



# Children's human rights education: conceptual foundations of school students' learning processes

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## ABSTRACT

The study of human rights education has emerged in recent years, but few studies have addressed students' learning processes regarding children's human rights education (CHRE). This paper conceptualises the interrelated features of these processes in school, subsumed under three conceptual levels of analysis. The first highlights the individual child, whose learning is influenced by developmental and socio-cultural factors and should consider child-centred aims, content and approaches. The second level accentuates the prominent role of interactions and relationships in students' learning of CHRE, which requires educators to share power. The third emphasises the role of the school environment as a multidimensional space where students' CHRE learning processes transpire, stresses the importance of whole-school approaches, and analyses the institutional challenges that may constrain students' ability to make sense of CHRE. This conceptualisation highlights how CHRE may be adapted to children as learners in school.

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## Introduction

The study of human rights education (HRE) has emerged in recent years, and many scholars have addressed the various definitions, pedagogical approaches, contents and limits of such education (for an overview, see Kayum Ahmed, 2021). However, fewer HRE studies have paid specific attention to the learning processes of the schooled child as a learner of HRE. This gap in the research is surprising given the prevalence of 'child-centred' approaches in sociological and educational discourse (e.g. Lerikkanen et al., 2016; Parker, 2018; Power et al., 2019). The current study aims to conceptualise children's human rights learning processes in school. More specifically, it aims to answer the following question: What characterises children's human rights learning processes in school when children are the learners and children's rights is the content?

This paper draws on literature focusing on children's rights education for children in school and on HRE for children. Children's human rights education (hereafter CHRE)

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encompasses these two neighbouring research fields (see Quennerstedt, 2022). In a complementary manner, we examine relevant works relating to children's rights and learning in school to facilitate a more profound understanding of students' CHRE learning processes. This interdisciplinary perspective assembles knowledge on developmental and pedagogical dimensions of learning about, for and through rights in school environments.

The paper opens with an introductory section focusing on HRE and highlighting the gap in the research about children as learners of children's and human rights. The following section outlines the innovative proposed conceptualisation of students' CHRE learning processes, organised into three primary levels of analysis: the individual child who is developing and is embedded in a specific socio-cultural background, the interactions and relationships intertwined with children's learning of CHRE in school, and the school environment as the space in which the learning occurs. The concluding section addresses the theoretical and practical importance of the conceptual framework we offer, which supports adapting CHRE practices to children as rights learners in school. It also accounts for research gaps and prospects for future study.

### **Human rights education: definitions and approaches**

Since the adoption of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training (United Nations Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training [UNDHRET], 2011), it is commonly agreed that HRE aims to develop knowledge about, through and for rights (e.g. Bajaj, 2017; Struthers, 2015). Teaching content about human rights should provide learners with knowledge and understanding of related norms and principles, as well as about the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection. Both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UDHR], 1948) and (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], 1989) highlight that learners should not merely learn about rights but should also learn to respect the rights of others (e.g. Lile, 2020). The UNDHRET, therefore, suggests that HRE should be supported by learning and teaching processes that respect the rights of both educators and learners (art. 2(2)(b)). Finally, the UNDHRET was foundational in affirming that education for human rights 'includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others' (art. 2(2)(c)).

Based on this latter aim, HRE has recently been defined as encompassing a transformative dimension. This perspective has moved HRE beyond its initial definitions, rooted in the UDHR (1948, art. 26), which prevailed up to the adoption of the Vienna Declaration (General Assembly [of the United Nations], 1993) and the launch of the Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004) (General Assembly [of the United Nations], 1996; see; Moody, 2016; Lile, 2020). Practices have progressively moved from merely learning about basic rights and respecting fundamental freedoms as a 'didactic instruction' (Jennings, 1994, p. 291) based on 'declarationist' and 'non-critical' approaches (e.g. Coysh, 2014; Keet, 2012; Zembylas, 2016, 2018) to directly address issues relating to the connections and interdependencies among rights holders. This transition is embedded in understanding HRE as a means to achieve social justice and

educate rights learners to become agents of change and activists for human rights (see Bajaj, 2011; Kayum Ahmed, 2021; Simpson, 2017; Tibbitts, 2017).

HRE as a transformative process has nonetheless revealed some problematic aspects, particularly when examining how it transpires in schools. States, teachers and parents may not perceive schools as a place for social and political activism (Mejias & Starkey, 2012; Vlaardingerbroek, 2015) or as a place to develop education for radical politics (Bajaj, 2011). A related educational concern is the adoption of extreme relativist approaches to rights, promoting diversity over the enculturation of universal values (Almog & Perry-Hazan, 2012); while policymakers and teachers must translate human rights to fit local contexts, the challenge is to ensure the local versions of CHRE still retain the core values of the universal standards. Moreover, the aim to 'empower' children 'to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others' (UNDHRET, art. 2(2)(c)) does not fully align with transformative HRE models, as it leaves children the choice whether to engage in promoting social change. Thus, whereas scholars agree that a critical approach to HRE is required, rather than normative teaching of international rights documents, calls for a more 'acceptable' approach have been made; some argue that a middle ground would allow more engagement from teachers and schools in ensuring rights are taught, respected and used by all actors throughout the education process (Quennerstedt, 2022; Zembylas et al., 2015).

Noteworthy is that the transformative perspective is firmly related to the practical and theoretical developments in adult HRE, mostly outside educational settings (e.g. Bajaj, 2011; Tibbitts, 2002). This focus on adult learning similarly characterises Mezirow's seminal work on transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997). Mezirow emphasised that transforming adults' frames of reference 'requires a form of education very different from that commonly associated with children' and that 'learning requires that new information be incorporated by the learner into an already well-developed symbolic frame of reference', which children would be lacking (p. 10). While debatable, this assumption has led to excluding child-related issues in this theory.

The inclination not to consider children or their specificities is consistent with the broader definition of HRE, strongly framed by works carried out with adult learners. Scholars have acknowledged that human rights curricula are 'as diverse as the learners involved in the process' (Palau-Wolffe, 2016, p. 32), and research has provided preliminary insights into how CHRE could take place in schools (Brantefors et al., 2016, 2019; Isenström, 2022; Isenström & Quennerstedt, 2020; Quennerstedt, 2011). However, the realities of the child as a learner and the particularities of school as an educational institution where children's rights may be taught, facilitated and upheld have been unsystematically considered.

### **Conceptual foundations of students' CHRE learning processes**

Studying children and their rights requires considering their inherent complexity and integrating the multiple dimensions at play (Moody & Darbellay, 2019). The following section constructs students' CHRE learning processes in school from a systemic viewpoint, bridging the individual, interpersonal and school environment levels and based on understanding CHRE as learning about, through and for rights. This analysis reflects elements of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), which

highlights the importance of understanding a child's development within the context of multiple interacting environments. However, within the scope of this paper, the emphasis remained on the first level of influence – focused on educational issues and building upon the literature reviewed.

This systemic analysis draws on a review of literature included in a database of scientific work collected in the framework of a collaborative international project. Our study does not aim to undertake a systematic literature review; instead, it aligns with Grant and Booth's description of critical reviews that seek 'to identify most significant items in the field' and provide a 'conceptual contribution to embody existing or derive new theory' (2009, p. 94). All three authors reviewed the database, suggested categories for analysing the students' CHRE learning processes in schools, and collectively formulated the scheme of systemic analysis. The authors have a solid record of publishing on children's rights, rights education and educational context-related topics. Two authors have published several systematic reviews or research syntheses on related subjects, while the third has extensive experience in epistemological and interdisciplinary work.

First, the focus is on the individual child, as a student, whose learning is influenced by developmental and socio-cultural factors and for whom the teaching processes should encompass child-centred aims, content and approaches. Then, the prominent role of interactions and relationships in students' learning of CHRE is highlighted, especially the daily interactive experiences that comprise CHRE in schools and the weight of children's participation rights and agency, which require adults to share power. Finally, the focus is placed on the school environment as the multidimensional space where students' CHRE learning processes transpire. This level pertains to the importance of a comprehensive whole-school approach for effective CHRE and the challenges that may limit children's ability to make sense of CHRE in the school context due to gaps between CHRE aims and prevalent institutional practices. Whereas these three levels are interconnected, the analysis aims to discern the distinctive features of each to promote a more comprehensive understanding of students' CHRE learning processes in school.

### ***The individual child as a learner of CHRE***

Students' CHRE learning processes in school involve individual children as CHRE learners. One distinctive feature is the need to consider the developing and socio-culturally embedded child. This feature implies the sequencing of rights education based on age, which aligns with theories of cognitive development and individual socio-cultural factors central to learning processes. Another feature is the need for child-centred content, aims and approaches, such as legal literacy adapted to children and participatory learning.

### ***Considering the developing and socio-culturally embedded child***

Several studies have highlighted developmentally concordant progression frameworks that specify what CHRE elements can be taught at which age level for research and practice (e.g. Flowers, 1998; Gollob & Krapf, 2009; United Nations, 2004). Indeed, cognitive developmental views of learning underpin the sequencing of rights education according to age (Brantefors et al., 2019; Palau-Wolffe, 2016) or 'evolving capacities' as also worded in the UNCRC (1989, Art. 12). These views

of learning correspond to influential developmental studies that explored children's perceptions of rights in different age cohorts (e.g. Melton, 1980; Ruck et al., 1998).

Cognitive developmental views of learning have been translated into curricula (Rinaldi et al., 2020) and rights education resources (see Martínez-Bello et al., 2020; Svennevig et al., 2021). For example, an analysis of early education textbooks has noted that children are regarded as competent enough to understand certain types of content and information concerning rights, such as responsibilities (Martínez-Bello et al., 2020). They are, however, considered insufficiently mature to be taught more general rights-related aspects and 'their entitlement to these rights in particular' (p. 8). Some CHRE programmes were expressly designed for the secondary school level, suggesting that children under 11 cannot be expected to experience significant learning in this area (Howe & Covell, 2005). Jerome et al. (2015) challenged this, highlighting that teaching must be adapted for younger children to confront misconceptions about rights (see also Brantefors et al., 2019).

Scholarly work has also underscored that a strong focus on age-related patterns and shifts regarding children's abilities or (in) competence also impacts teachers' attitudes and thinking about CHRE (Isenström & Quennerstedt, 2020). This conception might undermine considering children as individuals with agency (Qvortrup, 2009) and as holders of rights (Freeman, 2020; Quennerstedt, 2011), leading teachers to mainly conceptualise children as duty-bearers (Waldron & Oberman, 2016).

Little evidence has been presented to validate a strict sequential development of CHRE, which seems underpinned by widely spread universalist – and sometimes simplified or outdated – notions of child development (Quennerstedt, 2011). Although few studies have focused on how younger students can benefit from legal teaching, some empirical works have supported children's early readiness to be taught about controversial and critical issues (Claire & Holden, 2007; see also Paley's work with kindergarten children, Paley, 1992). Focusing on children's perceptions of justice and moral development, Nucci and Turiel (2009) have provided solid evidence 'that children at all points in development are capable of evaluating actions and social norms in moral terms, mean[ing] that educators may engage students in critical moral reflection at all grade levels' (p. 151; see also Kohlberg, 1981).

Some scholars have asserted that educating children about rights issues should start as soon as possible. For example, Lucas (2009) argued that since children as young as five have likely been – at least indirectly – confronted with the effects of humanitarian catastrophes (e.g. war and displacement) or social injustice (e.g. homelessness, bullying), it is wiser to accompany them in their understanding of human rights issues rather than to let them grapple with these matters on their own. Similarly, Flowers et al. (2000) highlight that by age 10, children's ideas about core human rights concepts like dignity and equality are already settled.

Another issue related to child development is the lack of consideration of how children's emotional development may affect their learning about rights. Emotions are central to HRE and can provide effective pedagogical orientations to the teaching of human rights, as Zembylas (2017) has suggested, as well as scholars focusing on socio-emotional learning programmes and children's rights education (Moody et al., 2023, Naser et al., 2020).

A related aspect of students' CHRE learning processes in school concerns the child's particular background. As learning is primarily influenced by context and experience (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978), scholars have contended that culture, socioeconomic status, gender, race/ethnicity, ability, geographic location and previous experiences, as well as misconceptions, should be considered in the course and outcomes of CHRE (e.g. Jerome et al., 2015; Palau-Wolffe, 2016). This also includes the necessity to adjust CHRE to children with special needs and children from vulnerable and marginalised populations (e.g. Moody, 2021).

As part of a broader trend in HRE studies viewing the learner as embedded in a socio-cultural context (see Bajaj, 2017; Osler, 2016), a consensus has emerged that educators should articulate rights knowledge with students' everyday socio-cultural knowledge (de Almeida Santos & Barros, 2020; Parker, 2018; Wilson, 1992). This view is intertwined with various empirical studies indicating the influence of national and communal cultural repertoires on students' perceptions of their rights in school (see Perry-Hazan, 2021). Also, scholars have underscored the importance of anchoring CHRE in personal experiences of injustice, exclusion or discrimination that children encounter daily (Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018; Palau-Wolffe, 2016). These scholars argue that if students do not learn to identify breaches in their rights, the aim of empowering children to respect and uphold the rights of their peers cannot be achieved. More broadly, consensus is emerging that CHRE should have 'meaning' for children's lives (Rosenberg, 2022).

### ***The need for child-centred content, aims and approaches***

Various studies have highlighted the importance of child-centred educational content and approaches to achieve the aims of CHRE. First, CHRE requires child-centred legal literacy to adapt the language of rights to children and the contexts relevant to children's lives (Grover, 2018; Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018). This endeavour is complex considering teachers' limited knowledge of legal concepts (e.g. Martínez-Sainz, 2018; Perry-Hazan & Tal-Weibel, 2020; Schimmel & Militello, 2007). Child-centred legal literacy does not imply diluting the legal aspects of CHRE just because the learners are children. Children should be taught that they have legal entitlements with concrete legal consequences and trained to identify and challenge breaches of rights in schools (Grover, 2018; Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018). However, studies have shown that in most countries, children are not expected to acquire in-depth knowledge about human rights (Brantefors et al., 2019; Grover, 2018; Rinaldi et al., 2020). For example, Brantefors et al. (2019) found that CHRE in Swedish schools is often transformed into indirect and activity-oriented education, which does not provide children with explicit knowledge about rights. Lundy and Martínez-Sainz (2018) have criticised CHRE educators who prioritise children's rights' ethical and moral aspects over their legal components, presenting these rights as 'ethical values' or 'lifestyle' considerations.

Second, child-centred approaches to CHRE require pedagogies that facilitate student participation. HRE scholarship, influenced by Freire's critical pedagogy, has emphasised the importance of participatory pedagogical approaches (Bajaj, 2012; Tibbitts, 2017), which view students as active learners, who address 'difficult' knowledge, develop critical thinking and enter a community of disagreement (Lindhardt, 2022; Moody, 2020; Zembylas, 2014). Such participatory CHRE approaches are likely to support articulating

instrumental, communicative and emancipatory knowledge (Cranton, 2006), which empowers students through developing a critical stance towards the society that they are part of, the power relations they are embedded in, and the human rights system itself (Bajaj, 2012; Stavrou et al., 2022; Struthers, 2021). The role of student participation in CHRE, which concerns relational dimensions, will be further discussed in the next section.

### ***Interactions and relationships in children's learning of CHRE***

Consistent with socio-constructivist learning theories, various studies have demonstrated that children's learning occurs through interactions with their teachers and with one another (e.g. Kutnick & Kington, 2005; Takeuchi, 2016). These contentions about children's learning are particularly relevant to CHRE. In a research synthesis examining educational studies on the teaching and learning of CHRE, Brantefors et al. (2016) concluded that although the motives to engage in CHRE vary, content and processes always concern human relations and interaction. Considering the prominent role of interactions in CHRE, Isenström (2022) conceptualised some CHRE learning situations as collateral learning. These contentions align with studies exploring students' perceptions of their rights, showing that these perceptions are anchored in students' relationships with their teachers (Birnhack & Perry-Hazan, 2020; Brantefors et al., 2016). Two interrelated features of students' CHRE learning processes in school may help understand the prominent role of interactions and relationships in these processes: the daily interactive experiences that form an integral part of CHRE in schools and the shifting dynamics of power between adults and children framing CHRE.

### ***Everyday interactive experiences as an integral part of CHRE***

CHRE is intertwined with children's experiences (Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018; Robinson, 2017), comprising various interactions informed by and infused with human rights (Brantefors, 2019; Frantzi, 2004; Isenström, 2022; Reynaert et al., 2010). These interactions may include socio-constructivist teaching, such as brain-storming, role-play and small group work (Audigier, 2000; Palau-Wolffe, 2016), as well as participatory classrooms with democratic teaching styles or participatory conflict-solving practices (Brantefors et al., 2016; Isenström & Quennerstedt, 2020). Interactions that generate CHRE experiences also include teachers' everyday interactive actions (Isenström, 2020). Drawing on Dewey's theory of learning through experience (1938), Isenström (2022) noted that everyday interactions – not those designed explicitly for CHRE – can be rights-learning situations that create conditions for children's growth as rights holders.

In all these interactive experiences, it is critical to foster respect for others (see Robinson et al., 2020), per CHRE aims (e.g. UNCRC, Article 29(1)(b)(d); UNDHRET, Article 2(2)(c)). Drawing on Dewey's concept of intelligent sympathy (Dewey, 1934), Frantzi (2004) suggested that interpersonal relationships based on pro-social behaviour should be a cornerstone of HRE (see also Naser et al., 2020). For example, the Rights, Respect, and Responsibility (RRR) initiative in UK elementary schools' incorporated role-play exercises to help children understand the importance of respecting each other's views and feelings (Covell & Howe, 2008). A study examining the implementation of this

initiative found that students in schools that fully implemented the programme reported higher levels of interpersonal harmony compared to other schools with similar characteristics (Covell, 2010). Restorative approaches to school discipline can also be a key component of CHRE to foster respect for others. These approaches engage children in dialogue, empowering them to resolve conflicts while ensuring fairness in the process (see, e.g. Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Hopkins, 2003).

Along with the age-based organisation of learning described above, the interactions at the core of CHRE similarly differ in different age groups. Brantefors et al. (2019) compared the CHRE teaching traditions at different levels of Swedish education. They found that children in early childhood education are expected to learn how to interact socially with their peers, whereas, in school, these social interactions support democratic living and citizenship skills (see also Brantefors et al., 2016).

### ***Shifting power dynamics between adults and children***

CHRE's emphasis on children's participation rights and agency (UNCRC, Article 12) implies that children are active learners who should share the power to make decisions concerning their learning and the school environment (Brantefors et al., 2016; Isenström, 2022; Reynaert et al., 2010). Therefore, CHRE programmes should provide meaningful opportunities for children to participate in decisions related to the school's technical core, such as student instruction, as well as in managerial issues, including setting school goals and codes of conduct, allocating budgets and hiring educators (Covell, 2010; Perry-Hazan & Somech, 2023).

This characteristic of CHRE locates the dialogue between students and teachers at the core of learning (Palau-Wolffe, 2016). However, student–teacher relationships highlight the complexities involved in CHRE learning processes, considering several studies indicating that teachers may perceive children's rights as an impingement of their authority and an unjustified politicisation of education and thus resist rights-based pedagogies (e.g. Howe & Covell, 2005; Isenström & Quennerstedt, 2020; Martínez-Bello et al., 2020). In some countries, teachers' resistance may also relate to the fact that teachers comprise a disempowered group subject to constant supervision (Perry-Hazan & Tal-Weibel, 2020; Santoro, 2018). Teacher resistance to student participation rights and their integration into CHRE may also stem from perceptions of adultism (see Nir & Perry-Hazan, 2016), which portray children as immature, incompetent and needing protection. Teachers' perceptions of children's rights and willingness to share their power with children may be challenging to alter. A study exploring how senior teachers learn about children's rights revealed that teachers applied their newly acquired knowledge and thinking frameworks to buttress their moral perceptions of how student rights are intertwined with student–teacher power relations (Perry-Hazan & Neuhof, 2021).

### ***CHRE and the school environment***

The individual and collective learning dynamics of CHRE in school transpire in diverse school environments that may support and facilitate their implementation and appropriation or hinder and prevent them. Thus, our conceptualisation of students' CHRE learning processes finally focuses on the school environment as the context in which the



learning occurs. The school environment provides unique physical, social, psychological and cultural elements directly impacting teaching practices and children's experiences and development. Two interrelated features of students' CHRE learning processes characterise this level of analysis. One pertains to the interactions between CHRE and the school as a system, necessitating whole-school approaches to CHRE. The other mirrors the first and highlights challenges relating to the gaps between CHRE aims and prevalent institutional practices that derogate students' rights and thus constrain children's ability to learn through their rights and to make sense of CHRE in the school environment and more broadly.

### ***CHRE as a comprehensive whole-school approach***

Research has shown that the experience of the actors involved in schools is interdependent with the complex system in which the school community fits as a whole. The 'school climate', as conceptualised by scholars (Lewno-Dumdie et al., 2020; Rudasill et al., 2018; Thapa et al., 2013), comprises the interpersonal relationships between all school actors (e.g. students, teachers, management staff and family), their feeling of safety (e.g. emotional climate, safety, rules, inclusion and well-being), the teaching and learning environment (e.g. teaching methods, programmes, academic orientation, and informal and extracurricular activities), the institutional physical and structural environment (e.g. buildings, classrooms and resources) and the socio-cultural environment (values and beliefs). All those components constitute a complex system where CHRE as an experience transpires. Studies showed that CHRE can positively support multiple aspects of the school climate and reciprocally give them meaning (Činčera et al., 2018; Jerome et al., 2015; Stavrou et al., 2022). Whereas some dimensions of the school climate are closely intertwined with students' CHRE learning processes, others are more specific to the broader context in which CHRE occurs.

Studies testify to the importance of thinking of the school environment as a whole for effective CHRE. Some of these studies showed that when CHRE is deployed comprehensively (whole-school approaches) – including increasing participation in decision-making within the school community – it can help alleviate social disadvantages and support positive attitudes towards inclusion and diversity within society (e.g. Covell et al., 2011; Hannam, 2011). Other studies focused on processes rather than impact (see Brantefors et al., 2016; Jerome et al., 2015), acknowledging that since CHRE is strongly intertwined with the school environment, assessing its impact or effectiveness requires considering various complementary dimensions. It thus remains a challenge to draw an explicit relationship between the positive attitudes of students towards inclusion and CHRE programmes (Covell & Howe, 2008; Sebba & Robinson, 2010) or even between what happens in and out of school regarding rights education or experiences (Quennerstedt, 2022).

### ***The challenges of CHRE meaning-making in the school environment***

The importance of whole-school CHRE approaches implies that the coherence between what is taught and the opportunities to exercise one's rights is crucial (see McCowan, 2012; Osler & Starkey, 2010). Children can learn more *about* their rights *through* everyday life practices in school than in specifically designed lessons or programmes, especially if teachers are insufficiently trained to teach about legal issues (Isenström &

Quennerstedt, 2020; see also Isenström, 2020; Rosenberg, 2022). Reynaert et al. (2010) highlighted that the linkage between CHRE and the social domain (mesosystem) in which children's rights are realised implies that CHRE only comes to life by meaning-making in context. Thus, they argued that CHRE should also aim to study and understand the conditions that impede rights and the social, economic, political and cultural structures that create these conditions (see Osler & Yahya, 2013). However, these goals are typically difficult to achieve in schools, where a culture of compliance, accountability and unshared power often underlies practices and policies, and children's rights are often viewed as linked to responsibilities, duties and conformity (McCowan, 2012; Waldron & Oberman, 2016).

Several examples manifest the potential gap between CHRE aims and common institutional practices in schools. One is school councils, which may facilitate developing and exercising students' advocacy knowledge and skills (Mallon & Martinez-Sainz, 2021). School councils are important institutional structures for CHRE as they fulfil the collective rights of groups of children to participate in decisions that affect them as a group (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, para. 9–10). Nonetheless, many barriers hinder student participation in school councils. These barriers may include educators' sub-conscious biases ascribing low value to children's opinions, their lack of training in facilitating student participation, their feeling of relinquishing control, and their perceptions of the councils as ineffective (Struthers, 2016; Wyse, 2001). Other barriers may relate to top-down structures that often mimic familiar political institutions, excluding students from disempowered or marginalised families (Finneran et al., 2023; McCluskey et al., 2013; Wyse, 2001). These barriers may generate negative images of the councils among students and deter their willingness to get involved in school and beyond (Alderson, 2000; McCluskey et al., 2013).

Similar dynamics can affect organisational practices, which, under the pretext of guaranteeing a safe school climate, have counterproductive, even penalising, effects on the fair expression of children's voices. Of note are disciplinary practices and school surveillance. Various scholars have argued that zero-tolerance discipline policies, which rely on strict rules and mandatory punitive consequences for certain acts, discriminate against marginalised and disempowered students and, paradoxically, increase misbehaviour and school violence (Gottfredson, 2001; Kupchik & Catlaw, 2015). These arguments align with studies showing that students perceive punitive school discipline policy that applies sanctions and rewards as unfair (e.g. Bracy, 2011; McCluskey et al., 2013). Students are particularly concerned about rules' inconsistent and discriminatory application (Bracy, 2011; McCluskey et al., 2013; Thornberg, 2008) and disregarding their voice in disciplinary procedures (Bracy, 2011; McCluskey et al., 2013). Despite evidence supporting the positive impact of rights-based participatory approaches to conflict resolution in education, such as restorative practices (e.g. Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Hopkins, 2003), zero-tolerance policies remain prevalent in schools.

A related practice that may violate student rights concerns trends of school surveillance, incorporating technological strategies such as CCTVs, biometric scanners and online monitoring, as well as searching practices (Deakin et al., 2018; Kupchik, 2016). The typical justification for implementing these measures alludes to external security threats (Hope, 2009; Perry-Hazan & Birnhack, 2018). However, in many cases, surveillance technologies installed for security are used to monitor and

investigate students' minor disciplinary violations (Hope, 2009; Perry-Hazan & Birnhack, 2018; Taylor, 2011). Some studies have raised concerns about how school surveillance undermines students' privacy (Perry-Hazan & Birnhack, 2018; Taylor, 2011; Warnick, 2007) and criminalises school discipline (Hope, 2009; Perry-Hazan & Birnhack, 2018). CHRE's approach to school surveillance entails balancing students' rights to protection and their rights to privacy, participation and due process (Birnhack & Perry-Hazan, 2018).

## Conclusion

A systemic analysis of students' CHRE learning processes in school environments yielded a conceptualisation organising the multiple dimensions at play. The first level of analysis focuses on the individual child as a learner. It suggests that students' CHRE learning processes (a) are embedded in the developmental specificities and capacities of children as well as their background; and (b) should be organised around child-centred content, aims and approaches. The second level highlights the prominent role of interactions and relationships in students' CHRE learning, suggesting that it (c) incorporates everyday interactive experiences and (d) shifts the power dynamics between adults and children. The third level underscores the importance of the school environment, acknowledging that CHRE and the school system are interdependent and thus (e) portrays students' CHRE learning processes as intertwined with comprehensive whole-school approaches and (f) emphasises the challenges that may limit children's ability to make sense of CHRE in the school context due to gaps between CHRE aims and prevalent institutional practices.

The prominent link in this systemic analysis of students' CHRE learning in school is children's participation rights (UNCRC, Article 12), which underscores how the child is not a passive being but an active agent in all bidirectional interactions that take place in his or her most immediate relationships and environment. These rights are central at all the levels explored here: developing child-centred content, aims and approaches for CHRE requires participatory pedagogies, relational learning of CHRE implies reducing power gaps between educators and students, and whole-school CHRE programmes should provide children with opportunities to take part in organisational decision making and influence them. This dominant role of participation rights in CHRE aligns with the fundamental role of these rights in interpreting and implementing all the other rights in the UNCRC (Hanson & Lundy, 2017; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). It also underscores the significance of analysing CHRE as a concept embedded in the children's rights discourse, which partly overlaps with HRE but also has distinct features.

Whereas some features of students' CHRE learning processes in school have been addressed in various studies, the current study is the first scholarly endeavour to integrate them into a conceptual framework and as a system of interrelated levels impacting how CHRE can be adapted to children as learners in school. This framework is anchored in children's rights and HRE narratives. It also relies on robust literature elucidating how children learn and should learn, including developmental studies, educational theories and research about school climate and administration. Thus, the conceptual framework offered may foster the elaboration of effective whole-

school approaches to CHRE, which consider the child's development, relationships and broader environment. It may also help educators make sense of CHRE, link it to their professional foundation of pedagogical knowledge, and ultimately improve their practices.

The study highlighted several research gaps, suggesting avenues for future research and intervention programmes. First, the developmental perspective underlying the understanding of the child as a learner of CHRE lacks sufficient empirical evidence, particularly for younger students, while also typically oversimplified and primarily focused on cognitive aspects. More attention to the social and emotional dimensions of learning and development, including moral development aspects, seems critical for better apprehending how children learn about their human rights. Child development knowledge is relevant both for determining what age is appropriate for CHRE and for guiding how to make it age-appropriate and setting forth a curriculum for rights learning. Second, whether the principles of transformational learning apply to child learners of CHRE remains open, and there needs to be more evidence of how to implement such approaches in classrooms for children. Third, while interactions and relationships are recognised as central to CHRE, little has been done to articulate this level with the more individual one. Learning pro-social behaviours and how to react to anti-social ones, in connection with developing legal skills, are research directions to be considered when studying CHRE or designing CHRE programmes. Finally, more systematic research is needed regarding how local contexts should be considered within students' CHRE learning processes, specifically if impact assessment is an aim.

A limitation of the offered framework to conceptualise students' CHRE learning processes is its reliance mostly on studies conducted by Western scholars in Western countries. The aim was to offer broad categories applicable to various contexts. However, this framework may lack cultural components embedded in diverse values, policies and practices. Thus, it is likely influenced by broader cultural dimensions relating to nationality, ethnicity and religion, among other factors. A prominent criticism of children's rights literature, particularly concerning participation rights, relates to the inclination to view children and childhood as a homogenous category based on Western and individualistic lenses (e.g. McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Perry-Hazan, 2021; Quennerstedt & Moody, 2020). Several studies have expressed the need to contextualise children's rights research and explore the complexities of implementing children's rights within collective cultures, which use diverse cultural frames to interpret rights (e.g. Duramy & Gal, 2020; Liebel, 2012). Thus, further study is needed to expand cultural understanding of CHRE and children's rights in school environments.

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## Data availability statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

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