UNICEF UK, n.d) run projects that support schools to adopt whole school approaches to HRE, underpinned by key international human rights instruments, such as the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child:

The approach is rooted in the notion that human rights must be simultaneously learned and practised throughout the school in order to be successful, and that a rights-based school ethos can lead to improved outcomes. (Mejias, 2017)

It is important to recognise that the holistic approach to addressing human rights in schools is not new. It is evident in the 1974 UNESCO Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1974), and the 1985 Council of Europe Recommendation on teaching and learning about human rights in schools (Council of Europe, 1985). These calls for holistic school approaches have been reaffirmed in more recent HRE initiatives, both globally and regionally, which have informed the aforementioned Amnesty and UNICEF whole school human rights projects. When schools adopt a whole school approach to human rights, the responsibility no longer lies with the individual teacher, as the findings suggest is the case in upper secondary schools in Iceland.

Adopting a whole school approach to human rights is, however, not straightforward, despite the relative autonomy of upper secondary schools to develop their own curricula. As the teachers' narratives suggest, a culture of subject specialisation persists, leaving little room for innovation and change. The school board is responsible for approving the school curriculum, monitoring its implementation, and deciding "on the school's priorities" (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008, art. 5a, 5c). Each school is required to issue a school curriculum guide and study programme description in line with the national curriculum guides (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2008, art. 23). The curriculum guides state that the six fundamental pillars should be evident in the "working methods, communication and atmosphere of schools" and "in all educational activities and in the content of school subjects and fields of study" (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2012, p. 15). However, as the previous discussion on competing discourses and the rigidity of school cultures and practices suggest, the possibility to

introduce a developed and defined HRE curriculum and to adopt a whole school approach to human rights seems unfeasible if not unrealistic. Traditional subject-based curriculum is often defended by arguments about what students need to learn (Jónasson, 2016) reflecting processes of learnification.

The relevance of subjects in a curriculum is influenced by vested interests (Jónasson, 2016), which reinforce the importance of certain subjects within the curriculum. The teachers recognise these influences, as the findings indicate. Subject matter selection is anything but neutral (Apple, 1979; Young, 2013). As a social construct, the curriculum “is located materially in the social and historical practices and conditions of its production and, as such, relays power relations from the political economy into the school” (Parker, 2018, p. 10). The narratives indicate that the introduction of the curriculum pillars has generated a defensive response amongst certain subject areas, as teachers protect their specialities. This resistance may be in part due to teachers' understanding of general aims as part of the learning that takes place in subject teaching, as Harðarson's (2013) doctoral study suggests. However, it can also be linked to teachers' lack of confidence and know-how in terms of how to approach and work with general aims such as human rights. The teachers' narratives suggest that this may be the case amongst upper secondary school teachers in Iceland given that they themselves depend on tacit knowledge rather than explicit human rights and HRE knowledge. Lack of knowledge on human rights amongst teachers is supported by literature (BEMIS, 2013; Decara, 2013; Finnish Human Rights Centre, 2014; Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011; Waldron et al., 2011). The influence of vested interests is also important to understanding what constrains the possibility of developing an HRE curriculum at the upper secondary school level.

Jónasson (2016) suggests that the “lack of motivation and little space for initiatives oriented towards possible futures is a problem of narrow institutional ‘informed foresight’” (p. 9). He argues that when future perspectives are evident in the curriculum they focus on “the labour market, the world of work; whereas scientific, social, ethical and cultural issues are somewhat neglected” (Jónasson, 2016, p. 10). Market preferences have a strong influence on curriculum development, creating a neoliberal values orientation. Neoliberal school systems are characterised by a results-driven curriculum, parental choice, school autonomy, and discourses of control aligned with discourses of school improvement (Apple, 1988). In their multilayered approach to rooting justice-oriented pedagogies in a human rights history course, Gibson and Grant (2017) argue that “a human rights

framework can help us better resist the narrowed conceptions of education that are pervasive today” (p.227). When human rights are addressed in contexts of narrow institutional informed foresight, they are understood as apolitical and are represented by learning processes that encourage complacency and conformity. This risks diluting the transformative nature of HRE.

Chatelier (2019) points out that internationalisation of HRE is inextricably linked to “the logic and norms of neoliberalism” (p. 229). He suggests that it is difficult to find an alternative to school systems that respond to pervasive global market preferences. Jónasson (2016) encourages understanding and respect for the inertial constraints that prevent changes from taking place. Recognition of inertial constraints in curriculum reform processes is important in many ways. It raises awareness of the tenacious nature of a market-oriented education system that is undemocratic in its resistance to change, while being represented by discourse that suggests democratic processes and critical pedagogies are the norm. It also reveals the way in which competing discourses in education systems allow unjust practices to persist because the focus is on what is considered as successful practice, or what are uncritically assumed to be progressive social justice pedagogies. When human rights become part of competing discourses without challenging the inevitable injustices of a market-oriented education system, HRE fails in its ultimate goals of protection of human rights and prevention of human suffering, or lack of wellbeing represented by human vulnerabilities.

Jónasson (2016) concludes that curriculum reform will always be problematic because of the inertial nature of constraints to curricula change. Chatelier, on the other hand, is more optimistic, despite recognising the difficulties in searching for alternatives to market-oriented preferences. He suggests that there are always alternatives to be sought and fought for. He argues for the need for counter-narratives to dominant “articulation of globalization with the logic and norms of neoliberalism” (Chatelier, 2019, p. 229). Given the persistent systemic constraints to HRE in upper secondary schools in Iceland, teacher education can act as a counter-narrative and an opportunity to develop an HRE curriculum: a human rights episteme consisting of a coherent knowledge structure and theoretical base.

## **7.5 Summary of chapter seven**

This chapter has focused on teachers’ perspectives on the systemic constraints to their work with human rights. The findings suggest that there is a conflict between teachers’ understandings of the purpose of schooling



and the expectations of other education stakeholders. They further suggest that a school culture that emphasises subject specialisation pushes the notion of general aims, including democracy and human rights, to the periphery of the curriculum. In such an environment, teachers' human rights practices become self-regulated in that there is no accountability to work with the fundamental pillar of democracy and human rights, beyond the competences defined for this curriculum pillar; competences which are not clearly defined and that reflect values awareness and socialisation forms of HRE. In the absence of a whole school approach to human rights, working as individuals in such contexts can dilute teachers' moral and political convictions.

Teachers' perspectives of systemic challenges are important. They remind us that it is not sufficient to build teachers' knowledge and skills on human rights and HRE. It is also necessary for teachers to engage in collective dialogue on these constraints to explore what underpins challenges to new content and pedagogy in curriculum reform. The findings suggest that these constraints include competing interests, including those that create tensions between social justice education and market-oriented education goals.

Teacher education has an important role to play in contexts where school culture is unresponsive to teachers' commitment to social justice as a purpose of schooling. Teacher education can act as the counter-narrative that Chatelier (2019) calls for. It provides an opportunity to build a human rights episteme. However, this begs the questions: What would be included in an HRE teacher education curriculum? What content and contexts would be required? These are questions that I address in the following and final chapter by drawing on my findings from the ten teachers' narratives, and informed by my own narrative and my analysis of human rights, HRE literature and the policy and school context in Iceland. I propose a conceptualisation of an HRE teacher education framework that aims to develop teachers' human rights knowledge and skills to generate HRE praxis to make change possible at the upper secondary school level.



## **8 A counter-narrative: Conceptualising human rights education praxis as a teacher education approach**

*It matters crucially that education is a teleological practice, that is, a practice that is not only framed by its purpose (in Greek: telos) but also constituted by its purpose; that is to say that without a sense of purpose, direction or orientation education simply doesn't exist. (Biesta, 2020b, p. 32)*

### **8.1 Introduction**

In chapter one, I stated my purpose as to advocate for HRE as a valuable contribution to other forms of social justice oriented education in the context of formal schooling, and to develop my own practice as an educator while working with teachers. My purpose was based on a belief that it is ethically unjust to leave the question of human rights to the discretion of individual teachers. This belief has been strengthened by the humility and honesty evident in the stories of the ten teachers, as they discuss their knowledge and competence to address human rights in their role as upper secondary school teachers. In particular as they work in an education and institutional context that has not yet shown full commitment to international and national moral and legal human rights obligations, despite human rights featuring as a core curriculum pillar.

The analysis of human rights, HRE literature and the policy and school context in Iceland, has worked in dialogue with my own story and the teachers' life stories. This dialogue, which has both critically questioned and drawn on professional knowledge, has informed and extended my understanding of transformative HRE. It does this in a way that contributes to existing research on HRE and also the gaps. In this final chapter, I now draw on what I have learned about HRE from critically engaging with the stories of ten upper secondary school teachers, and in particular, its transformative potential.

This study shows the challenges that teachers face because of competing ideas about the purpose of education. The complexities and conflicting agendas of curricula content, as well as contexts, suggest the need for deep reflexivity on how to work with teachers to introduce the normative goal of

creating a culture of human rights that seeks human wellbeing, but without adopting a normative instrumental stance that contradicts the notion of teachers' substantive freedoms. This is where Biesta's concept of subjectification and Bajaj's understanding of transformative agency become useful to support my understanding of HRE and its transformative potential in the context of Icelandic teacher education.

In this final chapter, I first present how my findings support existing HRE research in upper secondary schools, with emphasis on the Nordic context. I then discuss the gaps in HRE literature addressed by my findings and how my work contributes to better understanding the complexities involved in ensuring the ethical responsibility of the educator, the role HRE can play in supporting teachers' commitments to addressing social justice, and importantly, the power of the narrative to develop moral and political convictions that can encourage transformative pedagogies. I end this chapter by conceptualising teacher education as a form of HRE that aims to develop teachers' own HRE praxis. The conceptualisation draws on Biesta's concept of subjectification and Bajaj's understanding of transformative agency, concepts I later explain. It is intended as a counter-narrative to systemic constraints at the school level, by engaging with the tacit nature of teachers' reasons for working with social justice and human rights. In this sense, it is both framed and constituted by the purpose of developing teachers' agency to better engage with constraints and to increase the potential of transformative pedagogies in schools, pedagogies that intentionally seek human wellbeing.

## **8.2 Returning to my epistemological beginnings**

The central component of this thesis was the interpretation of the stories of ten teachers to understand and extend understandings of the transformative potential of HRE in the Icelandic upper secondary school context. This interpretation was informed by locating human rights within Nussbaum's capabilities theory (Nussbaum, 2002), which reflects North's (2008) knowledge/action conceptualisation of social justice. Capabilities emphasise rights as the possibilities people have to live a life they choose to live. The constraints to people's freedoms, including adapted preferences, can be addressed through education that emphasises practical reasoning and affiliation. People need to be actively and critically conscious of their circumstances and the role of the state as regards these circumstances (Nussbaum, 2002). Yet, the literature reminds us, weak accountability mechanisms at the level of government and within education institutions,

combined with the lack of human rights knowledge amongst teachers, are not conducive to generating active and critical consciousness.

References to the need for education to engage with issues of human wellbeing, injustice and inequality and to ensure peace, predated the 1948 UDHR. However, the right to education and HRE in article 26 of the UDHR is arguably the most commonly referenced justification for a moral responsibility to ensure human dignity. The legal responsibility comes in the form of international human rights legislation, with signatories showing a commitment to incorporate such legislation in domestic policies and legal frameworks. Yet, the literature review illustrates how these responsibilities have not been taken seriously (Council of Europe, 2017b; United Nations, 2015, 2017), raising questions about the role of government in ensuring accountability for HRE and the implications as regards the evident disparities between rhetoric and HRE practice in schools (Bajaj et al., 2016; Gerber, 2008; Osler, 2016). At the Nordic level, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, are all signatories to both non-legally and legally binding international human rights declarations and conventions, including those that address the right to HRE. They therefore all have a legal obligation to ensure the right to HRE both from an international and domestic law perspective. Yet studies suggest a lack of accountability in ensuring HRE at the school level in the Nordic context (Decara, 2013; Finnish Human Rights Centre, 2014; United Nations, 2015, 2017; Vesterdal, 2016). Lack of accountability impacts on the way in which human rights are addressed in schools and studies indicate that lack of human rights knowledge and weak structural and pedagogical support is a key constraint (BEMIS, 2013; Decara, 2013; Vesterdal, 2016; Zembylas et al., 2016). Other studies point to the absence of HRE as an explicit component of school policy and practice (Cassidy et al., 2014; Messina & Jacott, 2013; Müller, 2009; Rinaldi, 2017; Zembylas et al., 2016).

In the Icelandic context, human rights is recognised as a core component of the national curriculum for all school levels. It features as one of the six curriculum pillars. Given the absence of research on HRE in Iceland, it is not known the extent to which schools and teachers are aware of their moral and legal responsibilities towards HRE as laid out in international conventions that Iceland is a signatory to, and as suggested in national level legislation, including the national curriculum. However, my analysis in chapter three illustrates missed opportunities by education institutions to actively engage with human rights obligations, which dilutes the importance of the fundamental pillar of democracy and human rights. Tensions between decentralisation and legal obligations raise questions about accountability to

ensure these obligations. The lack of consistency as regards policy directives related to human rights, evident in the absence of reference to human rights in the 2014 White Paper despite featuring in the 2011 national curriculum guide, and the dependence on electives discussed in chapter three, illustrate missed opportunities. These missed opportunities raise questions about the need for critical and open dialogue on the role of the university, and in particular the autonomy of the School of Education, to integrate the six pillars into its programming.

The work of Icelandic projects such as the Nordic Centre of Excellence Justice through Education in the Nordic Countries project and the Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice Project suggests that despite legislation aimed at protecting students' rights and ensuring equitable and inclusive practice, these rights are violated in terms of participation and protection (see Bjarnadóttir & Geirsdóttir, 2018; Bjarnadóttir et. al., 2019; Jóhannesson & Bjarnadóttir, 2015; Kjaran, & Jóhannesson, 2015; Kulbrandstad et. al. 2018; Lefever et. al., 2018). Findings from these projects are supported by other studies including the work of Bjarnadóttir (2019); the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2017); Óskarsdóttir et al. (2019); Ragnarsdóttir (2018); Sverrisdóttir & Jóhannesson (2018) and Tran (2016). My study shows how committed individual teachers are engaging with social justice concerns in ways that reflect lack of a holistic coordinated institutional response engaging multiple stakeholders.

Müller's (2009) study conducted in German UNESCO supported schools found that HRE is practised mainly by teachers personally motivated and committed to human rights, although the study does not examine the reasons for their commitment. My study, using stories of teachers who have identified as being committed to addressing social justice and human rights in their work, offers insights into reasons why teachers engage with social justice concerns. It argues that these are informed by moral and political convictions developed through cross-cultural experiences. Based on my review of HRE literature, understanding teachers' reasons for choosing to engage with human rights in their work seems to represent a gap in HRE literature, particularly in the Nordic context. Magendzo et al. (2015) look at how life experiences and diverse ideological perspectives have shaped the work of human rights educators, suggesting that despite diverse experiences and contexts, the educators share a common belief in the power of human rights to generate social change. Tibbitts' (2016) use of political autobiography with graduate students in a teachers college further suggests that reflexive inquiry on beliefs and values in relation to social justice concerns, evident in one's personal and professional life, can develop

understanding and agency. In my study, teachers' insights on their reasons, practices and perceived systemic challenges are one important part of a broader reality. These insights include the tacit nature of teachers' commitment, which in chapter five I explain as an unconscious or implicit form of knowledge that leads teachers to respond and act towards injustice. Unexamined tacit knowledge in this context can lead to pedagogical practice that is preservative in nature. By this I refer to different interpretations of HRE, which when unexplored, can allow preservative HRE models to go uncriticized. Tibbitts' (2017) work on HRE typologies suggests that values and awareness/socialization and participatory/interactive models are dominant in formal schools that address human rights and that these can neglect the action-oriented component of HRE, learning *for* human rights. Although not based on empirical studies, her hypothesis is supported by other studies (Zembylas, 2016; Zembylas et al., 2016). Preservative approaches to addressing human rights are evident in Zembylas et al.'s (2016) study. Their work suggests that teachers' vagueness as regards human rights and HRE can lead to learning *about* rights in decontextualized ways that trivialise human rights. Teachers retreat to familiar discourses and activities.

In chapter six I discuss the risk of teachers' well-intentioned practices becoming preservative because they depend on tacit knowledge rather than on explicit human rights knowledge that has the potential to situate human rights as a pedagogical intention. The findings on teachers' practices remind us that student-centered pedagogy, including participatory approaches that aim to encourage student voice, is not necessarily human rights pedagogy. Familiar discourses may be favoured by governments as suggested by an interdisciplinary research project on HRE and national minorities in six European countries (Mahler et al. 2009a, 2009b). The researchers conclude that civic education seemed more popular than HRE because HRE was understood as unnecessary or difficult. As Toivanen (2009) points out, forms of HRE that question hierarchies, hegemonies and customs can be incongruous with other education goals. Teachers' perceptions of the systemic challenges in chapter seven, which include conflicting expectations of the purpose of education and the tensions that exist between teacher self-regulation and teacher autonomy, suggest that such critical forms of HRE in upper secondary schools would face resistance. This claim is supported by Jóhannsdóttir's (2018) findings that point to minimal evidence of educational and institutional change at the upper secondary school level needed to accommodate the curriculum pillar of democracy and human rights.

While I am not denying the normative nature of HRE in terms of its goal to create a culture of human rights that seeks human wellbeing, I would

argue that having a normative pedagogical goal should not be confused with a normative approach that seeks consensus on how human rights should be addressed in schools. My conceptualisation of transformative HRE praxis proposed in the next section uses my analysis in different chapters to identify a pedagogical approach to move towards this goal; the intention being to generate consensus among education stakeholders that HRE is a necessary good for society and that it should therefore be supported in schools. The findings reveal certain defensiveness amongst stakeholders to protect subject specialisation and other aspects of how institutions operate. I have suggested that this may be in part due to teachers' understanding of general aims as embedded in subject learning, as Harðarson's (2013) doctoral study suggests. I have also shown that teachers' lack of confidence and know-how in terms of how to approach and work with general aims such as human rights is connected to lack of training and support. The findings further suggest that the influence of vested interests constrains the possibility of developing an HRE curriculum at the upper secondary school level.

What then are the implications of these findings in the specific Icelandic upper secondary school and education context? I refer to a context that lacks explicit human rights knowledge and where support to teachers interested in working with human rights is weak; a context characterised by lack of institutional responsibility to critically engage with legal aspects of policy documents such as the national curriculum guide, a document informed by international legislation in the form of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UNESCO policy on general education and sustainable development and the Council of Europe (CoE) policy on democracy and human rights (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012, p. 14).

In order to generate the deep reflexivity needed to support teachers to navigate the challenges presented by competing purposes of education and the complexities and conflicting agendas of curricula content, as well as contexts, I now propose a conceptualisation of transformative HRE praxis informed by Biesta's concept of subjectification and Bajaj's understanding of transformative agency.



8.3 Transformative human rights education praxis

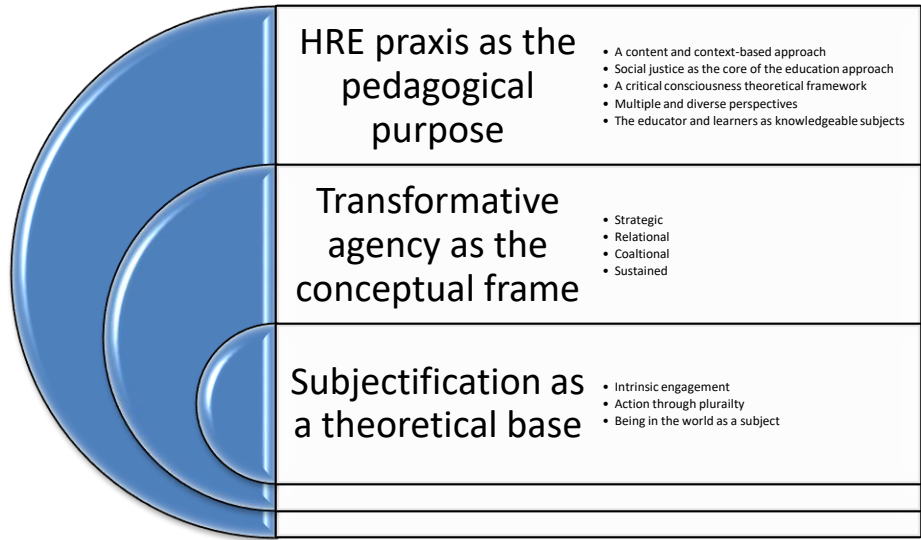


Figure 4: Conceptualising transformative HRE praxis

Earlier in this thesis, I defined transformative pedagogy as learning *about*, *through* and *for* human rights with the explicit intention of generating change to ensure human wellbeing. This has certain implications as regards the content and processes of learning. The main lesson that I have learned from this study is that:

*It is problematic to discuss HRE as a transformative pedagogy in the context of upper secondary schools and the constraints faced by committed teachers. First, we need to consider how teacher education can support teachers to release the transformative potential of their moral and political commitments to address justice concerns.*

My discussion of the findings suggests that there is a need to find a way to engage stakeholders, with competing understandings of the purpose of education, in dialogue on issues connected to not only who we are and what we do but also how we are in this world, in order to identify the role and place of human rights and HRE in the curriculum. I refer to this dialogic process as a form of transformative HRE praxis that builds on moral and political commitments, which all teachers possess but which may not

necessarily be channelled into working with human rights. A large number of teachers “conceive of their profession much more in moral and social than in crudely cognitive and instrumental terms” (Biesta & Miedema (2002, p. 176). My choice to draw on the concepts of subjectification and transformative agency is based on their potential to generate transformative HRE praxis for all teachers. Under the limitations of this study, I included reference to working with a select sample. My proposed conceptualisation of transformative HRE praxis better justifies this methodological choice because it draws on what I have learned from committed teachers, offering deeper insights as regards relevant contexts and contents. Part of this learning was the defensiveness they feel from those who resist engaging with general aims, and who prioritise subject knowledge. What I propose is not a form of socialisation into becoming a committed human rights activist or becoming qualified to work with human rights. I propose a form of HRE praxis, which I visualise in Figure four. At the core of this educative dialogue, acting as its theoretical base, is the concept of subjectification, emphasising intrinsic engagement, action through plurality and being in the world as a subject.

Biesta (2006, 2017, 2020a) proposes subjectification as one of three domains of the purpose of education. The other two are qualifications and socialisation, equally important in that they exist as core components of current educative approaches. Subjectification, the third domain, works to give greater meaning to the other two. Biesta draws on Hannah Arendt’s argument that as human beings we are constantly bringing new beginnings into the world through everything we do (Arendt, 1998). However, in order to act or bring new things into the world, we depend on interaction with others (Biesta, 2006): “When...I begin something and others do take up my beginnings, I do come into the world, and precisely at this moment I am a subject” (Biesta, 2006, p. 133). Biesta’s theorisation of becoming a subject addresses the problematic concept of normativity often associated with transformative pedagogies. Generating teachers’ agency to act in the context of social justice education suggests a normative intention as purpose; education aimed at equipping “learners to interrupt and transform unequal social conditions” (Bajaj, 2018, p. 9). Subjectification understands agency or the freedom to act as relative to the subjectification of others. In other words, educators must engage with others, not to make them instrumental in achieving the educators’ purposes, but to provide opportunities to intrinsically act through their own initiatives. As Biesta argues while discussing subjectification, action is therefore dependent on plurality, suggesting plurality as the necessary condition to become a subject:

As soon as we erase plurality, as soon as we erase the otherness of others by attempting to control how they respond to our initiatives, we not only deprive others of their actions, but at the same time, we deprive ourselves of our possibility to act, to come into the world, and to be a subject. (Biesta, 2006, p. 134)

Becoming a subject suggests a form of agency to choose how to be in this world. The notion of transformative agency can conceptually be understood as the combination of strategic, relational, coalitional and sustained agency. These represent certain capacities that can support HRE praxis as the pedagogical purpose. Strategic agency is understood as the capacity to engage in “strategic and deliberate analyses of future action” (Bajaj, 2018, p. 16); relational agency is the cultivation of agency through interaction and collaboration to generate “critical consciousness and the desire to act in the face of injustice” (Bajaj, 2018, p. 12); coalitional agency situates struggles for justice within broader social justice frames; and sustained agency is the capacity to act independently in response to injustice. In order to develop these capacities, I propose five pedagogical principles. These take into consideration the understanding of transformative pedagogy as learning *about, through* and *for* human rights with the explicit intention of generating change to ensure human wellbeing. The principles aim to offer the possibility for challenging compliance and blind acceptance of human rights and the neglect of accountability, in particular in countries considered paragons of democracy and justice (Osler, 2016). These principles are: 1) applying a content and context-based approach; 2) positioning social justice at the core of the education approach; 3) developing critical consciousness; 4) ensuring multiple and diverse perspectives; 5) and treating the educator and learners as knowledgeable subjects. I now explain each principle in turn in order to illustrate how they relate to my findings.

### **8.3.1 Principle one: A content and context-based approach**

In the context of teacher education, HRE needs to be understood as more than developing sociomoral and political dispositions or as learning about human rights in abstract contexts. HRE requires content that develops a robust HRE knowledge based in a context that raises awareness of the legal responsibility of governments, schools and teachers to address human rights. In chapter five, the tacit knowledge of teachers as regards human rights suggests that the agency needed for HRE praxis is missing. The teachers’ stories suggest they are more comfortable and familiar with the concept of social justice applied to education and that they have limited knowledge of

the field of HRE. Learning *about* relevant human rights and HRE content, including awareness of the moral, political and legal foundation of domestic education policy and its relation to international human rights frameworks such as the UNDHRET, is a core part of this content. The findings indicate that teachers are not familiar with international HRE frameworks or the role that the legal dimension of human rights can play in their teaching. However, human rights and HRE content needs to be contextualised in the reality of the teachers. This includes recognition of the well-established knowledge base that they already have as regards their subject specialisations. Content as used here therefore refers to human rights related knowledge and skills, and is also inclusive of theory of knowledge and organisation of knowledge (Parker, 2018) to reinforce the importance of a sturdy knowledge base. Context refers to the location of human rights into multiple cultural contexts that represent unique lived realities to reinforce the universality and indivisibility of human rights. Contextualising human rights addresses Biesta's (2006) concern, that teaching incorporates the learner into a specific social, cultural, or political order as a socialisation process. Different cultural contexts illustrate how diverse understandings of human rights norms and values can be carried through education.

Content and contexts provide the basis for strategic agency in that they should aim to create the conditions for teachers to engage in active debate and collective critical reflection of possible future scenarios, the constraints to these, and the political and legal changes required to ensure new realities. In section 8.4, I propose specific content and context for an HRE teacher education based on the findings in this study.

### **8.3.2 Principle two: Social justice as the core of the education approach**

As previously mentioned, teachers are more familiar with the concept of social justice than human rights. However, North (2008) reminds us there is a tendency to apply the term without elaborating the substantive meaning of social justice education and the implications of its use. Based on the findings and related literature, educators need to consider how they understand social justice and the relationship between social justice and human rights. By suggesting social justice as the core of the education approach, I position myself as an advocate for education that has a clear relationship to social justice. Given that social justice aims are evident in the six fundamental pillars of the national curriculum guides, albeit not always explicitly, engaging with social justice, as a core concept of education, seems

a necessary component of teacher education. As discussed in chapter five, despite teachers' tacit knowledge of their reasons for wanting to work with human rights, there were examples of teachers taking a strong social justice stance informed by political and moral convictions. Yet, without the opportunity to engage in active reflection and dialogue on how they understand social justice in the context of upper secondary schools, and the relation between human rights and social justice, it becomes more challenging to identify how pedagogical practice can respond to social justice aspirations and develop into explicit intentions. Social justice is a moral and political construct that explains how a society responds to human vulnerability and ensures the wellbeing of its members. As suggested in chapter two, there are multiple ways to understand and interpret social justice. HRE teacher education aimed at generating HRE praxis needs to engage teachers in discussions on social justice as a theory and a practice; social justice acts as a foundational construct to discuss both subject and general aims of education from a historically located context. This creates the necessary condition for coalitional agency in that it situates struggles for justice within broader social justice frames, allowing teachers to recognise intergenerational forms of activism and solidarity (Bajaj, 2018). Praxis generated through in-depth debate on social justice in the context of education can act as a counter-narrative that challenges inertial constraints to curriculum reform. However, this requires intrinsic action and plurality as necessary conditions to become a subject. I address these conditions in the next three principles.

### **8.3.3 Principle three: Developing critical consciousness**

The notion of critical consciousness is important in HRE, as in any form of education that works with the notion of students as active subjects as opposed to passive objects. Critical consciousness is one of the core capabilities in Nussbaum's work. She refers to practical reason as a substantive freedom, defined as "being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life". Critical pedagogy (Darder et al., 2009; Giroux, 2010, 1997; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007) also offers a useful theoretical lens for critical consciousness, understood as becoming conscious of the world around you. Deep analysis is used to understand social inequalities and the role of institutional structures in creating and perpetuating these; it also provides an understanding of the need for dialogue to better understand the impact of oppression and forms of resistance to liberatory pedagogies (Darder et al., 2009). In chapter seven, the teachers refer to systemic challenges that

impact their commitment to social justice. These include conflicting expectations of the purpose of education and the tensions created between a school culture that encourages teacher autonomy while failing to support or address accountability towards social justice responses because of its reliance on teacher self-regulation. Critical consciousness is therefore important to challenge education systems that adopt social justice discourse while maintaining traditional approaches that allow injustices to prevail. Bajaj (2018) distinguishes transformative agency from “partial resistance” or “negative agency”. Negative agency reflects what Amartya Sen (1999) calls “adapted preferences”; a form of consent to existing dominant arrangements, leading to adaptation to the status quo (Gammage et al., 2016). The findings in this study suggest that the teachers have developed forms of “partial resistance” that are at risk of being developed into “negative agency” because of the pervasive conservatism of the system. In such a system, principles of equality and democracy are taken as a given because they are “reinforced by laws, regulations, culture and traditions” (Jónasson, 2016, p. 4). This reinforcement has taken place over several decades in Iceland because such principles are an assumed characteristic of Nordic social welfare political ideology (Osler, 2016). Critical consciousness can lead to recognition of such assumptions and present opportunities for teachers to act as subjects and engage in intrinsic acts that challenge what they perceive as constraints to their social justice intentions. The teachers’ stories suggest that the system can dilute these intentions as a result of ingrained expectations of how an upper secondary school should function and how and what a teacher should teach. This objectification of the teacher constrains the sustained agency for action that every educator should have. Understanding sustained agency in terms of subjectification reinforces the role of teacher education to develop teachers’ capacity to act independently in response to injustice (Bajaj, 2018). In the context of teacher education, this implies engaging teachers in critical debate and discussion on systemic constraints to working with human rights in upper secondary schools as a process of critical consciousness. The narratives of the teachers in this study provide rich content for such discussions.

#### **8.3.4 Principle four: Providing the pedagogical space for multiple and diverse perspectives**

Using subjectification as a theoretical base underpinning transformative HRE praxis places importance on plurality. The findings indicate that teachers are predominantly working alone to address social justice and human rights, and that they depend on the elective system. In some cases, teachers have

experimented with interdisciplinary planning and teaching but the overwhelming message is that they can “do what they damn well please”, to quote Anna. As Müller (2009) found in his study, personally motivated and committed teachers are not numerous enough to produce significant human rights related outcomes. The teachers in his study reported that media and public events ranked first in terms of sources of knowledge on human rights. Ranked lowest were “the first phase of pedagogical training; student teaching internships; in-service days; and other continuing education opportunities for teaching staff” (Müller, 2009, p. 15). Engaging teachers from different subject specialisations and specialists from multiple contesting fields, in a dialogue on human rights, creates plurality, a necessary condition for both relational and sustained agency. Relational agency is the cultivation of agency through interaction and collaboration to generate “critical consciousness and the desire to act in the face of injustice” (Bajaj, 2018, p. 12). In the context of teacher education, this suggests the need to engage with multiple and diverse perspectives on social justice, human rights, human wellbeing, the purpose of education, and the role of the teacher. The narratives of the teachers illustrate the transformational potential of teachers of different subject specialisations engaging in dialogue on their unique experiences of working with human rights (or indeed, not working with human rights). Their narratives also suggest the need for plurality in terms of expert knowledge on the school system, aims and purpose of education, and indeed social justice and human rights, which their teacher preparation seems to have lacked. Plurality can develop teachers’ capacity for negotiation about social justice related aims of schooling in the context of conflicting agendas.

### **8.3.5 Principle five: The educator and learners as knowledgeable subjects**

Biesta (2006) argues that processes of learning as an individual pursuit, which he terms learnification of education, have led to overemphasis of student-centred pedagogies to achieve qualification and socialisation aims, which are both instrumental in nature. The role of the teacher to foster subjectification of students is based on an understanding that one purpose of education is to support individuals to become subjects of their own action and not objects of the actions of others. The teachers in my study work as individuals when developing responses to the curriculum pillar of democracy and human rights; yet their objectification by the system is reflected in the way that lack of attention or support to their applaudable efforts encourages compliance. The principle of understanding educators and learners as knowledgeable

subjects reflects the classic tension in education (Parker, 2018); “the combination of disciplinary knowledge with students’ everyday, sociocultural knowledge” (p.16). Teacher education needs to engage with these tensions by providing opportunities for teachers to learn about human rights and HRE in ways that acknowledge the valuable contribution of lived realities and cross-cultural life experiences and how these strengthen specific professional knowledge. Disciplinary and sociocultural knowledge are related and interdependent, and mutually support the learning process. The principle of understanding the educator and learners as knowledgeable subjects remind us that developing transformative agency in the context of HRE is a complex educative endeavour; it suggests the need for the past and the present to inform the future, fostering sustained, relational, coalitional and strategic agency.

## **8.4 Proposed content and contexts for a human rights praxis**

The five principles that I have proposed to develop HRE praxis as the pedagogical purpose of HRE teacher education are underpinned by Bajaj’s conceptualisation of transformative agency that is theorised by Biesta’s notion of subjectification. In this next section, I specifically work with the first principle to propose content and contexts that could be part of HRE teacher education. These suggestions reflect the interconnectedness of the five principles and are based on the discussion of the findings at the beginning of this chapter. The intention is that the content and contexts, which represent my perspective, act as the basis for further discussion through interactions with the multiple and diverse perspectives of others. In this sense, it represents a beginning to bring new beginnings into teacher education.

### **8.4.1 The purpose of education as content**

As discussed earlier, the findings suggest that teachers’ understanding of the purpose of education conflict with stakeholder expectations of what should be taught at the upper secondary school level. It therefore seems essential that teacher education provide an opportunity for teachers to critically discuss the purpose of education. Biesta (2017) argues that discussions about education tend to take place “in terms of a language of learning” (p. 27) with emphasis placed on individual processes of learning. This limits questions on “content, purpose, and relationships” (p, 28). Biesta’s concept of learnification that is common in schools, and that Parker (2018) argues restricts HRE, can support the trivialisation of human rights teaching, as noted by Zembylas et al. (2016). The references made by the teachers to an



upper secondary school culture that does not explicitly engage with social injustices taking place in schools and in society, and that supports the focus on subject specialisation, suggests the need to include the purpose of education as core content area in teacher education. As Biesta (2017) points out, how can we make decisions about content and relationships when we are unclear about our intentions? I propose Biesta's three domains of purpose (qualifications, socialisation, and subjectification), as a useful theoretical frame for teachers to critique school cultures and practices in relation to the purpose of education. The three domains function in ways that make them interdependent. A focus on one will impact the other two, suggesting the need for "a meaningful balance between the three" because "what can be achieved in one domain often limits or intervenes with what can be achieved in the other domains" (Biesta, 2017:p. 29). This critical engagement allows teachers to recognise and problematise the inertial constraints to curriculum reform and to recognise their role in perpetuating or challenging conservative systems that resist curriculum reform.

#### **8.4.2 Capabilities as content**

I further propose Nussbaum's capabilities framework as a useful content area. The findings suggest that teachers feel more comfortable and familiar with the concept of social justice than human rights, and that they tend to draw on tacit knowledge to explain their reasons for working to address social justice. It seems therefore important to provide an opportunity to explore how their moral and political convictions developed through cross-cultural experiences fit into a social justice frame. Capabilities provide a cross-cultural social justice frame that engages well with human rights. They represent dimensions of a dignified life that can be used as content to analyse the injustices that the teachers are working with. For example, issues related to rights to and in school; to gender and race inequality; to democratic participation; and to the development of certain sociomoral dispositions; all responses evident in the teachers' stories. This social justice analysis allows teachers to discuss the relevance of their practices to the moral, political, and legal dimensions of HRE. It further raises the issue of responsibility and accountability of the state towards ensuring human wellbeing as a political, moral and legal concern within education. If social justice represented by human capabilities represents the core of the teacher education approach, human wellbeing, or an understanding of human dignity as constituted by capabilities, becomes the educative central concern; a central concern that illustrates the interconnections between subject specialisation and human rights knowledge to ensure dignity.

Capabilities as content allow for a critical and comparative understanding of human rights and their use as moral, legal, and political tools in different cultural contexts, including Iceland.

### 8.4.3 Narratives as content and context

The choice to use teachers' stories as the basis of this study was informed by an understanding of narratives as important tools for identification and critical examination of social injustice in the context of education. Life stories are important pedagogical tools (Goodson & Gill, 2014; Ingvarsdóttir, 2014; Osler, 1997, 2016; Osler & Zhu, 2011), creating potential content and contexts for a humanising process. My narrative presented in chapter one, and the findings presented in the preceding three chapters, illustrate how stories can reveal themes that illustrate how we understand human rights. This then leads to analysis of the way that we work with human rights. While I use the teachers' stories as one data set in my analysis to inform understanding of HRE, here I propose using single narratives. The use of narratives in teacher education could be used as a method to analyse lived realities in relation to a social justice frame (such as the capabilities); to generate critical reflection on how teachers work with human rights in upper secondary schools (see appendix 1.5); and to introduce narratives as a method that teachers can use with their own students.

The use of narratives in HRE has been presented as a powerful tool to develop critical awareness (Osler, 2016; Osler & Starkey, 2010; Osler & Zhu, 2011): "narratives have the power to link legal and ethical frameworks with learners' own struggles, and it is for this reason that we place them centrally within human rights education" (Osler & Zhu, 2011, p. 227). This is because narratives can uncover the intersectional nature of injustice raising awareness of multiple identities. They have been used to generate solidarity, and they can present human rights as "principles of living together at all scales from the local to the global in contexts of diversity and in various overlapping communities of fate" (Osler & Zhu, 2011, p. 227). On page 128 of this thesis, I use Ella's narrative to illustrate how her story telling can be used as a context to explore social justice. Telling her story is a relational act.

'Relational' is a term applied to narratives to refer to the social interaction of the story telling process. Reality as relational provides "the context in which issues of social justice or injustice arise and can be inquired into" (Caine et al., 2018, p. 142). This implies a form of learning **in relation with** each other, as opposed to learning **about** or **from** others. A narrative can be told more than once and each time the reality of the story becomes

clearer, both for the narrator and the listener (Haydon et al., 2018). In particular when the interwoven dimensions of the story - temporality, sociality, and place - are used as the context and content for an analysis of injustice. My narrative in chapter one provides examples of how temporality, sociability and place can influence engagement with social justice concerns.

*Temporality* refers to understanding a person in relation to the past, present and future. This person can be onself. This ensures that the person is not understood in isolation but in relation to the temporal sequences that are evident in their life stories: when people recall their stories, it allows for reflection on change: what was socially acceptable then might no longer be valid. *Sociability* is concerned with personal and external conditions. Personal conditions include emotive responses such as the individual's feelings, hopes and desires. Telling and listening to stories depends on the innate human capacity for emotions (Nussbaum, 2003). While emotions are important in generating empathy, empathy does not necessarily move our concern from those we know to those we do not know; or lead to critical active responses to suffering (Zembylas, 2017). Working with temporality and sociability in narratives can illustrate how well intentioned practices at certain points in our lives can represent "cheap sentimentality" (Arendt, 1994). This allows for examination of the influence of external conditions, the environment or climate in which the story takes place, including the other people in it. *Place* is concerned with where the story occurs. It represents the physical boundaries, which will of course change as a result of the temporal nature of the story. When the experience is recounted, the environment where the narrative is told will influence how it is presented to the audience (Clandinin, 2013), providing a context for analysis. The three commonplaces reveal how shifting identities and stances towards injustice can become evident in our own life stories, creating an opportunity for becoming a subject of this story, and the responsibilities that this implies. In this sense, narratives represent a social justice practice (Caine et al., 2018).

Narratives also situate human rights knowledge as historical, contextual, and contingent because they come to be understood as the result of historical and cultural circumstances. They can be used to challenge human rights knowledge as a metaphysical notion of natural law or a transcendental universality. Narratives provide content and context in the form of constructed located realities to discuss human rights and social justice. They provide life experiences that can be examined in relation to the feasibility of capabilities as a minimum threshold of justice; or to identify "systemic (social, economic, juridical) inequalities and deficiencies of the political

system that hinder the implementation of human rights in the first place” (Zembylas, 2017, p. 11).

When human rights are articulated and explored through lived experiences and narratives in a critical manner underpinned by a pedagogical intention towards subjectification, they foster learning in relation with others as opposed to learning about or even from the Other (Adami, 2014, 2017).

#### **8.4.4 Community-based interactions as content and context**

The final content and context I propose as appropriate for an HRE teacher education are community-based interactions. The teachers’ stories reveal the valuable contribution of cross-cultural experiences to understand the way they work with social justice and human rights. Ilmur refers to a confused sense of cultural belonging in childhood, alerting her to the dangers of adopting one fixed identity. Yet, the majority of teachers had not engaged in deep reflections on such experiences prior to this study. While narratives provide content and context for such reflection, community-based interactions can generate content and context for deeper relational reflection on “living in the same community” representing “diverse realities” (Ilmur).

I have argued that tacit knowledge left unexplored and systemic constraints identified by teachers can dilute moral and political convictions informed by cross-cultural experiences. Sociopolitical development scholars suggest that in order to engage in ongoing sociopolitical activism, the following features are required in the learning process: a) achieve critical consciousness; b) access feelings of agency vis-à-vis the self, the collective, and the political; and c) perceive structures of opportunity for action (Monaghan et al., 2017, p. 8). Spreen et al., (2020) and Monaghan et al., (2017) draw on five years of empirical research to argue the effectiveness of human rights-related learning as a result of community-based social action projects. They draw on findings showing that contextualising human rights content into real life in the form of community-based social action projects, allows for learner discomfort when engaging with the unfamiliar Other. This discomfort is understood as crucial to fostering the development of participants’ “diverse sets of skills based on their interests and the specific context of the learning experience” (Monaghan et al., 2017, p. 16).

A number of education scholars argue that learning in the context of schools and classrooms is insufficient to generate critical consciousness and political and social action (bell hooks, 1994; Anyon, 2009). My findings

suggest that social reproduction of inequities and injustices can inadvertently happen when teachers seek to develop certain values in school-based learning contexts. In particular when these contexts do not necessarily reflect democratic values (Osler, 2016). Monaghan et al., (2017) argue that without the opportunity for community-based interactions, HRE can easily become another form of learning that maintains an unjust status quo. They further argue that being restricted to classroom learning cannot facilitate the features necessary for social change. The breadth and depth of their approach in terms of immersing participants in lived realities to explore content and contexts of injustice responds to concerns about the trivialisation of human rights, as discussed in the findings. It also addresses teachers' feelings of being unprepared to work with sensitive and controversial issues because they can develop awareness of the complexity of such issues through exposure to the diversity of lived experiences. Community-based interactions create the content for discussions on the purpose of education in relation to qualifications, socialisation, and subjectification; and importantly, they create the context for teachers to critically engage with their own lived realities in relation to the diverse realities of others as a means of strengthening moral and political convictions towards social justice.

## **8.5 Concluding my epistemological journey**

In this chapter, I presented the main lesson learned from this study as the problematic nature of discussing HRE as a transformative pedagogy without considering how teacher education can support teachers to release the transformative potential of their moral and political commitments to human rights, in particular in the context of systemic constraints. In line with other studies, I argue for explicit and ongoing HRE training and support for teachers, but with a specific focus on the upper secondary school level in Iceland. My study includes a dimension that is not commonly addressed in research on HRE. I draw on teachers' reasons for working with human rights to reveal that teachers depend on tacit knowledge informed by their moral and political convictions. Without relevant human rights knowledge and explicit pedagogical purpose informed by content and contexts that develop transformative agency, these convictions become diluted. This allows systemic constraints to transformative forms of HRE to persist. The findings have led to the proposal for an approach to HRE teacher education that fosters teachers' transformative agency underpinned by the theory of subjectification. The proposed pedagogical principles and examples of content and contexts represent a starting point towards developing a human

rights episteme within the context of curriculum reform in Iceland. This starting point now requires the necessary interaction of multiple and diverse stakeholders; not only those who self-identify with human rights as important curriculum concerns, as is the case of the ten teachers in the study. It also requires those stakeholders who have different views and who are critical of human rights and HRE but who have an intellectual and practical interest in the relationship between curriculum concerns, subject-based aims, and the general aims of schooling. As North (2008, p.1196) argues, social justice education involves “internal conflict and the mourning of deep-seated attachments that are harmful to ourselves and others”.

The title of my study “Human Rights Education in Iceland: learning about transformative pedagogies from upper secondary school teachers’ stories” is intended to reflect my engagement with teachers’ stories as an educative process. I believe that through this engagement my own transformative agency has been partially developed. I say partially because my dialogue with others was not framed by the five principles that I chose as essential to developing HRE praxis. These were 1) applying a content and context-based approach; 2) positioning social justice at the core of the education process; 3) developing critical consciousness; 4) ensuring multiple and diverse perspectives; 5) and treating the educator and learners as knowledgeable subjects. Although the research process reflected intrinsic engagement to a great degree, action through plurality was absent; my being in the world as a subject as a teleological practice, was framed by its purpose but not necessarily constituted by its purpose.

It is important to remember that this study is a small part of a wider agenda to raise awareness of the contribution of HRE to engage with social justice concerns. Based on what was learned in this thesis, a future broader and more comprehensive HRE research agenda for the Icelandic context could include: exploring key stakeholders’ perceptions of the role of and response to human rights in education (school leaders, teachers, parents, students and teacher education instructors); case studies of schools’ human rights and social justice related practices; and school of education responses to the social justice component of the national curriculum guides. Such a research project would aim to bridge the gaps between different social justice education initiatives and allow for greater synthesis and impact on ensuring human wellbeing in the context of an increasingly fragile habitat.

This study is premised on the belief that education needs to engage with the gap between human rights ideals and realities and that educators have a responsibility to use their privileged position to fight injustice. As Osler (2016)

reminds us, teaching is a moral and political act, and as educators, we are all “implicated in processes that either support or undermine struggles for justice” (Osler, 2016, p. 18). The starting point on this epistemological journey was that education and HRE are understood as rights because they represent a means to address human suffering and vulnerabilities. The case is not being made for HRE as yet another competing field of social justice education in Iceland, nor is it for human rights as just another school subject or pedagogical process. The argument stated here is for recognition of what and how HRE can contribute to other social justice oriented fields of education and how these can mutually support each other in teacher education, curriculum development and implementation.

I propose a conceptualisation of an HRE teacher education for pre-service and in-service upper secondary school teachers of all subjects. I understand this framework as providing an opportunity for critical dialogue on the purposes of education, the role of human rights and HRE in pursuing social justice, and engaging with the inertial constraints to curriculum reform. HRE has the potential to challenge conservative education systems that perpetuate complacency about social injustice while being represented by critical and social justice discourse. A critical understanding of human rights and HRE can create a relational space that leads to new understandings of what educators are trying to achieve in the name of social justice education. I look forward to developing my transformative agency through interactions in a relational space that encourages plurality of perspectives.

Working with ten teachers’ unique experiences has informed understanding of my own narrative in relation to the field of HRE and the specific upper secondary school context in Iceland. This has allowed me to appreciate transformative HRE as pedagogy flexible enough to take on different forms and colours, but robust enough to challenge, and withstand, assaults on our common humanity (Adami, 2014a).





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## Appendix 1.1: Invitation letter

Susan Gollifer/June 2013

### INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

My name is Sue Gollifer, a doctoral student at the School of Education, University of Iceland. I would like to invite you to participate in my research project on the perspective of upper secondary school teachers working for social justice and human rights. The research has been registered at the Data Protection Authority (Persónuvernd).

I am looking to work with upper secondary school teachers who identify with working towards social justice aims and who are promoting human rights in their work. For the purpose of this study, I have broadly defined working towards social justice aims and promoting human rights to include teachers who are working with specific human rights courses and/or those who work with issues of rights and responsibilities and power and privilege in school. It can include teachers engaged in work within the school community and/or classroom that promotes equality, inclusion and democratic practices, that encourages critical examination of justice issues or that reflects learning about, through and for human rights.

The purpose of the study is to create knowledge on **why and how** teachers work towards social justice and human rights to inform teacher education programmes. The relevance of my study lies in the introduction of six cross-curricular fundamental pillars (í grunnþættir) in the national curriculum guides, which include democracy and human rights. Teachers' understandings of these concepts and their experiences of working towards them provide valuable insights for teacher education, school development and implementation of the curriculum.

My research applies a life history method that envisions research as a partnership between the researcher and participants. The research process will include one or two interviews that are typically between one to two hours. I will ask you to share life experiences that have shaped your commitment to social justice and human rights, and how you engage with these in your work. You will have access to interview transcripts and my

interpretation of these for review, comments, and corrections. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any point during the research process. To maintain your confidentiality, I will use a pseudonym during all phases of the project. Please note that the interviews will be conducted in **English**.

All in all, your participation will take about 2-4 hours. In return, I hope that you will gain personally and/or professionally from the opportunity to reflect on social justice and human rights in relation to your work. If you are willing to participate in this study or if you want more information, please contact me either by phone or email. My contact information is: [susangollifer@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:susangollifer@yahoo.co.uk) or Tel.: **8410185**.

Once I have received confirmation that you are willing to participate in this study, we can arrange a mutually convenient time and place to conduct the interviews.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to working with you on this project.



## **Appendix 1.2: Interview guidelines**

Interview Guidelines (Participant Copy)

Summer 2013

Name:

Interview Location:

Date:

Time at start of Interview:

Time at the end of the Interview:

### **Introduction**

Age/Gender:

When/Where did you qualify to become a teacher:

Years of teaching:

School information (name; current position; and type of school):

Subjects taught:

Years in current position:

### **Focus areas for the interview**

You have been identified as a teacher who has a commitment towards social justice and human rights, and who addresses these in your teaching. In the interview we will cover the following points:

1. How do you understand the terms social justice and human rights?
2. How would you describe pedagogy (teaching and learning approaches) that works towards social justice and human rights? (Can you give me some specific examples of what exemplifies for you the way you work towards social justice and human rights in your role as a teacher? - this can be a written text or it can be part of our interview session).
3. Can you tell me about your life and how you think it may have influenced the way that you work towards social justice and/or human rights as a teacher?



## **Appendix 1.3: Informed consent**

### **Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities**

#### **“The perspective of upper secondary school teachers working for social justice and human rights: What do life stories reveal?”**

The project is registered with Persónuvernd and recorded as nr. S6320/2013.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. The purpose of the study is to create knowledge on why and how teachers work towards social justice and with human rights. Teachers’ understandings of these concepts and their experiences of working towards them provide valuable insights for teacher education, school development and implementation of the curriculum. The relevance of the study lies in the introduction of six cross-curricular fundamental pillars (í. grunnþættir) in the national curriculum guides, which include democracy and human rights. Your participation will involve:

- being contacted to arrange a convenient time and place to conduct the interviews.
- being interviewed twice for approximately one hour each time.
- having the interview digitally audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher.
- sharing documents that you deem relevant to your social justice identity.
- receiving copies of transcripts and preliminary interpretations of your interview responses for your review, comments, and corrections.

The amount of time involved in your participation will be approximately two to four hours in total for the interviews and review of interview transcripts and/or preliminary interpretations. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research. However, life stories can occasionally raise memories that produce discomfort.

The benefits for you participating in this study include contributing to knowledge about social justice and human rights that can provide valuable

insights for teacher education, school development and implementation of the curriculum. Many participants also find sharing their life stories to be a rewarding and enjoyable process.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time.

I will ensure your privacy by using a pseudonym and concealing your identity to the best of my ability in any publication or presentation that may result from this study. All digital information and all printed materials will be kept in a secure location. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as Persónuvernd). That agency would be required to maintain the confidentiality of your data.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

Participant's Signature

Date

Participant's Printed Name

Signature of Researcher

Date

Researcher's Printed Name

## **Appendix 1.4: Persónuvernd**

Susan Elizabeth Gollifer  
Neshaga 14  
107 Reykjavík



Persónuvernd

Rauðlaugavegur 10 105 Reykjavík  
sími: 510 9600 heðfasími: 510 9606  
netfang: postur@personuvernd.is  
veffang: personuvernd.is

Reykjavík 10. júní 2013  
Tilvísun: S6320/2013/ HGG/--

Hér með staðfestist að Persónuvernd hefur móttengið tilkynningu í yðar nafni um vinnslu persónuupplýsinga. Tilkynningin er nr. S6320/2013 og fylgir afrit hennar hjálágt.

Vakin er athygli á því að tilkynningin hefur verið birt á heimasíðu stofnunarinnar. Tekið skal fram að með móttöku og birtingu tilkynninga hefur engin afstaða verið tekin af hálfu Persónuverndar til efnis þeirra.

Virðingarfyllt,

  
Helga Grethe Kjartansdóttir

Hjál.: - Tilkynning nr. S6320/2013 um vinnslu persónuupplýsinga.

## Appendix 1.5: (Re-) constructing the teachers' stories

In chapter four (p.112), I explained that I made a methodological choice to analyse the stories to generate themes related to my three sub-questions rather than focus on each individual story as a single data set. The reconstructed stories as individual data sets are however important as pedagogical tools for HRE, as I have discussed in my final chapter. With the permission of the teachers, here I present the stories that I have used in my work with HRE to provide the opportunity for subjectification.

Although some of the core features may be common to a number of different teachers, the meanings contained in the individual voice in the context of time, personal and external influences and location are unique. The re-(constructed) stories provide content and context for my pedagogical principles that would otherwise be presented as isolated from lived realities. They also give credibility to individual teachers' voices as a core component of exploring the concept of transformative HRE.

**Ella:** "For me, being a teacher comes first and then what I teach comes second".

I met Ella through a colleague who was helping me to access the upper secondary school system when I had first embarked on my doctoral journey. I invited Ella to take part in my pilot study and she later agreed to participate in the broader research project. Ella is an English teacher. She completed her master's study in 2005 and had been teaching for over 14 years at the time of the interviews. She had worked in the same grammar school (Menntaskóli) for the past seven years but previously had taught at the compulsory school level. Our first few meetings took place in her school where we discussed the school system and English teaching. The location led Ella to recall how she felt when she started working at this popular grammar school:

I remember thinking I have to start saying something important in my class, I have to start inspiring my students (laughter)...because now that they have the view to match, it has to be something great.

Although Ella made this comment in jest, it suggests recognition of the teaching and learning expectations in certain schools that have acquired a reputation for high academic achievement. During the pilot phase of the study, I was able to attend her classes, talk to her students and experience what seemed to me to be a warm, safe and relaxed school environment. We discussed a wide range of education issues, including the impact of the learning environment on student learning and sense of wellbeing, a central theme in her narrative. Her story reveals that her work with human rights has been influenced by childhood experiences, intercultural encounters, and her capacity for deep reflexivity.

Ella feels that her decision to move into teaching was in part because both her parents were teachers: "It's not that there was one time that I sat down and said, yes, I want to become a teacher, but it just made sense to me". She did not, however, intend to teach English. She describes this as happening by default rather than by design. After completing her Bachelor's in African American Literature in the United States, she enrolled at the former Icelandic College of Education (now the School of Education), assuming that she would become a Social Science teacher. One of the courses she took was run by a professor of foreign language teaching who had a very strong influence on her choosing English as her major. During the course, she reflected back on previous English teachers she had had while studying for her bachelor's degree. She explains that they greatly influenced her teaching style, and in particular her awareness that English Language teaching and learning is much more than skills and language development. It allowed her to draw on the interest in literature that she developed during her BA studies.

Role models are important to Ella. She explains that people who show passion towards certain topics and who interact with students in ways that enhance learning offer important insights about teaching: "it's a lot about the people, the human beings...people who just give, you know, and who are human". She recalls that none of the teacher education courses that she took had any specific focus on human rights, which she feels is still generally lacking. She believes that the absence of an explicit human rights lens, leads to democracy and human rights in the curriculum becoming a question of personal and political preference rather than a policy requirement:

So I may see the political perspective of it when she was just thinking about, focusing on the methods of teaching grammar



or something like that..I think perhaps I am, not instinctively, but that I am more programmed to listen to certain things.

By this she means that her political stance and interest in social justice issues influenced the way that she worked with the course content during her teacher education programme. She points out that this may not have been the case for other teachers who took the same courses and that this is related to how one perceives the role of the teacher and education: "I think I could have gone through that same study without noticing it...but I cannot really divorce me from the teacher".

Ella refers to her childhood in language that suggests a certain nostalgia and pride. She grew up with a strong sense of family, community and awareness of the role of education and politics in her life. She explains how her parents had to struggle to overcome their respective families' bias as a result of opposing political affiliations and differences as regards socioeconomic status. She feels that the experience of growing up with grandparents and parents who displayed strong political awareness and commitment to social justice influenced her own interest in politics. The caring family environment, where discussing social and political affairs was the norm, is reflected in the way that she talks about her students and her own teaching approach. She aims to make students feel cared for and secure; she aims to get them to express their opinions about social concerns. Her narrative suggests a link between the emphasis on student wellbeing and her own experience of feeling unsettled as a child as a result of moving at the age of nine. She recalls the disruption to her life when she had to leave her family home in the North of the country, which she describes as: "a magical place to grow up in, the smell of the sea, the boats, the snow, the skiing..me, and being with my family". She left this seemingly idyllic country setting to move into a flat and an urban school setting. She found herself reacting to being viewed as the newcomer from the countryside resulting in a period of rebellion. She uses this experience to explain how students' sense of wellbeing can influence their school experience.

She finds herself consciously trying to challenge internalised stereotypes that she feels she has adopted as a result of sociocultural influences. This bias becomes evident to Ella through reflections on life experiences. She travelled extensively in early adulthood giving her an opportunity to explore different cultural contexts, sometimes alone and at other times as a family. For example, she recalls several experiences of being perceived as and feeling "different". One is when her husband and two children travelled around Mexico and witnessed extreme forms of poverty. Another is when she was

studying for her bachelor's degree at a university in New York. She explains how she felt conscious of being a white student in a class where the majority of students were black or of Hispanic origin. Reflecting on these experiences provides an opportunity for Ella to acknowledge her own privilege as a white person from an economically stable social welfare country while appreciating that bias and social exclusion are not only restricted to socioeconomic status, ethnicity or race; they are also gendered. This becomes evident in her choice of teaching content and methods.

Ella works with human rights and social justice concerns through an African American literature course designed as an elective English course. She uses the course to highlight themes of oppression, privilege and power related to race and gender and how these shape conceptions of national identity. Her pedagogy includes techniques that create opportunities for students to place themselves in the position of marginalised characters taken from the literature that the course follows:

I think you learn better when you have something to associate it with. Examples of stories and umm, so like if we were like talking about literature again and then eh, someone eh comments on a character's action, and I said yes, but okay, but can you see yourself in that position, what would be your reaction?

Her intention is to create an imagined reality leading to empathy for vulnerable members of society. Ella refers to being "socially just" in her teaching by which she means making attempts to treat her students fairly and with equal concern and care. This requires an awareness of her own bias, as mentioned previously. She acknowledges that the student population lacks diversity in terms of ethnicity; the majority of the students come predominantly from one catchment area or the same compulsory schools, where families of middle to higher-level income brackets tend to reside. She therefore uses literature to develop students' awareness of privilege by exploring themes and characters in an African American literature course that she runs.

One of the challenges that Ella recognises is finding ways to get students to develop a deep understanding of the oppression and suffering that the African American characters they are reading about experience. In particular in a school system that favours exams as the preferred measurement of knowledge acquisition:

The challenge may also be to have them understand that this is important...you know thinking about how people in other countries live and thinking, listening to one another, showing respect, thinking about racism, that is as important as learning English.

She explains that some students complain that they are spending too much time on certain topics, which they perceive as unconnected to English language learning. However, as she points out, students' final evaluations and feedback from parents also suggest that the course is appreciated and understood as relevant to their lives.

Ella also points to teachers' lack of knowledge about human rights and skills to work with human rights. She uses the example of teachers working with unfamiliar, sensitive, and controversial topics:

Many teachers have, that insecurity that if you do not know it, it is going to mislead you, like in literature if you come across something painful, you may think what if one of my students has faced that or has come across that, I don't know if I want to face that, but I think that is something that we have to venture into, but how?"

The main challenge that appears in her narrative is the narrow conception of the role of the teacher and a school system that she believes is failing to engage with the impact of socioeconomic and ethnic diversity on equitable access and quality achievement. Whilst Ella identifies with being a teacher in the broad sense, she sees many upper secondary school teachers who view themselves as subject specialists. This perpetuates students' expectations for certain teaching methods and content. She also suggests that such learning environments dilute creativity to think beyond one's own reality. Ella believes that these challenges are exacerbated by the fact that teachers are unprepared and unsupported to work with topics or themes such as the fundamental pillars that fall outside of student, parent and teachers' expectations of course content, methodology, and assessment processes; in particular when these conflict with higher education or career path demands.

**Post-interview reflection:** Ella's passionate and active engagement in the story telling process suggests a strong sense of relief to be able to express her experiences and share her ideas about teaching. There is also an element of frustration about working as an individual given that she perceives the

2011 National Curriculum Guides as an opportunity for increased interdisciplinary collaboration amongst teachers. She feels that this opportunity has not been fully used by schools and teachers. Ella is naturally reflective when sharing her personal and professional life. She has a strong capacity to use positive and negative life experiences to understand herself, her students and how they experience school. Although she admits that she has never engaged in such an in-depth reflection on how her life relates to her teaching, she welcomed the opportunity to make these connections.

**Anna:** "...no matter where I am, what subject I am teaching, [social justice] is always a clear focus. I just put it in different contexts"

Anna's name was sent to me by one of my contacts based on her active involvement in gender and women's studies. We met twice in her school and on both occasions, Anna actively engaged in the telling of her life story making important and insightful connections between her work and social justice and human rights. She spoke with passion, confidence, and commitment. Rich intercultural experiences have informed Anna's strong political views and developed an explicit social justice approach to teaching grounded in feminist principles. Her story is rich in its discussion of the main challenges to working with social justice themes. Anna's frank expression of her frustrations about the upper secondary school system is based on what she perceives as the lack of social justice vision at the leadership level. She puts forward a strong case for leadership vision as instrumental in generating passion and sustained commitment for teachers to address human rights related concerns.

Anna became a teacher in her early forties. In 1993 she graduated with a bachelor's degree in Sociology and History and completed her Master's in 2006. At the time of the interview, she had been teaching in the same comprehensive school since completion of her Master's. Anna majored in Sociology, but she has also taught History, Pedagogy, Gender Studies and Life Skills.

Anna grew up in a family environment where politics played a significant role. Her parents were active in the Independence Party (Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn), the centre-right liberal conservative party. In particular she recalls the influence of her father, who she endearingly refers to as a "right-wing communist", on the development of her left-wing views and beliefs. She describes her upbringing as stable and loving and recalls

political discussions at the dinner table and listening to political debates on the radio. Anna recalls her father's constant support during her teenage years and in particular when she decided to leave school after completing compulsory education at the age of 16. Encouraged by her father she moved to Norway at the age of 18 to attend a "folkehøgskole". The experience left a strong impression because of the contrasts between her Icelandic reality characterised by a relatively homogeneous and politically passive society and the "folkehøgskole" reality where she experienced forms of multiculturalism and political activism previously unknown to her.

In her mid-twenties she returned to school to complete her High School diploma. This was when she was introduced to Sociology, which she describes as the catalyst for wanting to become a teacher: "I fell in love with sociology, absolutely...and then I can teach sociology, and by being a teacher, I can influence". Anna's story is full of references to the role of the teacher as instrumental in students' sociomoral and political development. When Anna went into teaching, she already had a strong vision as regards the purpose of education and her role within it:

So I went to this job having this very clear understanding what I wanted to do, what I thought the educational system should do, not only prepare people for further education but to make better people, a better person, more social justice, so this has just been part of me but a structural part of me.

Anna presents herself as a passionate feminist focused on addressing power imbalances to ensure gender equality. She connects the roots of her feminist values to her childhood where she recognised that there was a greater degree of trust placed in the males in her family when it came to working with machines or cars. She also discusses her feminist stance in relation to social inequalities that she experienced and recognised from a young age. She explains that this has influenced her teaching approach in terms of seeking fairness and justice in contexts that represent gendered power imbalances.

She describes her work with human rights by using two distinct terms: direct and indirect human rights education. The latter refers to teaching methods that aim to role model care, respect, equality, and other values typically associated with human rights. Direct, on the other hand, refers to an explicit focus on human rights related topics and content. She gives examples such as addressing gender and women's concerns in the context of domestic violence, pornography and hate speech. She also refers to a focus

on democracy as part of her work with human rights, which she explains as making sure that student voice and participation are promoted at all times: “I think it is absolutely fundamental in all education about human rights, social justice, democracy, it’s the discussion...because they don’t get a lot of that, to have a voice, to speak their minds”.

Anna understands human rights pedagogy as reflective of mutual respect and informed by student-centred learning. She aims to make direct connection between the topics that she works with and students’ local realities. She understands student learning as dependent on cooperative learning approaches; her students are involved in project-based work that involves research, discussions and presentations. Anna acknowledges that her teaching is informed by strong moral convictions and political ideologies, which could be described as normative: “I have a really strong sense about my profession, I have a strong sense about what should be taught in life skills, in gender studies, in history”.

During the dialogue, Anna asked me about a definition for human rights education and I gave her the United Nations description of learning about, through and for human rights. This led to a conversation about the legal dimension of human rights education. Anna explains that she introduces legislation in her classes, for example the Constitution in History classes or laws related to gender equality. However, she reflects on how this is done from a historical perspective, which is reflective of learning about human rights as content. We discussed how the legal dimension of human rights also acts as a powerful tool to advocate for and fight for human rights. This led to her acknowledging the role of the legal to address accountability concerns: “I have not you know, in my work as a teacher, I have not put any effort or focus on that, but, this, this conversation makes me just start thinking about it”.

Anna does not relate her social justice oriented pedagogical approach to her teacher education, which she describes as having little relevance to lived experience. She recalls a teacher education programme that was predominantly theoretical. While she recognises theory as important, she also feels that an opportunity was missed to make links between theory and practice in ways that encourage critical reflection around social justice concerns. She recalls an incident during her teacher education when the students were asked to present their professional vision. While other teachers chose to draw on theoretical terminology to describe their practice, Anna remembers linking the personal and the theoretical to inform her sense of professionalism. She describes her response to the task as: “I will use the

theories and all the research that I have read to be professional, but I am going to teach with my heart”.

Anna’s description of her practice is laced with references to the development of sociomoral and inter-personal skills, care, and empathy, equality, and fairness. She frequently references the vulnerability of her students as a core component of her pedagogical response and as an important social justice concern.

Anna is optimistic about the focus of the 2011 National Curriculum Guides and its emphasis on the six curriculum pillars. She describes the shift towards progressive objectives as “a new wave”; it encourages creativity and addresses social justice concerns. However, she is honest and direct in her critique of the upper secondary school system. She identifies stakeholder resistance to change as a key challenge in that it maintains institutional norms and systems, such as a focus on subject-based learning.

Anna links this resistance to low knowledge of human rights amongst teachers. She remarks that many teachers find topics on issues related to social justice as sensitive and controversial and are not prepared to approach these in their lessons. She believes that teacher education should focus on working with teachers to accept their own vulnerabilities when working with youth and identify their own boundaries. She reflects that this requires a process of self-examination that reminds us that we are human: “I think teachers need to find their boundaries, where am I comfortable? What do I want to share with students? You need to show your humanity”.

A second challenge that Anna refers to is the role of leadership within a school. She believes that leadership is the heart of a school and it can constrain or facilitate the way a school engages with social justice. She refers to schools needing to develop a collective vision that is then implemented in a way that reflects social justice principles. She uses the example of the student council system. This exists because it is required by policy; but if there is no active engagement by leadership to monitor how the student council functions, they become token initiatives that can create more inequality.

As she acknowledges, a decentralised curriculum that promotes teacher autonomy is dependent on the response of the school and teachers. In the quote below, she uses the term surveillance to refer to accountability. She believes that accountability for developing and ensuring a common school agenda underpinned by social justice principles is missing at the upper secondary school level.

Well the thing is that, which is partly good and partly bad, the thing is the school culture... if you have a job as a teacher, you can do what you damn well please. It is good for me and then I can do all of this, but it is bad in the broader context because there's no kind of, any surveillance...

**My post-interview reflections:** Anna's engagement during the two interviews was active and passionate. She finds it easy to share her beliefs about social justice and human rights and is explicit about her commitments. She is also receptive to the exchange of ideas and information. I noticed that the second interview was more of a conversation that allowed us to exchange ideas in a way that led Anna to develop deeper reflections on her previous references to her own practice, life influences and the challenges that she faces as an educator committed to social justice and human rights.

Helga: "Do you know what you are missing when you don't want to bring in these people because they don't have an 8 in maths?"

Helga's name was sent to me by one of my contact persons. She accepted my invitation to participate and we met for an interview in my office. Helga's life story is rich with intercultural experiences, references to her childhood and her perceptions of social justice and human rights in the context of teaching and learning at the upper secondary school level. These provide valuable insights not only into her engagement with human rights, but also the role of the life story to help teachers to explore this engagement. Helga's story illustrates how life events can be used as the basis for examining beliefs and understandings related to conceptual understandings of human rights and associated concepts such as equality and democracy.

Helga completed her bachelor's degree in History followed by a one-year teaching certificate between 1989 and 1990. Including intervals, she had been teaching History for 26 years at the time of the interview. Helga explains that she had a strong vocation to become a teacher from a young age. She recalls writing home to her family whilst teaching at a school in the countryside at the age of 19. She wrote: "I am born to teach". This was during a gap year before enrolling at the former Icelandic College of Education (now the School of Education). She had decided to take on this teaching role to make sure that teaching was indeed her calling.



Her interest in teaching is linked to her own experience of informal and formal education. She recalls growing up in the countryside where she attended compulsory school before moving to Reykjavík to attend upper secondary school. Her memories of attending school in the countryside suggest that the experience kindled an awareness of the power of education. She remembers certain teachers and the influence that they had on her as a young student because of their approach to teaching and learning, which she understood as “nurturing” rather than “teaching”. Young students would come to work at the school for a couple of years at a time. Helga recalls that they were fresh from their studies and full of enthusiasm and passion for teaching.

She distinctly remembers a couple from overseas and describes them as “radical” in the context of that time period (the seventies) and place (the conservative countryside) in Iceland. The wife, who acted as the principal of the school for a couple of years, was a strong feminist who left Helga with vivid memories of the importance of women’s rights.

Her family environment when growing up is characterised by a stable close-knit family. She grew up with her sister and two other siblings, who she describes as all “inclined towards this field” referring to teaching and social justice related careers. She also refers to her parents as being political but in a non-activist way. They did not engage in political events such as marches and protests, and political views were not openly expressed at home. Yet she was aware of anti-American base and anti-war sentiments, even though these were unspoken and implicit: “politics were not very much discussed in the home either, but still, it was always clear that the family was very much opposed to the American army and stuff like that”.

She remembers the home as full of books by certain left-wing authors and listening to certain artists who reflected the household’s political sentiments. She explains that these are memories that she can draw on to explain her own political sentiments and how these may have influenced her choices when working with students. Helga also has rich intercultural experiences of living and studying overseas. She moved to France for a year with her husband and two children to study History. During this time, she experienced what she describes as the inequality and top down approach of the French school system. She explains that she found herself comparing the preschool system in France with the Nordic model: “I prefer this sense of being together, being equals, parents welcome into the play school etc., rather than this distinction all the time”.

This description is interesting because it emphasises Helga's strong focus on equitable access to education and the need for school systems to encourage inclusivity. Helga's disdain for selective and undemocratic schooling practices led her to leave the grammar school where she started teaching (and where she had also studied herself) and take up a position in a comprehensive school, where she was still teaching when we met.

At the time of the interview she had been working at this school for 12 years. Helga found the grammar school system overly exclusive. She made several references to the fact that the school had not changed since she was a student there. She understands this as wrong and unjust in that students are labeled based on their performance in core subjects such as Mathematics: "Do you know what you are missing when you don't want to bring in these people because they don't have an 8 in maths?"

The comprehensive school that Helga chose to work in caters to a diverse student population in terms of ethnicity, age, physical and learning disabilities and socioeconomic status. It is a challenging environment but one that represents a public school system that reflects her own educational ideology. Her pursuit of fairness is reflected in her pedagogical approach. She emphasises democratic participation in her descriptions of her teaching, characterised by engaging students in dialogue, tasks and activities that aim to generate respect and empathy. When discussing her response to human rights she refers to providing opportunities for students to experience the plight of others. For example, she describes her collaboration with the Red Cross to engage students in a 24-hour simulation of experiencing life as a refugee. She uses this example to explain the importance of situating students in contexts that may be unfamiliar but that represent the reality for others.

Helga also draws on materials such as COMPASS, a Council of Europe publication, which she recommends for teachers because in her words, it is "tailor-made, you do not have to think". By this she refers to the challenge that teachers face related to finding the time to prepare materials and resources related to the fundamental pillar of democracy and human rights. The 2011 National Curriculum Guides encourages working with multiple perspectives and critical analysis of important themes related to the six fundamental pillars. Yet, as Helga points out, teachers are struggling for a number of reasons beyond the lack of training and materials. At the time of the interview with Helga, teachers were preparing to strike because of the increased workload suggested by the introduction of the 2011 curriculum with minimal support or funds in place. This created tensions and conflict for

some teachers who agreed with the new emphases of the 2011 curriculum but who also stood by the Union decision to strike: “People want to do something, but then at the same time, not wanting to work for nothing”. Helga also points out that it is also about knowing what to do and how to do it when it comes to addressing human rights and the sensitive issues that it may raise. As she says, “it’s more that people say I wish I knew how to do it”. She explains that in her school, teachers are trying to collaborate and work together.

Helga draws on the student diversity in her school to inform her History classes. Although she acknowledges that History as a subject naturally facilitates the teaching of human rights as content matter in different historical contexts, she also understands human rights as related to processes of teaching and learning. She describes drawing on students’ experiences as the starting point to engage them in discussions about negative stereotyping and the danger of creating notions of mono-identities.

I have been very much preoccupied in my optional course with the History of the Balkans, and when I have somebody from Serbia or Kosovo in my class I can feel that, I get very nervous about my approach etc. and I think that goes for the students as well, I mean you don’t go about and say the bloody Polish are taking all our jobs etc., if there are three Polish students in the class. And one of them is actually a friend and you know that all Polish are not criminals, something like that, and I have had this experience with students from Lithuania for example which has such a negative image and I have, I have to admit, I remember an instance when I kind of forced one guy because I knew he was strong enough, I forced him to discuss Lithuania with us from that perspective and he did and I don’t know how that worked for the others but at least I think it was good for them to hear him tell his side of the story, his family’s side of the story.

This reflection is rich for many reasons. First, it illustrates Helga’s attempt to engage her students in understanding each other as individuals who have different experiences and cultural backgrounds, irrespective of where they come from. She aims to provide an opportunity to challenge the notion that a common nationality represents the same way of being and doing. Helga explains that this becomes very important at times when media is stereotyping certain nationalities. At the time of the interview, a spate of

burglaries was being connected to Eastern European criminal gangs and organised crime.

The second point is related to Helga's reference to getting "nervous". Here she raises the important question of teacher preparedness to work with issues of diversity in confident and effective ways. Although the notion of "tailor-made" materials that Helga refers to earlier in her story can be and should be problematised in terms of critical pedagogy, this needs to be done in relation to the type of support or professional training that teachers have (or have not) received. As Helga points out, teachers struggle when addressing sensitive or controversial issues.

At the time of the interview, Helga was also teaching a first-year course that is part of a larger programme to prepare teachers to work with the curriculum pillars. In her particular course, she was focusing on different inclusive teaching methods and lesson planning. In response to a question about how the programme addresses human rights, she replies that this is only done in relation to talking about diversity in the classroom:

That is the only thing that I can see that is linked directly to that. But they do a lot of classroom observation. And when we are discussing what they see, this is always the issue, boys and girls, younger, older, etc. what kind of approach does a teacher have towards the students?

Helga focuses on getting teachers to think about why they are here and who they are as teachers. Yet she admits that this is challenging as teachers, including herself, are not used to deep reflection that requires making connections to aspects of life that have a bearing on moral or political stances: "I would say, yeah, that's me definitely, social justice, but then, what do, what are we talking about".

**My post-interview reflections:** What struck me most about the conversation today was Helga's initial doubts as regards her contribution to this study. She is an experienced teacher and has a strong sense of justice that she clearly relates to her teaching and her role as a teacher. Yet, her participation has made her aware that she has not previously reflected on social justice and human rights in these contexts. As she explains, she knows that this is an important focus of her work but it is only now that she is beginning to develop a more explicit awareness of what she does, how she does this and why around the theme of social justice and human rights in her role as a teacher.

Simon: "My responsibility is not first and foremost a science teacher in my school, it's being a member of staff in this school and whatever the school does".

Simon was asked if he was interested in participating in the study by one of my contacts. He contacted me directly to set up a meeting and we first met at a coffee house and then the interview was conducted at my home.

Simon offers an interesting perspective with valuable insights on a number of different levels. First, he is a Science teacher, a subject not typically associated with human rights, who identifies clear connections between social justice and Science teaching. Second, he has strong views about schools as unjust based on the failure to meet the needs of all students, which he frames in terms of a violation of human rights. Third, his story provides rich data that reflect his attempts and frustrations when challenging what he describes as unjust norms in the upper secondary school system.

Simon graduated with a bachelor's degree in Biology and then completed his teaching certification before starting to teach in 1990. He teaches Biology and Chemistry and had been teaching in the same comprehensive upper secondary school for 24 years at the time of the interview. When asked about any life influences on his teaching approach, he suggests being influenced by a childhood of growing up with a mother who had a chronic illness and his own health issues as a teenager: "I was very bored, I probably was just depressed, I had a disease, I had tuberculosis when I was 19 years old...so it was many things, probably".

He found school uninspiring and after graduating from High School decided to take a two-year break: "I decided that when I was 20 years old and I matriculated from (name of school), I decided that I was never going to go to school again. I stayed out of school for two years".

Simon suggests that these experiences are likely to have had some influence on his own strong focus on student wellbeing. He provides support to students who are most at risk of dropping out:

The most important thing is if you are teaching in a school for 16 to 20 year olds, is if you convey that they live in a society, that is obviously the most important thing that you can give your

students regardless if they learn anything about gravity or whatever, you know, that's far more important.

Simon's concern for student welfare and the effects of labelling has led him to conduct a longitudinal study to explore the high dropout rate in his school. The results of his study suggest that there is a significant relation between compulsory school achievement and upper secondary school performance. His story reveals a sense of frustration that such findings are not taken seriously. During the discussion, he explains that he feels that there is a lack of interest in or at least importance placed on factors that impact negatively on student achievement. His story reflects anger at what he perceives as lack of systemic and institutional support to ensure student achievement. He relates this to an upper secondary school system that prioritises academics over other forms of achievement that should be used as measurement of student capabilities:

You come to the school counsellor, when you are trouble in school, your attendance is not good and you're not interested in what you are doing in school, because the school counsellor only has information about you in school.

The failure of schools to identify ways to support students to successfully matriculate is viewed as a human rights concern: "And of course, this is human rights, of course".

Simon's introduction to constructivism during his teacher education acted as a catalyst to explore holistic approaches to teaching Science. Constructivism helped him to make connections between the social and physical world. He describes having "brilliant" teachers and during this time he developed a strong emphasis on looking at a situation and measuring it against his own beliefs and ideals to develop meaning and challenge predetermined ideals. After teacher education, he taught at a local comprehensive school for three years before moving to the States to do his Master's in Science Education. His intention was to explore how to combine Science with Social Science. He developed an approach to Science teaching based on an understanding of nature in tension with human constructions of reality.

He explains the constructivist approach as developing human capacity to critically evaluate a learning context through a review of one's own beliefs and ideals to develop new understandings of that context. He works with students to develop critical thinking in order to generate ideas based on

newly acquired and evaluated information. He also aims to develop student awareness that knowledge is constructed to serve a certain purpose: “nature doesn’t have a manual; everything is made by man”.

The pedagogical focus for Simon is on how the human shapes the world. Whilst he believes that there is a need to accept decisions that have been tested as most appropriate in a given context, he also supports the need to stay open to new ideas to allow for freedom of thought and expression as an ongoing process of discovery:

Democracy is about acknowledging that most people if they think about things, they have, they are right in some sense, you know, yeah, and that’s also the case in natural sciences because it is almost impossible to say that we have a theory that explains everything.

Simon believes that working with rights and justice concerns in the context of Science requires a shift away from abstract terminology and norms to concrete ideas or contexts that students are able to relate to. Addressing human rights thus becomes linked to students’ current understandings of reality rather than abstractions that are unfamiliar and unrelated to how they live their lives: “I think that using ideas or using the existing idea to explain things before you adopt a new one is a very important idea in learning, teaching, yes, Science”.

His story illustrates the possibilities and compatibilities of social justice and human rights in the context of Science teaching. He is aware that there is resistance amongst Science teachers to recontextualise their subject in relation to sociological concerns and to reconsider traditional views of Science:

I think that maybe some science teachers, not social science teachers, but science teachers, are sort of using this you know, I don’t know, sort of referring to this notion, that these are political, almost religious words, human rights, and so on, not that, yeah, I think that’s one of the reasons they don’t define themselves as being able to relate and they define their discipline, their subject as sort of distant or err, or, even non related...it doesn’t, apply to it, to them.

Simon feels that school leadership perpetuates this resistance to change because of the limited discussion and over-dependence on external experts or resources rather than drawing on the rich resources within the school. In his opinion, teachers are viewed as subject specialists responsible for what takes place in the classroom rather than as members of staff collectively and collaboratively responsible for school concerns. This results in a fragmented school environment, which contradicts features of society that Simon feels that students should be exposed to.

He points out that increasing autonomy at the upper secondary school level places greater demand for strong leadership to engage more actively in supporting a whole school approach to curriculum reform. This engagement should include responses to structural constraints such as timetabling, assessment expectations, and insufficient teacher support. Simon's story implies that his experience of lack of support has led him to constantly seek out opportunities to express his resentment at a school system that has failed its students and teachers:

I need someone to talk to, therefore I am here, I am trying out things with you, explaining things to you, you know what the school is about, and I'm, sorry, using you as a guinea pig and trying to explain how I am thinking about the school.

It is through this dialogue that he is able to analyse and make sense of his own approach to ensuring student wellbeing.

**My post-interview reflections:** What is revealing about Simon's story is his overwhelming need to talk and share his valuable experiences. He refers to the interview as helping him to better define his own thoughts on how social justice concerns are a part of this work. Simon's story is a strong reminder that teachers need to be provided with the opportunities to reflect in and through dialogue as part of a democratic process.

Ingimar: "I had picked up the view that had prevailed in upper secondary schools that upper secondary school teachers didn't need pedagogy, we just have our core subjects"

I contacted Ingimar directly based on a recommendation from one of my contacts. We met twice and the first interview was held at the School of Education of the University of Iceland and the second at his workplace.



Ingimar's story is interesting in its description of the systemic challenges and the impact on teachers' commitment to social justice concerns. It also highlights the challenges teachers face when they make attempts to engage students in non-traditional pedagogies. As with the majority of teachers, his childhood and intercultural experiences have an obvious influence on shaping his moral and political stance and commitment to social justice. Yet, his frustrations with curriculum change and the perceived challenges that he faces as an individual teacher have started to dilute his energy to continue to fight what he sees as acceptance of inequalities and exclusionary practices in the upper secondary school system.

Ingimar started teaching History at the age of 24 after graduating with a bachelor's degree in History from the University of Iceland. He has taught History, Sociology and Life Skills. At the time of the interviews he had been teaching for some 25 years in the same grammar school. Ingimar's story therefore offers rich insights contextualised in education policy and curriculum reform in Iceland. These include the 1999 curriculum reform when the Ministry laid out a series of centralised guidelines that included the need for schools to seek permission from the Ministry to implement any changes to the curriculum. Ingimar saw this phase of curriculum reform as exclusive and selective in that it negatively impacted on those students who were not able to keep up with the curriculum demands, resulting in high student drop out.

His story suggests that this experience of working in a system that he felt conflicted with his understanding of accessible and quality public education led to disillusionment. Despite the opportunities provided by the introduction of the 2011 National Curriculum Guides, Ingimar explained in his second interview that he was at a point in his life where he no longer had the energy or desire to work as an upper secondary school teacher.

Coming from a family of teachers, he suggests that going into the teaching profession was a vocation. After some three years of teaching, he moved to Copenhagen to study for a master's degree. On his return, he thought about other career options but realised that teaching was something that he "really loved". He explains that this was because it connected to his own desire to learn and acquire new information. He was teaching students who were close to his age, which allowed for an invigorating exchange of ideas and development of new and creative thoughts.

This enthusiasm for teaching was further developed when he attended the College of Education (now the School of Education) on his return from studies overseas. As he suggests, the experience made him question his

previous assumptions that knowledge of pedagogy is unnecessary to teach at the upper secondary school level. The focus on theories and philosophies of education informed his views of how he worked with students and as he explains, led him to make an explicit connection between addressing social justice concerns and teaching and learning through project-based activities: “maybe that was when I first tried to organise a class in a way that students are investigating social injustices...not just me telling them how things were”.

He describes his pedagogical approach as informed by gaining a sense of the world and the need to question its realities. He makes a link between this view and his childhood in Copenhagen in the mid-seventies. Moving from rural Iceland to a multicultural and rapidly modernising Copenhagen provided powerful intercultural experiences. Ingimar recalls attending a school and being put in a class for foreign students until he was moved to the mainstream class because he was able to quickly pick up Danish. This made an impression on him in terms of becoming aware of the influence of background on life opportunities. Many of the students in his previous class had refugee status and had experienced some form of trauma. This contrasted with his own secure reality as an Icelander and his experience of life with his parents and his four siblings as beneficiaries of what he perceived as a functioning social welfare state:

I knew after this that the world that I had lived in, and I thought was the only world, was not, so you have to ask err, how do we want to organise our lives? There are other possibilities, other ways we are living.

The description of his pedagogical approach suggests that he draws from this experience. He works with students to raise awareness of structural injustices and the impact on certain members of society who may not have citizen status. He also describes forms of student activism that he has encouraged through his project-based approach to teaching History, Social Science and Life Skills. He discusses the challenges of activism in a school context that is focused on student academic achievement and the limitations of teaching human rights as content to respond to the History syllabus rather than as a broader curriculum concern. He believes that a subject-based curriculum influences the way that students engage with social justice and human rights concerns, placing more importance on passing exams and responding to perceived and internalised expectations of the purpose of schooling:

We were a traditional and old fashioned school, selective, which deliberately cultivates its traditions and history and deliberately creating this community of “us” and when you finished you joined this club of “us”.

He explains that his understanding of teaching as a critical dialogue between teacher and students was constantly being questioned, leading him to reflect on what the role of the teacher is in today’s schools:

We are on the run as a professional class, we are on the run from our ideals and values...well, we discuss economics and politics at coffee breaks, but as professionals, we do not ask ourselves who is responsible for bringing up the population, our responsibility towards people...towards nature...if teachers are not going to do it, consciously or deliberately and at least ask themselves, is this our responsibility”?

Ingimar recognises the opportunities presented by the introduction of the National Curriculum Guides in 2011 and the systemic restrictions:

I know I have no excuse; we do have a lot of freedom in this system, individual teachers, but somehow this system doesn’t, this system eats the individual teacher.

He recalls the principal in his school seeking to take advantage of the new decentralisation policy by setting up mechanisms to support teachers to respond to the six curricular pillars. The reforms coincided with Ingimar being one of the most experienced teachers at the school and for the first time, he felt a sense of relief that finally his project-based teaching was being given recognition rather than being critiqued because it did not support the traditional exam-based approach of the school.

However, as Ingimar explains, resisting a system that he perceives as unjust is one concern. Another is feeling disillusioned by the resistance amongst subject teachers to inter-disciplinary approaches to teaching, in particular amongst Science teachers. Furthermore, he was finding that although students supported project-based teaching, they were reluctant to adopt a cross-curricular approach preferring instead to focus on “being taught” one subject at a time.

Ingimar’s story reflects a constant struggle throughout his career to defend his teaching beliefs. He explains that despite the potential

opportunity for progressive change in the upper secondary school system, he was at a stage in his life where he was looking for some form of personal change. When the opportunity presented itself for further study and a role in a higher education institution, he decided to resign as an upper secondary school teacher.

**My post-interview reflections:** Ingimar's narrative suggests that he was somehow caught between pursuing his own path to address social justice and working collectively in the spirit of education reform within a school system that he perceives as resistant to change. The interviews flowed well, with Ingimar taking the lead to discuss how he understands his teaching experience in the context of social justice and human rights. He made important connections between the development of Icelandic society and the implications for schooling. Ingimar came across as very open to making connections between his teaching experience and his life; I think that the dialogue may have served a valuable opportunity for him to make sense of his decision to resign as an upper secondary school teacher.

Ilmur: "Everything to do with human rights, as I think, it is just something that you have to have, as being a teacher, you need to be able to reflect on that in some way...teaching something about just the way of living"

Ilmur agreed to participate in the study after she was contacted by one of my contacts. Ilmur offers interesting insights to develop our understanding of human rights education in the context of teaching at an upper secondary school offering both vocational and academic paths for the matriculation exams and preparation for higher education. She draws on the concept of sustainability to make the link between teaching and social justice and human rights in the context of Cultural Literacy and Art and Design. This offers a fresh perspective that complements the narratives of teachers who are established as subject specialists within the grammar and comprehensive school contexts.

Ilmur started her career in the airline business in her early twenties where she was designing and running human resource management training programmes. She talks about the enjoyment that she got from the collaborative approach to working together as a team during this time. She also refers to her awareness of the importance of group work and working with diversity to generate new ways of approaching a problem. She suggests that this experience led her to consider teaching. After completing her

bachelor's degree in Fine Arts, she completed a Master's in Education focused on Sustainability and Arts. It was during this course that she stated to make connections between social justice and sustainability. She has been teaching since 2011 and teaches both Art and Design and Cultural Literacy.

Ilmur's childhood experience has influenced the way that she perceives Iceland. She is concerned that as a small nation, it is important to hold onto a sense of community and connection with the lives of others, irrespective of where they come from originally. She spent her childhood in Canada and Italy brought up by an Italian father and Icelandic mother. She found the cultural diversity challenging:

I think at a certain point, I remember...uncertainty of sort of where exactly, or where you want to be identified as well, you know, just liking it at one point, loving it here and at another point hating it.

Ilmur's experience of growing up with a sense of shifting identities has made her more critical of how she understands the concept of cultural diversity. She refers to her father as living in Iceland for almost half his life and yet still identifying closely with his Italian national identity. She understands this as relevant to how we understand culture in that it should not be about having to choose between different cultures. She suggests that the lack of discussion in education makes us blind to the multiple possibilities that cultural diversity offers to a country.

She refers to life in Iceland as characterised by individualism; there is concern for one's own small part of life: "They're just so concerned with their own thing, and their own problem". This limits what she refers to as "a global sort of understanding", which is needed in a small community that has historically enjoyed geographic isolation and pride in maintaining cultural autonomy:

Even though we have a lot of people that are really connected to other things and doing great things, here, it's just a part of our culture that we are not accepting of whom, or you know, whomever, do you know what I mean?

Ilmur's background offers some insights into the way that she approaches her teaching and works with the concept of Cultural Literacy. She sees discussion and reflection as integral to breaking an isolated mindset that she recognises in Iceland. She describes this mindset in terms of a tension that

has resulted from a desire to hold onto a national identity whilst wanting to reach out to connect with the international community.

The Cultural Literacy course that she teaches is a compulsory first year course that is offered as part of a four-year technology programme. She emphasises that her starting point is students' own perceptions of culture in order to generate the understanding of diverse cultures. Learning how to discuss and dialogue is also an important part of the course. She believes that such discussion needs to be underpinned by student reflection on who they are, what they understand as culture, its effect on them and the relationship between design and different forms of art.

As well as dialogue, she highlights respect as an important principle that she works with: "respect between people, how is respect diverse here, than may be in other countries". Her use of the term diversity emphasises location as an important concept in understanding cultural diversity. This is influenced by her recognition that there is a need to explore the influence of rural and urban divides, living in Reykjavik, living in a small town, being brought up partly in Iceland and then abroad. As she points out, "I can feel there is a difference even though we are all sort of living in the same small community".

Ilmur also describes her course as an opportunity to critically look at design through an ethical lens that engages with social justice and human rights concerns:

If we are talking about art...design, I feel like...using these subjects, it is often more easy to start talking about important issues...to connect to it through that.

Her experience of working with 17-20 year-old students leads her to conclude that they struggle and find it challenging initially to engage in discussions. However, this capacity to engage in critical dialogue develops over time. In particular when the discussion is related to something concrete or visual such as a video, a painting, a building, or a visit to Harpa, the main Concert and Conference Hall in Reykjavík.

Design offers a comfortable distance as students engage in critical introspection of issues that are related to human rights; "where we come from, how diverse it can be, what we think to be right and wrong towards others". Ilmur strongly feels that working with human rights is an innate part of the teaching process. However, she points out that the way that teachers

work with human rights will depend on and be influenced by the mindset and moral disposition of the teacher.

When discussing the challenges that teachers face to engage with concerns related to sustainability, social justice and human rights, Ilmur suggests that purposes of education limited to qualifications are disconnected from the lived reality of upper secondary school level students. She reflects on the challenges that mathematics teachers may have, for example, and assumes that such subjects resist purposes of education that are more focused on the social, the ecological and the affective purposes of education. As she points out, this contradicts the 2011 curriculum guides that she understands as reinforcing the idea that “the role of the teacher should be inclusive of guiding students in ways to live life in connection with others”.

**My post-interview reflections:** Ilmur initially comes across as unsure about her participation in the research given that she had not previously made an explicit link between her teaching and human rights. As she states at the beginning of the interview: “I am not specifically working with human rights, but definitely, it’s something that comes up and something that we do discuss, even though I don’t, I can’t say that I have a specific project”. Through the process of the interview she starts to make more explicit links between her course and human rights. She gradually starts to discuss human rights as an innate and inevitable part of the teaching process, which she connects to the mindset of the teacher. By the end of her story she is taking the lead in the conversation and her responses have developed a deeper reflection. One of the most salient features of her interview for me is the use of “we” when talking about her students, who she clearly identifies with in terms of collectively making sense of the world.

Tumi: “The big subjects like English, Icelandic and maths are the masters of the universe, so if you had an English department that was minded towards...was very ambitious in implementing the Grunþættir (fundamental pillars), this would have a very strong impact on the whole school”.

Tumi agreed to participate in the study after I made contact with him based on a recommendation from one of my contacts. Tumi’s story is interesting in many ways and not least because of the way that he presents his work around social justice and human rights in the context of democracy in schools. Democracy as a concept related to schooling in Iceland has a much longer history than human rights, as I have discussed in chapter three.

Tumi's story offers valuable insights into the multiple ways democracy in schools can be understood and interpreted. A second important feature of Tumi's narrative is what it reveals about the hierarchy of subjects within the upper secondary school system and how this can constrain or facilitate work around social justice and human rights. Tumi's perspective emphasises the important role of the subject teacher in promoting human rights and the need for a whole school approach towards ensuring the six fundamental curriculum pillars as the core of all aspects of schooling.

Tumi completed a bachelor's degree in Philosophy and then moved to Denmark to continue his studies in Philosophy, taking English as a minor. He returned to Iceland to get his teaching certificate before starting as an English teacher at the grammar school where he was working at the time of his interview. Tumi had been teaching for 16 years when we met.

Tumi comes from a family of teachers and he feels that this was a significant factor in his decision to enter the profession. He believes that his upbringing and that of his students differ considerably in terms of exposure to political debate. He recalls growing up in a family environment characterised by communal dinners and engaging in political discussion as the norm: "my family was conscious, politically conscious...very socially conscious, things were being discussed at my home...kids growing up in the 70's and 80's, they would be exposed to news". In contrast, he sees a passivity and lack of political maturity amongst students that he relates to growing up in a technological world that provides immediate access to news without having to engage in critical discussions about these events:

I was following up on these world events and we had the cold war and we had South Africa...and it seems despite 9/11, they seem to be so, so, naïve.

He believes that this is the result of a school system that focuses on individual acquisition of knowledge as a measurement of achievement; interaction that generates collective meaning making of world events does not seem to be prioritised or valued by the system.

When he started teaching, the main influence on his pedagogical approach was his own experience of learning. He recalls being at school in the eighties in Iceland where progressive teaching in the form of games, projects and collaborative and cooperative teaching methods were being promoted. He describes them as "more open and creative...teachers liked doing different things, like doing group work, I was allowed to pick my own



approach". He refers to the period when these methods came under attack during an education reform referred to as "sögurskammdegi (the black period)", which I have discussed in chapter three.

When reflecting back on when he started teaching, Tumi makes the connection between this period and the traditional approach of grammar schools. Despite his preference for progressive teaching approaches, he realised that he would need to be patient and cautious when trying out innovative pedagogy because of the resistance in what he describes as a "seriously old-fashioned" school. Since the introduction of the 2011 National Curriculum Guides he feels that the school is developing towards a more progressive pedagogy influenced by the recruitment of new teachers to replace the more traditional ones as they retire: "the old guard have sort of left but we still retain some of that culture and some of that old idea but we are moving in a new direction".

Although Tumi qualified as a Philosophy teacher, he has been teaching English, one of the core academic subjects at the upper secondary school level alongside Mathematics and Icelandic. Philosophy is offered as an elective and so the running of the class is dependent on student numbers. With the introduction of the 2011 National Curriculum Guides, Tumi felt optimistic that the school would respond well and adopt new approaches in line with curriculum requirements. However, he suggests that systemic constraints have greater influence on what and how the school operates than the introduction of new policy. He refers to the power of stakeholder influences on maintaining the hierarchy of subjects. Certain subject streams, such as Science and Business, dominate the school curriculum. This means that it becomes challenging to find ways to incorporate the six curriculum pillars into subjects that have fewer hours allocated to them.

Tumi argues that the upper secondary school system prioritises subjects over students, which gives certain teachers greater influence than others. The more influential the subject, the more scope there is for teachers to introduce their preferences. He refers to the role of the management as influential on how schools respond to the curriculum pillars, suggesting that the current focus on administration and finance leads to a "hands off" approach as regards curriculum concerns: "interesting things could be happening but they are not supported and they are not opposed, so they...the change wouldn't be sustained". As he points out, "we spend an enormous amount of time creating our exams, making sure that they are reliable...when we could be spending a lot more energy on interesting modules or lessons".

Tumi's response has been to find creative ways to work within the system, which he argues is possible to some extent with the necessary school support. As part of his Master's project, he developed a game that provided an opportunity for students to experience working democratically. The purpose of the game is to get students to critically learn about democracy as a concept that signifies more than participation or having a voice, typically promoted in schools:

It's a very, it's a democracy that is limited to this sort of, this procedural, you know where they have these elections and they have popularity contests...but it's not, it's not so much about the empowerment of each individual student...

An example he uses is of the student council. While presented as a microcosm of a democratic system that supports student voice, participation, and representation, he suggests that student councils can promote dominant and one-sided perspectives of social reality:

An interesting thing about Icelandic school culture is this split between the social and the academic...the nemandafélag (student council), they're heavily sponsored by business, and they're doing very ambitious and cool things and they are also doing some things that are maybe not so, you know, they're producing these TV shows that are, now they're coming on, there's a TV station where they're showing one of the shows, which I think is yeah, (pauses), err, borderline, you know, sexist, ra.., I don't know, I'm not saying racist, but, but, but, you know, (*grimaces*), scary, a little bit, iffy, iffy.

Tumi's point is that democracy in schools should not be confused with the establishment of a political structure that gives students a voice without critical consideration of how the system works, who it benefits and the implications. Tumi explains that he aims to get students to think about these things in the context of the game that he developed. It is more than learning about democracy as a political construct or system. Instead, it focuses on experiencing living within a democratic system in order to critically identify the factors that need to be addressed to "change the system". This happens in the context of a fantasyland. Tumi explains the democratic characteristics of the game in terms of student participation, decision-making, and

discussion to address concerns that they identify and feel are important to them. The richness of the varieties and ideas that students come up with is an important democratic feature of the game.

Although he feels that he had the support of the school leadership to develop and implement the game, Tumi explains that his game was offered as an elective, which was not selected by enough students to allow it to run. In a four-year school programme, students are only able to select two electives, and as he points out, it is hard to compete with trips abroad! He also points out that the game requires two to four hours, which does not fit into the current timetable.

Tumi suggests that working with concepts like democracy and human rights tends to be ad hoc and the result of individual teacher initiative, which is unsustainable in the current system. He recognises that a comprehensive whole school approach is missing, despite the autonomy provided to upper secondary schools to develop their own curriculum. He is confident, however, that he will continue to experiment and find creative ways to incorporate the game into his teaching despite the systemic challenges.

His greatest opportunity to engage with human rights is through his English teaching because English is one of the three core subjects that he refers to as “the masters of the universe”. Tumi refers to “a culture of self-regulation” in upper secondary schools. By this he suggests that teachers fail to take advantage of the autonomy granted to them because they have come to accept what he perceives as a dysfunctional system as the norm. He refers to complaints about heavy workloads as a “kind of systemic masochism” that has developed in response to the system: “if you have so many papers to mark, you won’t be taking any courses, you won’t be reading any books, it’s part of the organisational culture”. He believes that a change of attitude towards professional development is required and this will only happen when teachers are encouraged and supported to develop professionally and personally. He refers to his experience of being supported in the creation and testing of his game, which benefitted both the school and Tumi: “I think it should be formalised a lot more, recognised as part of the, you know, being a professional teacher who would be doing these things”.

Tumi argues that without formalising the opportunity to explore and reflect on ways to incorporate democracy and human rights into the curriculum, these concepts will not become an explicit part of the curriculum or school practices. Instead, he believes that individual teachers will continue to do their best because of a moral and political consciousness: “I guess it is more like something that is just unconsciously slipped through

because it is a concern with all of us, I mean the teachers, we will all think about this a little bit”.

**My post-interview reflections:** Tumi engaged actively and confidently in the discussion from the beginning. As he progressed, he allowed himself to engage in deeper reflection and deliberation, which generated a rich analysis of the points that he was making. He seemed to enjoy talking about his work and trying to make sense of the constraints to promoting human rights in schools.

Selma: “My concern is that the students are going to come out not knowing about the English language but everything about human rights”

I was contacted by Selma after she received an invitation to participate in the study from one of my contacts. We arranged to meet in a cafeteria for the meeting. Her story was rich with references to her need to share and find out what other teachers were doing to address human rights in their teaching, as reflected in her comment:

I felt that maybe I had something to say and I had my own interest in mind because then I eventually would be able to read your research and find out what other people are doing, what I am missing out in, and so on, and I think it’s very, very important because it’s something that I have thought of for a long time.

She provides valuable insights into how she perceives the school system as contradictory to principles of democracy; she understands democracy as a process of learning to live together in ways that challenge inequality. Her story also highlights the value of both formal and informal opportunities as support systems to develop teachers’ ideas on working with human rights. Without such mechanisms, teachers can become isolated, insecure, and concerned that they are working against the system that they operate in.

Selma had been teaching English for ten years when we met and was teaching in the same grammar school that she had attended as a student. She had initially planned to become a journalist after completing her bachelor’s degree in English. However, on completion she decided instead to enrol in the teaching diploma programme. She has no regrets about becoming an English teacher and instead sees her profession as an opportunity to develop professionally and personally. Selma feels that

opportunities for intercultural exchange greatly influence the way that she works. At the time of the interview, she had recently attended a summer course in the States where she had the opportunity to discuss politics in relation to her role as a teacher. She has come to depend on informal learning through such events and discussions with colleagues. She feels that these keep her motivated to think “outside of the box”, which have become important to her given the absence of any formal mechanisms provided by the school system to support teachers to work with human rights.

Selma was working in an administrative role at her school during the education reform process that informed the 2008 Upper Secondary School Act and the 2011 National Curriculum Guides. She found herself actively involved in the development of the 2011 National Curriculum Guides at the national level. This was an important learning experience for her that involved meeting, discussing, and taking back proposals to her own school based on reforms that gave increased autonomy to schools to make curriculum decisions. While Mathematics, English and Icelandic were allocated a certain number of credits and teaching hours, schools could decide how to organise the remainder of the curriculum. Selma found the situation stressful given the personal nature of the resistance from teachers who sought to defend their own subjects: “This is such a political thing, and how do you sort of, what do you put in that recipe? Do you throw Danish out?”

The experience raised her awareness of the territorial nature of subject-based schooling. She describes teachers as defensive and focused on their own subject speciality during school planning meetings. She refers to this as a characteristic particular to the upper secondary school level: “We lack this solidarity or common pedagogy that you can find in Grunnskóli (primary schools) or Leikskóli” (preschools). Selma is critical of the upper secondary school system and its tendency to create and maintain hierarchy and divisions between subject areas, with certain subjects viewed as superior. She feels that the system breeds hostility and a lack of trust between teachers. She recalls being quizzed and made to feel inferior by another teacher when she discussed her work around gender because she did not identify with being a feminist. She recalls being asked:

Are you implementing gender issues because you are a feminist? No, because I think that these issues are important and relevant to students. I did not think of it as feminism but addressing rights issues and social justice as an educator.

She explains that it was not the comment in itself that led her to doubt what she was doing around human rights and social justice; it was more the recognition that she was not used to explaining her focus on rights and justice in the context of English Language teaching. She feels that teachers such as herself can easily be judged by different education stakeholders who have different expectations and understandings of the purpose of schooling and education: “My concern is that the students are going to come out not knowing about the English language but everything about human rights”.

She explains that the strong subject classification at the upper secondary school level makes it difficult to work collaboratively; she is not aware how other subject teachers are working towards interdisciplinary teaching because there is limited professional communication between the different subject disciplines at her school. From her perspective as an English teacher, Selma suggests that it was relatively easy to respond to the curriculum focus on learning objectives and competence-based learning. This is because she finds that English provides greater scope to engage with a range of subjects and themes through the skills and language development requirements of the curriculum. Selma also points out that the six curriculum pillars and the focus on issues of social justice were evident in the school vision that her school had developed prior to the introduction of the 2011 National Curriculum Guides. When asked to explain how human rights are presented or evident in this vision, she referred to the statement of “being a responsible citizen”. This suggests an understanding of human rights related to the notion of citizenship.

Selma believes that in the context of teaching, human rights tend to be understood in terms of content to integrate into other subject areas, rather than as processes and systems that promote equality and freedoms. She refers to the need for human rights education to challenge the way that the school operates, which she perceives as promoting hierarchy and failing to address issues related to imbalances of power and privilege. Selma is concerned about issues of privilege and injustice, which she feels are left unattended in the school. She connects these systemic flaws to human rights:

I think a lot of it comes from what I see first-hand at school, like with inequality, hierarchy amongst my students...that there is something in the system.

For example, she refers to a pecking order that is evident amongst students. She points out, “It may not be a human right, but it is a worthy discussion of things that are not necessarily fair”.

Selma’s understanding of human rights is as fundamental and inalienable entitlements “that you are born with”. She explains that they can easily be taken away in any given country context despite legislation in place aimed at protecting rights. The example that Selma often uses in her teaching is the Constitution. She explains that when students are given specific examples of when these laws are broken, it provides a context for discussion around human rights. The local examples that she draws on are those related to the rights of people with disabilities and gender concerns. Selma’s description of her teaching suggests that she places emphasis on students’ critical thinking skills and awareness of injustice locally and globally. She refers to developing a series of modules for each of the six curricular pillars, focused on the four skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking). Selma refers to identifying topics or events and making these relevant to the lives of her students. She has also previously invited guest speakers to come and talk about social justice concerns.

Selma points to a number of challenges faced by teachers when working with human rights. She talks about lacking the appropriate knowledge or skills to address certain human rights issues. She uses Freedom of Speech as an example. As she points out, “I am not sure even if I can handle it with all the online comments and everything”. Selma is referring to both a lack of human rights knowledge and confidence to deal with controversial concerns that are open to multiple interpretations. She also talks about the lack of preparedness or support to discuss human rights across subject areas and the limited resources available to teachers that are practical in nature rather than overly philosophical. Without formal support to work with concepts such as democracy and human rights, she fears that teachers’ lack of human rights knowledge will only sustain narrow conceptions of the purpose of schooling.

During her reflections she suggests that many of these challenges and concerns are a result of working in an educational system that is focused on testing to assess achievement. She points to the fact that she has to ask permission not to give her students exams. In doing so, she is made to feel that that she is working outside of or against the system. This works to create a sense of going against an accepted norm that is not always a comfortable position to be in. However, she is optimistic about change to the system and

in particular places her hope on a new generation of teachers coming in to replace those who are retiring.

**My post-interview reflections:** As the conversation progressed, Selma developed a deep reflective stance that led her to draw on the exchange of ideas to develop her understandings of how she relates to and works with human rights. Selma is passionate about her work and also committed to critically exploring the experiences of other teachers as a collaborative response to the curricular pillar of democracy and human rights.

Viktor: “When you fail maths, and you’re not sure what you are going to do, and your self-confidence isn’t high, then you don’t allow yourself to experiment or try different things”.

Viktor’s name was given to me by one of my contacts and we met in the meeting room at his school.

His story is interesting for a number of reasons. First, he became a Mathematics teacher later in life after working in carpentry for a significant number of years. His story therefore offers new insights, not only about a subject not typically associated with human rights, but also about the influence of life experiences on the way he approaches teaching as a profession. Second, his story addresses important intercultural influences on his pedagogical approach; and third, his school context offers an interesting progressive perspective in terms of its response to the introduction of the 2011 National Curriculum Guides.

At the time of the interview, Viktor had been teaching Mathematics at the same upper secondary school since 2009. The school offers academic programmes aimed towards matriculation and preparation for higher education. He had completed a Bachelor’s degree in Biology some 12 years earlier, but on completion, he felt that he could not afford to work as a Biologist given that he had already started a family.

He began carpentry courses and worked as a carpenter until his mid-thirties. He describes those years as rewarding. However, he was also aware of the fact that he did not want to be in the same profession at the age of fifty. He began to explore new options and enrolled on a master’s programme in Mathematics Education in Reykjavík. He completed the programme in 2009.

The Master’s programme focused on the New Maths Approach, which emphasised formative assessment processes. The focus on learning by doing



and project-based work influenced his own pedagogical approach. He explains that the course introduced him to the importance of developing his own materials, working creatively and collaboratively, and providing continuous feedback as an integral part of the assessment process.

He feels he was successful in securing a teaching position straight after completing his master's because of the New Maths Approach. The school was looking for teachers with progressive teaching ideas and non-traditional visions of the purpose of education. He believes that his preference for teaching and learning based on "open lectures, no big final exams, constant feedback...no grading till the end of the semester" played a significant role in his recruitment by the school. His hiring coincided with a critical period of reflection on societal values that was taking place in Iceland at that time as a result of the global economic crisis in 2008.

The financial crash in Iceland led to a large number of teachers, who had previously moved to work in the business sector, returning to teaching positions. As Viktor points out, some of these teachers were highly qualified. The teachers hired with Viktor in 2009 were hired not based on teaching experience but on their commitment to progressive methods and visions of teaching. Viktor describes the staff as "an exceptional team, so willing to try everything, to sharing".

For Viktor, who was the first Mathematics teacher at the school and who thrived in an environment open to creative and experimental ideas, it was an exceptional time: "it is the best job in the world...we met so many creative people. We were all trying to build something new".

This was an important professional development stage in Viktor's life. He was part of an active and engaged team working collaboratively to contribute to the development of a pilot school in the context of a country rebuilding itself financially while re-evaluating the moral implications of the financial crisis. The introduction of the 2011 National Curriculum Guides contributed to the emerging pedagogical vision of the school in terms of the focus on social justice and human rights related concerns:

It was the school and our passion for innovation that motivated the teachers, there seems to have been a sense of purpose around creating something new, which may have been an offshoot of the crisis and a general sentiment in Iceland at the time.

When the interview took place, five years had passed since the opening of the school. Viktor's view is that the collaboration across subject areas has continued. He also points to the school's open plan design as a contributing factor. Unlike in other upper secondary schools, Viktor suggests that the architecture and the environment support interdisciplinary approaches because they physically challenge the notion of teachers as subject specialists: "We all work in this collective workspace for all the teachers, we don't have the Maths department and the Science department".

In his own teaching, Viktor places emphasis on individual student needs. He sets up challenging questions and students work in pairs to encourage interaction and engagement to solve the problem posed. He feels that this method is effective in building the self-esteem of students who have previously been labelled as "failing". His assessment approach emphasises learning as a process rather than the capacity to provide the correct answer. As he explains, "wrong answers are always celebrated". He uses a great deal of hands-on work and finds that he is constantly researching new methods. In a statistics course that he runs for final year students, he uses surveys to look more specifically at social justice concerns in relation to global development disparities. He uses this as the basis of discussions that aim for critical analysis of the data.

Viktor explains that a large number of his students have left compulsory school without obtaining the competences for their age-level when they arrive at his school. These students tend to be sceptical and negative towards learning. Viktor sees his role as building confidence, which he describes as an essential part of what schooling should be about: "There is not something as a Maths person but about challenging yourself".

Viktor's reflections on why he chose to move into teaching suggest that certain life experiences and role models influenced his choices. He always sensed that he would end up as a teacher. His mother is a teacher and in his previous role as a foreman, his interactions made him realise that he had strong communication skills. He also recognises that his carpentry skills have helped him to understand maths learning as a practical rather than abstract skill. Carpentry also helped him to appreciate formative assessment as an effective education approach; it is the quality of the process that informs the end product.

Viktor lived in Sweden from the age of five to ten at a time of growing immigration in response to political events going on in South America and the Middle East. He recalls having close friends whose families had left their countries to escape persecution and violence. He makes a connection

between this experience and his sense of social justice. Political discussions were common in his household as he was growing up, which he also believes developed his political interests and way of looking at and understanding the world.

I draw from my life experiences and they probably are what motivated me to become a teacher, not teaching a subject, not the bringer of facts but to be a motivation to have kids grow self-esteem and to learn to learn what I think upper secondary schools should teach kids, to learn and finding a field of interest and not to teach facts as such.

He explains that it is important to differentiate between being political and a member of a political party. He presents himself as an environmentalist who thinks deeply about the impact of politics but who has never been affiliated to a political party. During his teacher education programme, he feels that he was greatly influenced by courses related to character education. These helped him to develop awareness of the inter-relational nature of learning; it requires setting goals, acknowledging the challenges involved in achieving these goals as well as the need to work with others in mutually respectful ways:

Having a goal to succeed whilst acknowledging that there will be sacrifices along the way that need to be made but that should not harm anyone along the way.

He started his studies in Biology at the University of Iceland before moving to Copenhagen, where he noticed a difference in the teaching approach. In Copenhagen he feels that he had very good teachers who were specialists in different areas of Biology. However, he felt more comfortable in the Icelandic university setting where he found the professors were focused on providing a generalist understanding of Biology rather than one specialism. He recalls the passion of his professors in Iceland and suggests that this is an experience that has informed his approach to teaching and learning.

When the discussion moved to human rights, Viktor explains that teachers in his school do not talk about their work in relation to human rights. He says that he often gets the question: "How does human rights connect to Science or Maths?" He suggests that there is a tendency to understand human rights in terms of specific concerns such as gender inequality, students with disabilities or the failure of the system to respond to the needs

of immigrant students. He suggests that he is more comfortable using the term social justice to explain the content and methods that he uses with his students:

Social justice within our country...the equal opportunity to do things both from the rural and urban areas, the growing economic gap where many kids are working many hours a week and how this affects their study and their opportunities and goals. What is the purpose of education, is it to get a highly paid job or is it to be happy in life? These are things we talk about a lot with the kids especially.

As this statement reflects, Viktor positions himself as a teacher who is working to engage with critical issues that can impact on both students and societal wellbeing; however, he does not frame this in terms of working with human rights.

**My post-interview reflections:** Viktor was relaxed and prepared to discuss his experience of working to address human rights in his work. He gave the impression that he was used to sharing and discussing his ideas and that he understood reflection and engagement in self-critique as part of the role of the teacher. What struck me most about the dialogue was his ability to make connections between life influences and the way that he approaches his teaching.