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The Aims of Education and Initial Teachers' Education: A Rights-Based Comparative Study of Five Countries

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Abstract

A qualitative direct content analysis is used to explore how Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), is embedded into the national educational policy of five countries (Iceland, Ireland, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland) by how it is addressed in their respective Initial Teacher Education (ITE) curriculum. The study analysed documents at the national, programme and course levels. Findings from this cross-country comparison suggest the five aims of Article 29 are addressed to varying degrees but all to an extent that fails to do justice to the legal and moral commitment required of parties to the CRC. With this study, we argue that the responsibility to fulfil the legal obligations for the aims of education should be addressed at the structural and institutional levels in national and university guidelines.

Keywords

right to education – educational policy – cross-country comparison – rights-respecting education – teacher training – Convention of the Rights of the Child

1 Introduction

This comparative study applies a rights perspective to investigate how teacher education programmes in five European countries (Iceland, Ireland, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland) address the educational aims outlined in Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; United Nations 1989). The research question that guides the study is: To what extent and how are the aims of education embedded in Article 29 of the CRC addressed and translated in Initial Teacher Education across the five countries? The study is based on the premise that the CRC is the most widely known and legally enforceable framework. All five countries are party to the CRC; however, only Iceland and Sweden have incorporated the CRC into domestic law. Hence, the difference for these countries lies in that ratification creates international obligations for the state but does not necessarily confer enforceable domestic rights upon individuals. Incorporation, by contrast, grants the Convention direct effect within the national legal order. Within the field of educational rights, there is an ongoing debate about how children's human rights are understood: as a separate set of rights granted to children, or

as part of the broader human rights framework, taking into account children's special circumstances and contexts (Quennerstedt 2022). These debates illustrate the distinctly differing discourses concerning the child as a rights-holder. Recently, there have been signs of bridging the gap between the differing views (Quennerstedt 2022), with the concept of children's human rights education (CHRE) being used more frequently. As the authors of this article are part of the international CHRE-network, this article builds upon previous work completed by the network (Gillett-Swan et al. 2025; Moody et al. 2024, 2025; Quennerstedt et al. 2025). Consequently, CHR(E) will be the concept used in this article.

Children's human rights present a complex challenge for schools. National direction in curricula is often lacking (Bron and Thijs 2011; Leung et al. 2011) and research indicates that teachers report lacking sufficient knowledge about children's human rights (Lundy and Martínez Sainz 2018; Gollifer 2022). The importance of adequate teacher education in children's rights is highlighted by Jerome et al. (2015). Their comparative study of 26 countries underscores the significant role of teacher preparation in implementing rights education, identifying teacher training as the most critical area for action. Their study also reveals that the majority of countries surveyed do not provide universal and comprehensive training for all teachers on the CRC.

An analysis of Swiss curricular frameworks (Moody 2021) highlights that curricula often provide narrow, knowledge-based aims without addressing the methodological conditions necessary for culturally-responsive and rights-infused teaching. While ready-to-use materials are appreciated by teachers, they tend to focus on teaching about rights rather than fostering a global, cross-curricular approach. This limitation restricts equitable access to meaningful and inclusive educational practices. The implementation of Article 29 – including 'the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms or more broadly the values underpinning a human rights culture (equality, tolerance, and cultural diversity) – depends significantly on teachers' goodwill and training' (Moody 2021, 204). In Ireland, the implementation of Article 29 has been highlighted as an opportunity to incorporate children's human rights further, building upon previous changes in the curriculum and provisions in teacher education to develop new alternatives and possibilities in the future (Mallon and Martinez Sainz 2021).

A study in Sweden examined how children's rights are presented in educational plans and syllabi for teacher education. The results showed that national regulations influence educational plans to emphasise skills, abilities, and values related to human rights, but not knowledge and understanding (Olsson 2020). The study revealed gaps in translating these plans into

concrete course content, with children's rights often becoming vague or disappearing entirely from syllabi. Consequently, the omission of knowledge and understanding leaves out one of the three competency areas required for a comprehensive education on human rights as outlined in the United Nations action programme (Bajaj 2017). This also elucidates how children's human rights education takes on different emphases in different contexts.

The aforementioned comparative study by Jerome et al. (2015) focused on three key questions: To what extent are countries with a National Committee presence implementing children's rights education (CRE)? Where CRE implementation is advanced, what factors have supported this process? Where CRE implementation is not advanced, what factors are hindering implementation? To our knowledge, there has been no research on how the aims of education outlined in Article 29 are handled in teacher education. So, in this study, we start "from scratch" by aiming to elucidate to what extent and how the aims of education expressed in Article 29 of the CRC are addressed in Initial Teacher Education across five countries. This current study takes a focused approach, examining how teacher education prepares student teachers to implement the obligations stipulated by the CRC. Article 29 of the Convention outlines five key educational aims: (a) the personal development of the child, (b) respect for human rights, (c) cultural identity, (d) preparation for a responsible life, and (e) respect for the environment. These aims serve as a framework for analysing educational curricula for initial teacher education, providing the basis for the present study. By comparing five countries, we can identify similarities and differences, thereby learning from one another and advancing teacher education in this area.

The literature review that follows presents the roles teachers and teacher education play in fulfilling the aims of education stated in the CRC, as well as the influence of culture and dominant national discourse. We start with a focus on Article 29 of the CRC and its incorporation into Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and then present the methodology. The findings section follows and includes both quantitative and qualitative findings, with the latter organised under each of the five aims. The paper concludes with a discussion and concluding remarks.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *Educational Rights and the Aims of Education in the CRC*

Educational rights, including access to education, a rights-respecting education, participation in educational decision-making, and human rights

education, are captured in various articles of the CRC. Article 12, for example, guarantees children's participation in education as it focuses on their right to form and express their views on matters that affect them, including education. Article 28 establishes the child's right to education, while Article 29 defines the aims of education and specifies the kind of education children have the right to access that supports their development and strengthens respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the environment. This type of education has been characterised as child-centred, child-friendly and empowering (UN 2001). Children's right to human rights education is asserted as one of the key aims of education. Article 42 of the CRC emphasises the responsibility of States to ensure children's human rights are widely known to adults and children alike.

Although the interconnectedness and interdependence of human rights are acknowledged, this study focuses primarily on the aims of education as expressed in Article 29 of the CRC. Firstly, this article emphasises that education should support the holistic development of the child's personality, talents, and intellectual and physical abilities, enabling them to reach their fullest potential. Secondly, it highlights the importance of fostering respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. The third aim underlines the need to cultivate respect for the child's parents, cultural identity, language, and values, as well as for the national values of both the country in which the child resides and their country of origin, while also promoting an appreciation for cultures different from their own. Closely linked to this, the fourth aim stresses the preparation of children for a responsible life in a free society, grounded in understanding, peace, tolerance, gender equality, and friendship among all peoples, including different ethnic, national, and religious groups, which includes indigenous communities. Lastly, the article asserts the importance of instilling respect for the natural environment.

Article 29 has been described as both visionary and ambitious in setting out a comprehensive framework for children's education rights, but also as under-researched and difficult to translate into practice (Gillett-Swan et al. 2021). In many contexts, its broad and aspirational wording risks being overlooked or interpreted only superficially. Moody (2021) has argued that Article 29 takes a declarative approach to human rights education, focusing primarily on the transmission of knowledge and "respect" rather than fostering deeper engagement, and it provides little guidance on how to be operationalised in educational contexts. However, as Gerber (2017) and l'Anson (2021) highlight, General Comment No. 1 of the CRC (United Nations 2001) articulates a rights-inflected vision of education that extends beyond a declarative approach. It

presents education as a “holistic” and “child-centred” process, emphasising the development of critical thinking, ethical capacities, and decision-making skills. The intention of the study is not to problematise the content presented under Article 29. The objective is to analyse how the national educational policies of five countries and their respective initial teacher education descriptions reflect the five aims of education contained in Article 29. In addition, the study examines the historical, cultural and political influences on how the aims of education outlined in Article 29 are understood and interpreted in different country contexts.

2.2 *Incorporating Article 29 into Initial Teacher Education*

As stated, Article 29 of the CRC defines the five key aims of education: personal development, development of respect for human rights, cultural identity, preparation for a responsible life and respect for the environment. Research indicates that responsibility for the incorporation of the CRC into initial teacher education or securing that teacher training prepares teachers to incorporate the aims stated under Article 29 in their practice lies particularly with individual teacher educators rather than institutions, as a result of a lack of emphasis on children’s human rights across teacher education (Burridge et al. 2013; Gollifer 2022; Olsson 2020; Rinaldi 2017; Struthers 2017). Struthers (2017), for example, draws on extensive empirical data on teaching human rights in primary schools in England to call for improved teacher education that equips teachers with appropriate human rights knowledge and skills.

Whether children’s rights are fully granted and exercised depends largely on the translation of international policy and law into children’s reality and this is done through the actions taken by national governments (Lundy et al. 2013). Incorporation of the CRC into domestic laws and legal instruments in different jurisdictions has gained significant prominence (Lundy et al. 2013; Kilkelly and Liefaard 2019; Hoffman and Stern 2020; McCall-Smith 2021); however, other non-legal processes of incorporation of the CRC remain largely unexplored, including educational policy and how it could effectively support children’s human rights. In previous studies, P’Anson et al. (2017) and Robinson et al. (2020) explore how the CRC, as a legal text, is translated into national policy and subsequently into educational practice. The authors claim that before reaching professional practice with children, the CRC undergoes multiple translations, with each level of translation potentially creating a distance from the original intentions. They argue that when actors claim to enact and engage with articles from the CRC, they may not realise or acknowledge that it is actually a translation, influenced by biases and/or partial knowledge of the article they are enacting, which can be closer to or further

from the initial intentions. Consequently, professional work with children guided by the CRC will vary across contexts, depending on what influenced the translations at different stages. This understanding resonates with socio-legal approaches to children's rights that conceptualise rights as "living rights" that are socially embedded and enacted practices shaped through local interpretations (Hanson and Nieuwenhuys 2013).

Montà et al. (2025) recognise how different contexts influence how children's rights are understood. They discuss how conventional paradigms have been treating children's rights, as formulated in the CRC, as a universal set of objectives applicable in any context. However, when exploring how democracy is described in relation to children's rights and education in Sweden and Italy, the authors found that a cultural contextual understanding is crucial to comprehend how articles in the Convention are implemented and enacted in educational practice. In Swiss curricula, CHRE is not explicitly mentioned; instead, the terms "citizenship education" or, in the German-speaking part, "political and democratic education" are used, as citizenship education cannot easily be translated into German (Rinaldi et al. 2020). This translation issue leads to differing emphases, with a more critical and conceptualised framing of rights and related cognitive abilities in the Swiss German curriculum (e.g. pupils are expected to reflect on 'the relationship between power and law'), and a more exercise-oriented approach in the Swiss French and Italian curricula, allowing space for the development of rights-related behaviours (e.g. pupils are expected to engage in exercising democracy through class rules). I'Anson (2021) examines how Article 29 is translated into the Scottish educational context, primarily through policies that integrate children's rights within a broader health and wellbeing framework. While this approach provides a structured way to address children's needs, he highlights that it tends to sideline key educational dimensions, particularly the development of critical and experimental capacities essential for a comprehensive rights-based education.

3 Methodology

In this article, we explore the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) curriculum, which is a Higher Education degree, across the five countries leading to a qualification to teach in primary schools. We compare teacher education documents from these five countries, which have different educational systems, selecting those that train teachers for primary students to ensure comparability, as training structures vary before or after this stage (e.g., in

Sweden). Despite differences, all selected programmes prepare teachers for general primary education. A number of common components are similar across the five countries, including programme structure, qualification, foundational subjects, practice or placement in schools, and the option to specialise in specific subjects/areas. These commonalities are summarised in Table 1.

Each country has national guidelines with varying levels of detail; for example, Sweden provides very specific guidelines in terms of content, whereas Iceland, Ireland and Poland offer standards regarding content, competencies or approaches. In contrast, Switzerland's framework focuses solely on the structure and organisation of teacher training. Overall, ITE providers have significant autonomy regarding syllabi and curricula and how the national guidelines are interpreted.

Rather than assuming linear stages of incorporation of the CRC as the ones suggested in policy borrowing frameworks (Phillips and Ochs 2004), we recognise the dynamic process of implementation, recontextualisation, and translation into different national contexts. We apply a multi-layered curriculum-making framework (Priestley et al. 2021) to examine the content selection, organisation, and structure through which CRC Article 29 is embedded in ITE, as shown in Table 2.

Priestley et al. (2021) argue that, rather than operating at fixed levels, curricula are created across different sites of social activity, with movement between these sites. This perspective enables consideration of the possible interactions between these sites that influence how children's rights are incorporated into policies, processes, and ultimately pedagogical practices.

The research question that guides the study is: To what extent and how are the aims of education embedded in Article 29 of the CRC addressed and translated in Initial Teacher Education across the five countries?

3.1 *Methods*

The data for this comparative study comprise policy documents for teacher education from five countries: Iceland, Ireland, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. These five countries were selected based on the authors' involvement in the CHRE-network, which supported members to conduct collaborative transnational research on CHRE. The countries included share certain similarities in their teacher education systems, while also representing distinct national and cultural contexts. A limitation, however, is that all cases are drawn exclusively from European countries; had other regional contexts been included, the findings might have differed. Still, the countries included in the study give a clear indication of the state of CHRE in the European context.

TABLE 1 Overview of ITE in the five countries

	Iceland	Ireland	Poland	Sweden	Switzerland
Duration	5 years	4 years	4-5-5 years	4 years	3 years
Qualification	Bachelor and Masters	Bachelor	Masters	Masters	Bachelor
Provider	Universities	Universities and Teacher College	Universities	Universities	Universities of teacher education
Students' age group	6-12 years old	4-12 years old	3-10 years old	6-9 or 10-13 years old	(4 or) 6-12 years old
Placement or teaching practice	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Specialisations	Possible (depending on University)	Possible (depending on Programme and University)	Possible (depends on University)	Possible (depending on Programme and age-group).	Choice between some courses

TABLE 2 Analytical framework

Site of activity ^a	Focus of analysis	Policy document
Supra	Transnational discourses and frameworks	CRC Article 29
Macro	National policy frameworks, guidance and support for curriculum-making.	Initial Teacher Education Guidelines, Regulations and Frameworks
Meso	Programme design, content and outcomes.	Initial Teacher Education Curriculum

^aIn our analysis, we draw on Priestley et al.'s (2021) conceptualisation of *sites of activity* within curriculum making. While we adopt this theoretical understanding, we use the more commonly employed term "levels" when describing the specific sites of activity examined in the study. This enables us to retain the analytical value of the original concept while enhancing clarity and accessibility for the reader.

Building upon contemporary approaches to comparing curriculum-making across diverse contexts (Priestley et al. 2021), the study recognises the multiple layers and various practices which inform and shape national curricula.

By looking at ITE curricula it is possible to identify the knowledge base and skills provided to teachers on children's human rights. Only policy documents that explicitly address the content or approach for ITE were included in the qualitative direct content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). The selection process of the programmes in specific countries was a combination of accessibility and geographical sampling, and in some cases, the number of students admitted to a programme (with priority given to the largest teacher education institutions). Four universities were chosen in each country, except for Iceland, where the small size of the country necessitated a different approach and only two universities were selected. The decision to limit the sample to four universities in the four larger countries was made to avoid creating a dataset that would be disproportionately large relative to that of Iceland. A larger dataset might have produced slightly different results; however, given that teacher education in all participating countries is governed by national policy frameworks, it is reasonable to assume that variations between universities within each country are not substantial. Moreover, the inclusion of four universities per country generated a considerable volume of data (see Table 3). To ensure the dataset remained analytically manageable,

four universities were deemed sufficient to capture meaningful variation while keeping the overall data volume manageable.

The policy documents sought online were categorised into different levels:

- Supra: CRC
- Macro: State legislation regulating teacher education, such as national guidelines and regulations.
- Meso-I: University programme descriptions, educational plans, and educational objectives.
- Meso-II: Teacher training modules or courses (mandatory and elective).

Table 3 shows the number of documents for each country and level that were analysed. The national documents are from 2019 to 2023. One Swiss document from 1995 refers to the “Recommendations on Teacher Education and Universities of Teacher Education” which have not been revised since its adoption and therefore remain a reference framework for teacher education at the national level. For the meso-I and meso-II levels, the documents are from the 2024–2025 academic year, except for Iceland. The researcher focusing on Iceland joined the project a year later than the other four researchers. As such, it was decided to look at the current academic year instead of the 2024–2025 academic year to facilitate follow up research.

Since the documents were written in the respective languages of each country, they were analysed by researchers from those countries. In cases where policy documents had official English translations, these documents were used for the analysis. Each researcher identified distinctive themes or conclusions, which were discussed among the researchers in several rounds. When agreeing on comparable themes, these formed the basis for comparisons across the different countries.

Article 29 takes a declarative approach to human rights education (Moody 2021), primarily emphasising the transmission of knowledge and “respect” without necessarily encouraging a deeper interpretation of its principles. This limitation suggests that a strictly textual reading may overlook key dimensions essential to understanding the broader objectives of the Convention. To address this, our study adopts a dual approach, combining explicit coding of the aims present in the text with a more interpretative analysis. Expansive coding refers to synonyms for the explicit codes; the implicit coding captures expressions in line with the spirit of Article 29. This allows us not only to identify what is stated but also to explore how certain dimensions can be understood within the broader spirit of the Convention.

The data was analysed using a qualitative content analysis. Direct content analysis employs predefined codes (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). In this study, a coding schema was developed based on Article 29 of the Convention on the

TABLE 3 Number of documents analysed for each country

	Iceland	Ireland	Poland	Sweden	Switzerland
Macro (national)	2	2	1	2	3
Meso-I (university/ programme)	5	4	4	7	8
Meso-II (course/ unit)	201 (47+154)	196 (57+38+44+57)	395 (154+87+69+85)	158 (34+30+40+54)	894 (149+444+35+266)

Rights of the Child, with the main codes being: a) personal development, b) respect for human rights, c) cultural identity, d) preparation for responsible life, and e) respect for the environment. Each main code had further subcodes derived from the Article 29 text. To analyse how Article 29 is reflected in teacher education documents across five countries, we employed a structured coding calibration process. Our approach consisted of three levels of coding:

- The literal coding framework focused on the exact wording of the Convention text in each language, ensuring a direct textual analysis.
- The expansive coding framework incorporated synonymous terms and variations used in each national context, allowing for the development of a country-specific codebook with relevant examples (examples in Table 4).

The implicit coding framework captured concepts aligned with the spirit of Article 29 but not explicitly mentioned; these were expressions that may vary over time and across contexts. For example, notions of consent were coded as an implicit expression of Preparation for Responsible life. Equally, notions of climate crisis were coded as implicit expressions of Respect for the Environment. The implicit codes are also relevant to the country contexts. For example, cultural identity in a relatively homogeneous country such as Poland is represented by social-class identity, whereas in a more diverse-oriented country such as Sweden, cultural diversity is used. Similarly, the value base was coded as respect for human rights, as both the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) and the Swedish Education Act stipulate that the value base of the education system is grounded in democratic values and human rights (examples in Table 5).

The coding for each country was conducted using logical (Atlas.ti, NVivo, MAXQDA) or manually where codes were systematically organised according to the five key aims of Article 29, integrating both explicit (literal) and

TABLE 4 Examples of literal codes and expansive codes meant as synonymous terms and variations

Exact wording of the Convention	Expansive codes (synonymous terms)
Mental abilities	Intellectual/cognitive abilities, dispositions, capacities, faculties
Respect for the child's parents, his or her own language	Plurilingualism, plurilingual, multilingual

TABLE 5 Examples of explicit and implicit levels of coding

Explicit codes (exact wording of the Convention)	Implicit codes
Fullest potential	Holistic development: Holistic, integral, global Flourishment, flourish, successful, thriving, wellbeing, feeling good
Respect for human rights	Value-based (e.g., Sweden, Iceland) Children's rights to participation Children's rights to express their views References to the National Curriculum Guides (Iceland)
Respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity	Experiences of migration, refugee or asylum seeking References to the values, traditions, language, and practices that shape an individual's or a group's sense of belonging within a specific culture or society References to engagement with parents
Respect for the natural environment	Climate change/crisis References to the National Curriculum Guides (Iceland)

expansive (synonym-based) coding, as well as implicit interpretations to capture broader conceptual translations of the text.

To ensure comparability across the five countries, we expressed the results primarily as percentages rather than raw counts. The overall number of codes varies significantly between countries and levels, partly because some policy documents are much more detailed than others. If only absolute numbers had been used, countries with longer or denser documents would have automatically appeared to give more attention to certain dimensions. By

converting the counts into percentages, we normalise the data and highlight the relative weight of each dimension within a given country and level. Still, to ensure transparency, we present, within parentheses, the total number of coded references in Graphics 1, 2, and 3. The calculation was straightforward: the number of occurrences of a given dimension (explicit or implicit) was divided by the total number of occurrences across all five dimensions for that country and level. As a result, the percentages always add up to 100 per cent per country and per level.

4 Findings

The findings are presented in two complementary steps. We begin with a quantitative overview of how references to the five aims of Article 29 are distributed across countries and across the national, programme, and course levels. We then turn to a qualitative analysis of each dimension, examining how these aims are framed and interpreted within the documents. Together, these two strands provide the basis for the subsequent discussion, in which we integrate quantitative patterns and qualitative insights.

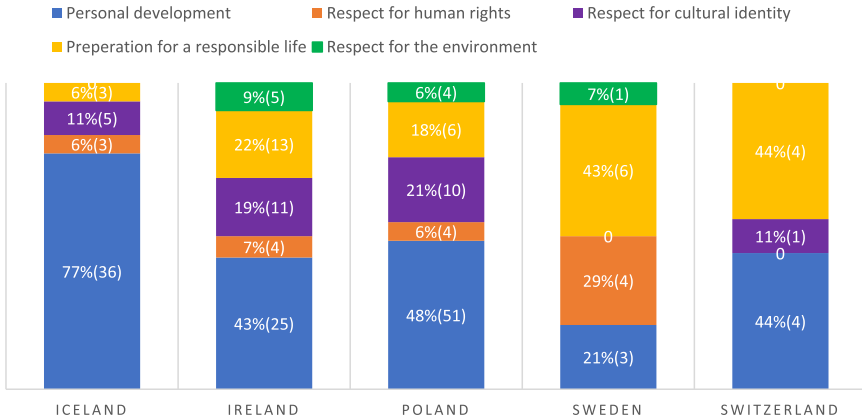
4.1 *Quantitative Findings*

Graphics 1, 2, and 3 present the proportions of references to the aims of Art. 29 across the five countries studied and at each of the three levels of analysis (national, programme, and course).

Personal development is by far the most dominant dimension but predominantly appearing as an implicit code. Human rights remain marginal overall, with only one clear emphasis in Sweden. Cultural identity is more secondary, but still present, especially in Ireland and in Poland. Preparation for a responsible life is more strongly affirmed in Sweden and in Switzerland. Finally, the environment is almost absent across all contexts, with minimal references in Ireland, Poland and Sweden.

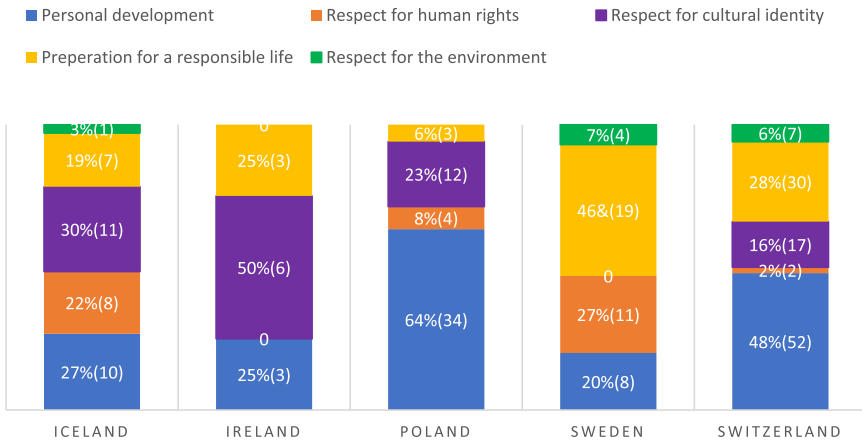
At the programme level, the picture differs slightly from that at the national level. Personal development remains important across all countries. Human rights increase most in Iceland, and to a lesser extent in Poland and Switzerland, while they remain at approximately the same level in Sweden. However, human rights are absent from the Irish documents at the programme level. Cultural identity is particularly strong in Ireland, while it remains secondary in the other countries. Preparation for a responsible life is most evident in Sweden. Finally, the environment appears only marginally, with small percentages in Iceland, Sweden and Switzerland.

NATIONAL (LEVEL I)



GRAPHIC 1 National level – percentage of coded references and in parentheses, the total number of references.

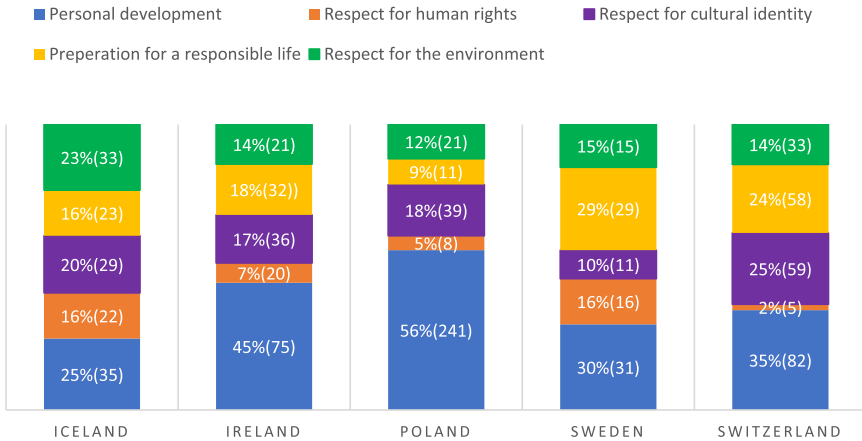
PROGRAMME (LEVEL II)



GRAPHIC 2 Programme level – percentage of coded references and in parentheses, the total number of references.

At the course level, the distribution is more balanced, and we see some new trends emerging. Personal development continues to dominate. Human rights remain low overall, though Iceland and Sweden show higher proportions. Cultural identity is clearly visible across all countries. Preparation for a

COURSE (LEVEL III)



GRAPHIC 3 Course level – percentage of coded references and in parentheses, the total number of courses in which the aims appear.

responsible life is present everywhere, especially in Sweden and Switzerland. And finally, the environment gains greater visibility at this level in each country than at the national and university levels. While the proportional distributions presented in Graphic 3 show the relative importance of each Article 29 dimension within countries, Table 6 highlights the actual number of course units in which these aims appear. Across all five countries, the figures show that Article 29 is reflected in only a very small fraction of the total courses offered. For example, in Switzerland, only five of 894 units include references to respect for human rights (see Table 3). This structural scarcity reveals that children’s rights education occupies a marginal position within initial teacher education, despite the breadth of the curricula analysed.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

4.2.1 Personal Development (a)

A first striking result is that personal development is the most salient dimension across countries. It appears consistently at all three levels and is particularly prominent in the implicit codes. Implicitly, two main framings emerge across countries. In Iceland and Ireland, child wellbeing is a central concern, appearing in policy texts and course descriptions. In both contexts, pupils’ well-being is presented as a key responsibility of teachers, encompassing children’s physical, emotional, and intellectual growth. In Ireland and Sweden, implicit references also emphasise holistic development more

TABLE 6 Number of course units in which each Article 29 dimension appears, per country

	Iceland	Ireland	Poland	Sweden	Switzerland
Total of courses/units analysed	201	196	395	158	894
Personal development	35	75	241	31	82
Respect for human rights	22	20	8	16	5
Respect for cultural identity	29	36	39	11	59
Preparation for a responsible life	23	32	11	29	58
Respect for the environment	33	21	21	15	33

broadly, including identity and relationships. In Iceland, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland, personal development is very often associated with inclusion and differentiated teaching approaches. These references stress the need to recognise and respond to students' diverse abilities, needs, and circumstances, and to ensure that all learners can develop to their fullest potential.

By contrast, explicit references to personal development, in terms of the exact wording of the Convention (example in Table 5), are much less frequent than the above-mentioned implicit wording and are often absent. In Sweden and Switzerland, explicit mentions are almost non-existent across all levels, while in Iceland and Ireland they only appear at the national level, with almost no presence at the institutional or course levels. Explicitly, references to personal development are primarily linked to children's talents and abilities, in line with the wording of Article 29. These often emphasise physical and cognitive skills and, through our expansive coding, also socio-emotional skills. Such references appear across all five countries, although they remain sparse and unsystematic. Poland stands out as an exception, where explicit references are not only frequent but also more detailed. Policy and curricular documents explicitly highlight children's specific domains of ability, including mathematical, musical, and artistic capacities, in addition to more general references to physical and cognitive development.

In all five countries, personal development is primarily articulated through implicit references such as wellbeing, holistic growth, and inclusive practices.

Explicit references to this aim are limited and rarely draw directly on the CRC's terminology. Overall, the dimension appears embedded in broader pedagogical narratives rather than in explicit rights-based language.

4.2.2 Respect for Human Rights (b)

According to Article 29, education should aim at 'the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations'. The explicit intention to develop teachers' competence to promote learning about human rights to foster human rights principles and support fundamental freedoms is not commonplace. There are, however, interesting differences in the way this aim of education is addressed in the five country contexts. Sweden records the largest proportion of explicit codes at the national level, with notably more than Iceland, Ireland and Poland. Switzerland, meanwhile, makes no reference to respect for human rights at this level. At the programme level, Iceland and Sweden have the greatest proportion of codes, followed by Poland and Switzerland. Ireland has no codes at this level. Both Ireland and Iceland note that although there are multiple references to "rights" in the documents at the national and programme levels, these tend to be related to students' rights in schools, including references to the rights of teachers, with a focus on responsibilities and obligations rather than children's human rights. At the course level, Iceland and Sweden include a similar proportion of references to respect for human rights. Ireland has a smaller proportion of codes at this level, with Poland and Switzerland containing even less still. Implicit codes are higher at the course level in Iceland and Ireland, while combined codes are lowest in Switzerland.

Sweden's codes suggest an emphasis on human rights competence, understood as a combination of knowledge, skills/attitudes, and action-oriented responses. Iceland, Switzerland and Poland codes emphasise knowledge and skills/attitudes more than action-oriented responses. Ireland codes suggest that importance is placed on knowledge of human rights, with less attention paid to human rights as rights-respecting pedagogy or in the context of action-oriented responses. Sweden and Iceland have a comparatively higher number of explicit and expansive codes, as well as implicit codes that include references to democracy and equality, which are more common. The higher number of codes for Iceland at the programme level can be explained by implicit codes related to policy, legislation and regulations addressing human rights. Iceland and Ireland have higher codes for this aim within specialisation courses. For example, in the Icelandic context, this includes courses addressing gender and sexuality while in Ireland, this is evident in courses on

social, personal and health education; geography and history; global citizenship education and sustainability education.

Overall, explicit and implicit references to respect for human rights are relatively low across all five countries. There are significant differences among the three levels of analysis regarding explicit and implicit coding and the understanding of human rights as an aspect of learning. While in some countries the aim is included as an action-oriented competence and/or as the development of related knowledge/skills/attitudes, in one country (Poland) human rights as an approach to teaching draws less attention. At the course description level and in two countries (Sweden and Iceland), respect for human rights appears more frequently in specialisation than in compulsory courses.

4.2.3 Respect for Cultural Identity (c)

The most common references to respect for cultural identity are multiculturalism (across all countries) and multilingualism (across all countries except Ireland). The least common and unique aspects from different countries are: respect for indigenous peoples in relation to Sami people (Sweden), religious values and the need to prepare teachers to teach in different institutions with different religious patronages (Ireland), to prepare teachers for work with children with refugee experience (Poland), the preparation of teachers to work with children with migration experience (Switzerland, Poland).

It is worth noting certain differences between countries regarding the above findings, which are particularly interesting with respect to religious values. In Switzerland, the term “religious diversity” appears, but it is generally associated with cultural diversity, which future teachers should be prepared to deal with. Sweden and Iceland do not emphasise the term religious diversity in any of the analysed documents and study programmes focus mainly on linguistic diversity, but respect for religious diversity is visible and present. Regarding Poland, religious values do not appear either in relation to their variety or to the Roman Catholic religion as it is in Irish programmes. However, children in early school and preschool education learn about different religions (or rather, faiths) during the holiday season, and the knowledge they gain applies to customs in different countries. The Polish documents discuss shaping the right attitude towards other cultures in students, and children should learn about different customs. However, in practice, it is not uncommon for school textbooks to present only one religion and one denomination, regardless of the denomination of the students in a given class. It is still happening despite religion being a separate subject in the Polish

education system, and teaching it requires completing theological studies and obtaining a canonical mission to teach it. The situation is different in Ireland, where 90 per cent of schools are religious, so when preparing to become teachers, students acquire not so much knowledge about how holidays are celebrated in different countries, but rather knowledge related to religion, for example, about the sacraments. In other words, future teachers are prepared to teach religion in schools and work in religious schools.

Documents in all countries refer to respect for the culture of children from other countries, although in documents from Ireland and Iceland, this aspect is not as clearly emphasised as in the other countries. These two countries' documents state that teachers should prepare students to respect national values. In Poland, a national-oriented country however, patriotic education and national identity references appear through lessons about folk dances and rituals as well as the knowledge about the role of holidays. The national and course levels also mention national heritage, although this aspect refers to music classes as being culture-forming, and thereby as a means of protecting national heritage. In the case of Poland, which is a bit surprising, documents explicitly state that intercultural competences of teachers are necessary to build appropriate attitudes in pupils towards other cultures. Swedish documents underscore the need to prepare student teachers to support pupils' competences, i.e., to reflect on communication in relation to identity and multiculturalism, and Switzerland explicitly frames respect for other nations' cultures around the recognition and valuing of students' diverse cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds.

Respect for cultural identity is present in the documents of all five countries. However, there is a difference regarding content, and the analysed documents reflect specific contexts for each country with some disparities in terms of the depth of the topic addressed: from emphasising religion (Ireland) to simple school subjects that may not apply to life in an increasingly changing world (Poland), to immersing students in values that foster a genuine atmosphere of respect for their own culture and that of others (Iceland, Sweden, Switzerland).

4.2.4 Preparation for a Responsible Life (d)

According to Article 29, education should aim at –

the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.

This is addressed on most levels of analysis in all countries. Poland is the country that addresses this aim least at the programme and course levels, with few writings, little variation, and vague expressions. Expressions relating to democracy and non-discrimination are found in documents from all countries except Poland. Still, Poland uses expressions such as pro-civic and pro-social attitudes, however, with no further explanation, which makes it difficult to understand what these concepts encompass. Switzerland, on the contrary, is the country with the most varied expressions in the documents for this aim, and on all levels. However, non-discrimination and the fostering of inclusive attitudes and respect for diversity are primarily evident in the analysed documents. Additionally, Irish documents place a strong emphasis on diversity, peace, tolerance, and equity, both as content and values for pedagogic practice. In the Swedish documents, expressions of democracy and equality between the sexes stand out across all levels. This is further expressed as the foundational values for arranging schooling and teaching. In Iceland, democracy and equality are represented in national- and course-level documents. Other values important for teachers to work with in helping students develop are national social values, ethics, Icelandic culture, and legislation. However, pluralism and relations between individuals and groups are also mentioned.

To prepare children for a responsible life, all countries (except Iceland) express the importance of conflict resolution. In Irish and Swedish documents, it is related to a pedagogic strategy, whereas in the other countries' documents, it is not as clearly expressed. The Icelandic documents have expressions about bullying, however, not with an explicit focus on conflict-solving strategies.

In the Polish, Icelandic and Swiss documents, expressions of aims for teacher education are found to prepare teachers to support children's development of being responsible in the digital world.

As a condensed result of the preparation for a responsible life, Swedish and Icelandic documents share a similar focus on democracy and equality. Swedish documents put even more emphasis on equality of sexes, whereas in Irish and Swiss documents, non-discrimination, diversity, and inclusive attitudes are prominent.

4.2.5 Respect for the Environment (e)

The development of respect for the natural environment was the dimension with the least explicit references at the National level documents across five countries. Poland and Sweden's national documents explicitly mention this aim, while in Ireland, only implicit references were found. Particularly

contrasting is the case of Iceland, where no references, implicit or explicit, were identified despite the introduction of compulsory sustainability education courses in ITE. At programme level, references were also scarce across five countries for this educational aim, with most of the references to respect for the environment found at course level.

Across the five countries, there were consistent references both implicit and explicit to the environment, sustainability, and nature; however, the frequency and prevalence, as well as the emphasis given by each country, varied. In Iceland, for example, the majority of the references at the course level were under specialisations of Outdoor learning and Arts and Technical Subjects. In Ireland, respect for the environment was evident only in courses preparing teachers to teach specific subjects, such as Geography, Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), although some connections to Mathematics and the Arts were mentioned. Similarly, in Sweden, references for this dimension are mostly about sustainable development and putting a sustainable perspective on other topics, with only a few explicit expressions about students developing an understanding of ecosystems and biodiversity. In Switzerland, references to this dimension also primarily focus on sustainable development and are integrated into various disciplines, including sports, the humanities, the arts, and health education. In Poland, references emphasised the aim of environmental education in the development of pro-ecological attitudes and the skills to protect and care for the natural environment. Across the five countries, there were prominent references to outdoor or outside learning, especially found in Iceland, Ireland and Poland; and experiential learning in nature for Sweden and Switzerland, as relevant pedagogical approaches in initial teacher education.

These findings suggest that across five countries, there is a bottom-up approach to incorporate respect for the natural environment as part of ITE, either as part of specific subjects or as a pedagogical strategy. This challenges existing assumptions about how global agendas, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), permeate into school classrooms but also highlights the disconnect between policy documents and guidelines and practices in ITE where the increased awareness about the connection between sustainability and education was evident, as well as the urgency to teach how better to protect and respect the natural environment.

5 Discussion

We have so far presented our findings in response to the question: To what extent and how are the aims of education embedded in Article 29 of the CRC addressed and translated in Initial Teacher Education across the five countries? Analysing whether countries fulfil their legal responsibilities as outlined in Article 29 is a central question and the answer involves understanding what importance countries attribute to this legal document. Article 29 has a specific role, as the right to education is a right on its own; however, education is also vital for understanding and being able to exercise other rights. As parties to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and with two countries having incorporated the Convention into their domestic law, the countries in this study have legal obligations to adhere to the directives outlined in the document. Article 29 sets out the aims of education and identifies five central aims, which states have a legal responsibility to respond to. Teachers are central to the education taking place in classrooms, both in terms of content and methods. The policy documents are the guidelines; however, teachers will interpret these and enact the education in accordance with their understanding of the policy documents and their competence in applying the guidelines into actual teaching situations. Consequently, teacher education that aligns with the aims of education expressed in legal documents is crucial.

Our findings suggest that at the national and programme levels, some countries lack any references entirely to address one or several of the analysed aims; other countries address all aims, but not to any great degree. At the course level, all countries address all aims, however, with primarily implicit language. The limited national and university guidance on this topic places a significant responsibility on university teachers to formulate the course descriptions. It is reasonable to assume that if their knowledge about rights is limited, the formulations become vague and implicit. As a consequence, the implicit language requires even more of student teachers' and practising teachers' competencies in understanding the aims as intended in the CRC. Previous research has demonstrated that teachers often feel insecure when addressing children's human rights topics in schools and feel they lack the knowledge to address human rights (Kasa et al. 2021; Gollifer 2022). The limited direction of teacher education to address the aims of education as stated in Article 29, along with teachers' insecurity in handling the topic, makes it reasonable to believe that the five analysed countries are failing their legal responsibilities expressed in the CRC.

The aim addressed most frequently, with the most variation, and on all national levels in all countries, is that education shall be directed to the

development of the child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. This aim corresponds well with the general understanding of what education should be about and is relatively well addressed in teacher education documents across all five countries. Other aims vary across the national contexts. Drawing on a keyword-based approach, Hennem and Aamodt (2021) demonstrate how particular keywords, shaped by cultural traditions, constitute and delimit fields of policy making – in their case, Norwegian child protection. Although their analysis is situated within a specific national setting, similar tendencies can be observed in our five countries. The distinct cultural histories and policy traditions in each context influence which aims are foregrounded and how they are articulated within initial teacher education.

For example, the comparatively higher number of explicit codes related to respect for human rights for Sweden and Iceland can perhaps be explained by value-based school systems, which have historically been aligned with democratic principles, and historically in Sweden and, more recently, in the Icelandic context, with human rights. Sweden has a long tradition of democracy and human rights both domestically and in foreign policy. Carlson-Rainer (2017) claims that, 'Sweden has a historical legacy of groundbreaking human rights policies' (83) and already in the mid-1700s century, Sweden introduced policies that align with today's human rights. Additionally, Iceland has a long history of democracy in education with human rights introduced in the 2011 National Curriculum Guides (Gollifer and Jónsson 2025; Halldórsdóttir et al. 2016). Additionally, in the documents from Ireland, Poland, and Switzerland, the specific national context can be discerned in codes aligned with respect for cultural identity defined as 'respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate and for civilisations different from his own'. This can be explained by the strong societal religious foundations in Ireland and Poland, the Irish history of conflict and Switzerland's four official languages. Additionally, in the Icelandic context, codes identified for this specific aim emphasise Icelandic culture, values and language, reflecting growing public concern for the preservation of a national identity in the context of increasing migration.

In a fast-changing world where European countries are becoming increasingly multicultural, respect for cultural identity needs critical attention in Irish and Icelandic ITE to counterbalance an overemphasis on domestic cultural identity and values. An approach similar to that applied in Switzerland and Poland, which emphasises respect for both one's own and others' cultural identity, would better align with the Convention's overarching

intention. At a time when human rights and democracy are under global threat, all five countries need to pay more focused attention to the extent to which Article 29 is evident in ITE, and these aims are addressed. There is increasing awareness and interest in respect for the environment and children's human rights in research and policy; yet these aims remain under-represented in practice. Across the five countries, it is at the course level rather than the national level where respect for the environment is more visible, suggesting that it is mostly through the efforts of teacher educators that sustainability issues are addressed or that the role of education in climate change, biodiversity loss and other planetary crisis is emphasised in ITE.

As parties to the CRC, the five countries are obligated to provide an education that fulfils the aims of education as outlined in the Convention, and that treats all of these aims equally. As we demonstrated in this study, the directions on structural and institutional levels to equip teachers, through their university education, with enough competencies to do so are scarce and there is a significant variation between the aims. The responsibility tends to fall on university teachers who formulate the course descriptions. These teachers have a varied knowledge of rights and of the aims of education as outlined in the CRC. Consequently, the aims are variedly emphasised and primarily expressed implicitly. It is reasonable to assume that teachers' reports of insecurity regarding rights-related topics result from the insufficient direction in teacher education regarding the aims of education. With this study, we argue that the responsibility to fulfil the legal obligations for the aims of education should be addressed at the structural and institutional levels in national and university guidelines.

6 Concluding Remarks

Our analysis of the extent and how the aims of education embedded in Article 29 of the CRC are addressed and translated in Initial Teacher Education across Iceland, Ireland, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland raises pertinent questions about state responsibility for the aims articulated in Article 29 of the CRC. The dependence on the course level that our analysis has revealed supports research identifying individual teachers as the leading players in ensuring children's right to HRE, and in particular, respect for human rights, cultural identity, and the environment. This dependency, without institutional support, risks ad hoc and inadequate responses, perpetuating assumptions about and/or complacency towards CHRE as a purpose of education. Given global political trends that dismiss legal commitments to social and ecological

concerns, which contribute to the increasing fragility of human rights as a moral, legal and political tool to address injustice, the role of ITE is crucial. Our findings suggest that states need to take their responsibility for the aims articulated in Article 29 of the CRC seriously. This initial study aims to inform follow up research with teacher educators in each of the five countries to engage with the cultural, historical and political influences on how the aims outlined in Article 29 are currently addressed and identify ways to develop a stronger response to the aims of the objectives: to encourage respect for oneself, others, parents, cultures, and the planet, all while building confidence and skills for a meaningful life.

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