



# Inertial constraints to educational change: The case of human rights education in Iceland

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Despite national education policy that presents human rights as a core curriculum concern, education systems seem to resist the introduction of new content areas. This is not only worrying but unethical, given the human and ecological crises that characterise the world our students inhabit. This paper responds to Jón Torfi Jónasson's belief that education will remain the same unless there is an understanding of, and even respect for, the inertial constraints that prevent change from taking place. The paper uses data from a broader narrative inquiry on human rights education (HRE) to illustrate how inertial constraints operate in the context of upper secondary school teachers working with human rights in Iceland. A reflexive thematic analysis suggests systemic inertia leaves teachers working as individuals depending on tacit human rights knowledge in school environments. Tacit knowledge makes acceptable dominant hierarchical practices that encourage hostility to new content and ideas. The paper concludes with implications of a lack of institutional accountability for human rights, raising questions of significance for teacher education and HRE in Iceland and internationally.

**Key words:** Human rights education, upper secondary schools, curriculum reform, inertial constraints, teacher education

## Introduction

Being an educator in a world characterised by human and ecological crises suggests a moral, legal and political responsibility to engage with social justice concerns. The past two years of the global health pandemic have made visible extreme social, economic, gender and racial inequalities, raising questions about the role education plays in addressing such concerns. Human rights education (HRE) is a powerful tool to engage with “the great challenges of human existence ... in the here and now” (Biesta, 2022, p. 11) to be better prepared to shape potential futures by visualising and advancing a more just world. It offers an educative framework that challenges dominant and narrow nationalistic perspectives (Osler, 2016) and provides opportunities to work in solidarity and draw on universal standards to ensure accountability for protecting and ensuring rights for all (Hahn, 2020). Yet, education systems remain resistant to change in the form of new content and ideas. In this paper, I draw on the work of Jón Torfi Jónasson (2016) and his use of the concept of inertia in education to better understand the challenges faced by teachers when working with human rights. Jónasson (2016) uses the term inertia to describe resistance to education responsive to potential futures. Inertia can be explained as a tendency to do nothing, allowing an existing state to continue unchanged. This creates acceptance of how the purpose

of education is understood, allowing dominant interpretations to persist, despite legal and moral obligations towards new content and ideas, such as human rights. Informed by a broader narrative inquiry on ten upper secondary school teachers' experiences of working with human rights in Iceland, I discuss the challenges faced by these teachers in the context of Jónasson's interrelated inertial constraints, described as: 1) General conservatism in educational discourse; 2) Education understood as an institution; 3) Standards and implementation that ensure conservative curricula; 4) Preservation of traditional subjects; 5) Failure to recognise the value of new subject matter, in particular when the academic value is difficult to discern; 6) Dominant vested interests that ensure curriculum content is defined by existing subjects; 7) Conservative teacher education; 8) Lack of motivation and space to critically engage with potential futures; and 9) Lack of accountability to ensure enactment of policy.

The paper starts by introducing the Icelandic educational context and the status of human rights and HRE. It then introduces international HRE literature to illustrate the impact of inertia on the transformative potential of HRE. This section is followed by a description of the methods used to generate the findings on how inertial constraints operate in the context of teachers working with human rights in upper secondary schools in Iceland. Three interrelated themes are discussed in depth: *Teachers work as individuals depending on tacit human rights and HRE knowledge; acceptability of dominant school practices limits the opportunities for human rights education and contradicts human rights principles; and hostility towards new content and teaching methods.* The discussion of these themes addresses the implications of the lack of institutional accountability towards human rights, raising questions of significance for teacher education in Iceland and internationally.

## **The Icelandic education context**

The introduction of six cross-curricular fundamental pillars for all levels of schooling in 2011 marked a shift towards decentralisation and school autonomy (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). The pillars of literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity (p. 14) suggest both social and educational objectives as components of the purpose of education. The curriculum guides state that the interrelated and interdependent pillars should be reflected in the “working methods, communication and atmosphere of schools” as well as “be evident in all educational activities and in the content of school subjects and fields of study” (p. 15). Human rights and HRE are not an explicit part of pre- or in-service teacher education in Iceland, suggesting that the status of these six pillars in school curricula remains unclear, particularly in relation to existing subject areas.

Upper secondary schools are typically organised around a credit system (Act on USS 92/2008; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012) where students can complete coursework at their own pace with an estimated time spent on learning (Ragnarsdóttir, 2018). Shortening the upper secondary school from four to three years informed the decision of education authorities to stipulate that Icelandic, mathematics, and English would be compulsory in all upper secondary schools irrespective of type. Schools then choose what and how to design additional subject areas and study programmes. Decentralisation supporting school autonomy offers both possibilities and challenges for new content such as human rights. Despite a national curriculum guide that places emphasis on holistic and interdisciplinary competence-based teaching and learning, schools have the flexibility to retain traditional subjects from the 1999 curriculum or adopt new ones (Ragnarsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). The introduction of the competence-based curricula underpinned by the six fundamental pillars has raised significant challenges at the upper secondary school level (Ragnarsdóttir, 2018). Drawing on longitudinal data, Ragnarsdóttir and Jóhannesson (2014) suggest that the increased workload of teachers has resulted in less job satisfaction and heightened occupational stress at the upper secondary school level. This has serious implications for the introduction of human rights in school curricula, including its transformational potential.

## Understanding how inertia prevents transformative forms of human rights education in schools

Jónasson (2016) argues that education will remain the same unless there is an understanding of, and even respect for, the inertial constraints that prevent change from taking place. Given my interest in the role of HRE in contributing to social and ecological wellbeing by challenging dominant hegemonic structures and practices that allow inequities to persist, Jónasson's work reminds us to critically explore constraints to pedagogies with explicit transformative intentions. Understanding the constraints provides greater insights into how to address these, creating possibilities for educational change. In this section, I draw on HRE literature to discuss how inertial constraints impact the transformational potential of HRE in schools.

Human rights are a familiar and shared international political discourse, representing the dominant international vocabulary to make legal and ethical claims about global justice (Moyn, 2014). The role of education in realising human rights has been promoted by both the United Nations and the Council of Europe through various moral and legal frameworks. The UNESCO Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in 1974 (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1974) is a landmark legal document specifically directed at peace and human rights in education (Savolainen & Torney-Purta, 2011). The recommendation is currently being revised to ensure education policies are guided by a global perspective and commitment to international solidarity to better prepare learners to shape more just, sustainable, healthy and peaceful futures (UNESCO, n.d.). Since its establishment in the mid-forties, UNESCO has consistently raised the need for education that works to ensure justice, peace, equality and sustainable realities. Three seminal reports (see Delors, 1996; Faure et al., 1972; UNESCO, 2021) stress the need to engage in dialogue about the purpose of education and to challenge educational complacency that fails to engage with complex realities. UNESCO's most recent report (UNESCO, 2021) calls for a new social contract. It suggests that reimagining futures requires that this social contract be grounded in "human rights and based on principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity and cultural diversity" (UNESCO, 2021). This report is being used to inform the revisions to the 1974 UNESCO Recommendation.

At the European level, as early as 1985, the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation (85)7 to the Member States of the Council of Europe (CoE) focused on teaching and learning about human rights in schools (Council of Europe, 1985). The work of the CoE has played a significant role in promoting education for democratic citizenship and HRE in school systems. In 2010, the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDCHRE) was adopted (Council of Europe, 2010). The EDCHRE is non-binding but provides a framework for member states representing a common commitment to democratic citizenship and HRE in schools.

A more recent non-legally binding document is the 2011 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training (UNDHRET) (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011), which focuses exclusively on HRE. Despite weaknesses in the form of missed opportunities to apply more inclusive, forceful and directed discourse to ensure state accountability for HRE (Gerber, 2011), UNDHRET reaffirms the legal obligation to the right to HRE articulated in Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The official definition of HRE presented in the document is learning *about*, *through* and *for* human rights, which combine to create human rights education pedagogy that is transformative in nature, as I now explain.

Tibbitts (2017) refers to different models of HRE, including the activism/transformative model. Features of this model include adopting a critical stance towards one's society or local environment,

the nature of power including the human rights system itself, leading to personal transformation, human rights activism and social change (pp. 83–84). My understanding of transformative HRE is informed by the work of Paulo Freire, requiring four pedagogical principles: an explicit pedagogic intention; critical engagement on purposes of education; a critical holistic approach; and cosmopolitan perspectives (see Gollifer, 2022). Despite a global expansion as regards inclusion of human rights in educational policy and textbooks in national education systems (Ramirez et al. 2007), research suggests that HRE in schools reflects ‘socialization towards prosocial behaviour’ rather than transformative models (Tibbitts, 2017, p. 86). A review of HRE literature suggests the transformative potential of HRE in schools is affected by the interrelated factors that Jónasson refers to as inertial constraints.

Parker (2018) and Jerome et al. (2021) argue for a strong human rights knowledgebase to ensure effective forms of HRE. However, studies point to the lack of adequate and relevant human rights and HRE knowledge amongst teachers (Osler, 2016; Rinaldi, 2018; Vesterdal, 2016; Zembylas et al., 2016); and understandings of HRE limited to student-centred and participatory approaches focused on the individual socio-moral development of students (Gollifer, 2021, 2022). National surveys on HRE in schools indicate human rights are insufficiently addressed in educational policy and teacher education (BEMIS, 2013; Decara, 2013; Finnish Human Rights Centre, 2014; Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011), suggesting human rights are not respected as relevant components of school curricula and that teachers have few opportunities to develop a strong human rights knowledgebase. These findings point to lack of accountability towards HRE, despite state obligation and responsibility, reflecting a general conservatism that Jónasson (2016) argues creates acceptance of a system in ways that act as its preservation. In cases where schools claim to implement HRE, conservatism dilutes its transformational potential, as I now discuss.

Hahn (2020) conducted a secondary analysis of data to determine how teachers and secondary schools enact HRE in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Like Iceland, these countries have a long history of democracy and human rights ideals, are signatories to the European Convention on Human Rights, and have all adopted the EDCHRE (Council of Europe, 2010). She noted that in most schools in each country emphasis was on learning about human rights-related events from historical perspectives without using the language of human rights. Similarly, the survey conducted by the Danish Institute of Human Rights found that human rights were taught indirectly. A key recommendation in the final report referred to the need for the Education Act to include specific and explicit references to human rights and not only democracy and equality (Decara, 2013). Hahn (2020) also found that rights tended to be studied in contexts of national values and norms or as human rights violations in international contexts, with less attention paid to local human rights violations. Oomen’s (2013) analysis of HRE in the Netherlands similarly concludes that despite a strong foreign policy promoting human rights, HRE is not a government priority despite increasing intolerance towards minorities since the 9/11 attacks in the United States. In the Nordic countries, while commitment to human rights overseas is strong, HRE reflects assumptions that human rights and national values are synonymous (Osler & Lybæk, 2014; Strømmen Lile, 2019; Vesterdal, 2016).

Hahn’s (2020) study argues that without deliberate efforts to maintain human rights cultures, important human rights messages can lose their meaning and indeed, transformative potential. The emphasis on deliberate human rights efforts cannot be underestimated. A 2020 report on HRE in ten schools in Great Britain was conducted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (EHRC, 2020). Four schools were in England, three in Scotland and three in Wales. The main challenges faced by the schools related to lack of directed government commitment towards human rights. The report found that HRE and knowledge about human rights is inconsistent, resulting in teachers feeling ill-prepared to work with human rights. The report suggests that given that schools operate in a context of limited resources and capacity, human rights may not always be prioritised and may be neglected in favour of exam results and attainment (EHRC, 2020). In

Scotland, where human rights are more explicitly referenced in the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) requirements, school staff report greater awareness of human rights. The report recommends that HRE be incorporated into initial teacher training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) (EHRC, 2020). Unlike in Scotland and Wales where national measures have been introduced which promote the Convention on the Rights of the Child and HRE, England has made no such requirements. Inappropriate attitudes to the empowerment of students and weak government policy are found by Struthers (2017) who has conducted studies on teaching human rights in primary schools in England. She suggests it is unlikely that students leave school capable of contributing to broader human rights cultures without teacher education that builds teacher confidence and comfort to engage with transformative approaches. The EHRC report calls for HRE as a mandatory part of the curricula and inspectorate frameworks. Without this requirement, “schools will find it difficult to prioritise and it will remain the duty of individual schools and dedicated rights champions within them to push it forward” (EHRC, 2020, p. 45).

The review of literature suggests lack of government and school accountability to ensure enactment of human rights policy in different country contexts, despite the associated responsibilities of being a signatory to international human rights conventions. Lack of accountability, one of Jónasson’s inertial constraints, underpins all other constraints. It encourages conservatism, dilutes motivation, and limits space to engage critically with reasons for curricular change. This provides the perfect context for inertia that blocks possibilities for curriculum change. However, as Jónasson (2016) suggests, rather than focus on changing the system itself, it is more important to understand and even respect inertia towards educational change in order to change what the system does. This is the purpose of this paper; to explore how inertial constraints operate in the context of teachers working with human rights in upper secondary schools in Iceland.

## Methods

The paper is informed by a broader narrative inquiry that worked with the life stories of ten upper secondary school teachers to explore their reasons for working with human rights, their practices, and perceived challenges (Gollifer, 2021). It further draws on a paper (Gollifer, 2022) on the challenges and possibilities for transformative HRE in Icelandic upper secondary schools. This paper is guided by the question: *How do inertial constraints to educational change impact the human rights-related work of upper secondary schools in Iceland?* The ten teachers self-identified as working with human rights and are comprised of five females and five males teaching a range of subjects, including mathematics, English, history, science, geography, geology, gender studies, philosophy, and cultural literacy. They have a broad range of teaching experience from four years to over 25 years, and work in each of the different types of USS in Iceland: schools with academic study programmes exclusively, comprehensive schools offering academic and vocational programmes, and vocational/technical colleges. Upper secondary schools present an interesting research context to explore inertial constraints because of a continued emphasis on subject specialisation and academic outcomes, despite the 2011 policy supporting interdisciplinary and cross-curricular teaching and the introduction of new content, including on human rights.

Life stories were used as a data set, reflecting a social constructivist understanding of knowledge creation (Clandinin, 2013; Goodson & Gill, 2014), whereby teachers’ stories are used to identify and inquire into issues of social justice/injustice (Caine et al., 2018). The teachers were interviewed between one and three times in English but were encouraged to use Icelandic when they lacked a word or a phrase. In the rare cases they did, transcripts were checked for accurate translations. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was used to generate the themes presented in this paper. Returning to the data set from the broader study, I read my journals and transcripts multiple times, and reviewed the initial codes related to teachers’ reasons for working with human rights, their practices and their perceptions of challenges. Using the lack of accountability as the inertial constraint that underpins all others, I refined the codes from the broader study to draw

out themes that reflected the impact of a lack of institutional accountability. This resulted in the following three core themes: *Teachers work as individuals depending on tacit human rights and HRE knowledge; Acceptability of dominant school practices limits the opportunities for human rights education and contradicts human rights principles; and Creating hostility towards new content and teaching methods.*

Limitations of the study include the small data set and dependence on teachers' perspectives to inform an ambitious attempt at disrupting inertia in the education system. However, I do not claim to draw conclusions, make comparisons, or claim population representation in relation to variables such as school type, school culture, subject area, age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. The in-depth nature of my engagement with the teachers generates rich data informed by individuals' perspectives on what they identify as relevant and significant (Goodson & Gill, 2014). This allows me to explore the impact of inertial constraints on teachers' work with human rights and to use my findings to discuss the implications for teacher education.

## Findings

### *Teachers work as individuals depending on tacit human rights and HRE knowledge*

In this section, I argue that when teachers work as individuals, dependent on tacit knowledge as regards the social aims of education, the school system is allowed to operate without institutional accountability. Despite the teachers self-identifying as working with human rights and addressing social justice in their teaching, all the narratives reflect varying degrees of uncertainty about participating in a study on HRE. Ella is an English teacher who describes her work in terms of: "doing it very unconsciously; until starting this project with you, I hadn't really thought of myself as using, you know, human rights approaches". Despite not associating her work with HRE prior to the interview, she recognises that her teaching is informed by her moral and political worldview: "I haven't been very conscious of it but it's just more, part of who I am and what I think is important". Tumi, an English teacher, also points to the unconscious connection between teachers' awareness of injustice and the role of the teacher: "it's more like something that just unconsciously slipped through because it is a concern with all of us, I mean, all the teachers we all think about this a little bit". Anna, a gender studies teachers, also suggests that her political perspectives inform her views about education and the role of the teacher, which she describes in terms of "no matter where I am, in what subject, I am teaching, social justice".

I use the term tacit to describe a person's ability to implicitly know and do things (Castillo, 2002). Polanyi (1966) talks about knowledge that we have but that is not easily articulated, making it difficult to share (Polanyi, 1966). For example, Helga, a history teacher, starts her interview by saying: "I wanted to ask you what you meant by social justice because that is something that I would say, yeah, that's me, definitely, social justice, but then ... what are we talking about"? Her narrative suggests she has a strong sense of justice, which she depends on to inform her teaching but without an explicit pedagogical intention. As Bjarni, a geography teacher explains: "It was not an agenda to promote social justice, but I think you are always promoting social justice and human rights, but you don't know you are doing it".

The need for teachers to depend on tacit knowledge to respond to the social aims of the curriculum illustrates lack of accountability to prepare teachers to work with human rights, despite policy claims that they should underpin all aspects of schooling. The teachers work as individuals and, as Tumi describes, in "self-regulated" ways:

I come into a culture and I come in with some ideas ... but then you settle into this rhythm, a routine ... and there's nobody from above or from outside coming to tell you or saying you have some grunnþættir [the fundamental pillars] ... the conservative teachers, they are the ones who win out in the end.

Self-regulation is reflected in the way teachers talk about the absence of leadership to support their work. Simon, a science teacher, talks about being “deeply worried” because of the lack of discussion, which he interprets as “the leadership of the school ... taking no responsibility”. His narrative reflects an urgency as regards needing to talk about how to change a school system that places responsibility on individual teachers:

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

Working as an individual in a school with relative autonomy can provide opportunities for certain teachers. As Anna points out, “if you have a job as a teacher, you get students and you go into the classroom and you do what you damn well please”. Similarly, Viktor, a mathematics teacher, Ilmur, a cultural studies teacher, Bjarni, Tumi and Helga refer to the relative freedom to pursue their own interests in their teaching. However, Ingimar, a history teacher, shares Simon's frustration as regards the lack of support to implement the fundamental pillars, including human rights. He describes teacher autonomy as a double-edged sword: “We can easily as a single teacher introduce elements in our teaching of our choice and no one stops us”. However, his experience of intentionally challenging stereotypes in history textbooks while recognising that the selective school system remained unchanged, eventually led him to leave teaching at the upper secondary school level.

Dependence on tacit knowledge with no systemic buy-in to support the social aims of education dilutes the transformational potential of the way teachers work with human rights (Gollifer, 2022). Teachers may leave the profession, as in the case of Ingimar, or they may work in ways that reflect what Tibbitts (2017, p. 83) identifies as the values and awareness/socialization model rather than the activism/transformation model. Transformative models depend on human rights and HRE knowledge, as well as related skills and attitudes. Both Anna and Ilmur refer to the fact that they do not draw on the legal dimension of human rights in their work. Based on their work around HRE and legal literacy, Lundy & Martínez Sainz (2018) suggest that a narrow focus on ethical and moral aspects of rights without including legal knowledge cannot be transformative. Legal knowledge provides an opportunity for teachers and students to discuss state accountability towards ensuring human rights, as well as the contradictions in national legal frameworks that protect the rights of certain students/citizens while violating the rights of others.

Leaving teachers to work as individuals and depend on tacit knowledge of human rights and HRE allows conservative education systems to resist change and allow dominant school practices to be accepted as the norm.

*Acceptability of dominant school practices limits the opportunities for human rights education and contradicts human rights principles*

In this section, I argue that lack of institutional accountability to support teachers work with social aims allows dominant school practices to persist. These practices include subject hierarchies that underpin selection processes and student admission to upper secondary schools and student associations that can create and perpetuate forms of othering. Unquestioned acceptance of these practices limits the opportunities for human rights education and contradicts human rights principles.

Prior to the introduction of the 2011 national curriculum guides, the subject-based curriculum was offered by secondary schools as preparation for university. However, the notion of core subject areas has persisted irrespective of changes to overarching social aims. This suggests that the introduction of human rights into the school curriculum is likely to be influenced by traditional notions of the role of the upper secondary school. Dominant purposes of schooling continue to

focus on academic achievement despite article two of the 2008 Education Act stipulating “the all-round development of all students and their active participation in democratic society” (Act on USS 92/2008). The core academic subjects of mathematics, Icelandic and English are referred to by Tumi as “masters of the universe” to explain how certain subjects hold higher status than others, a claim supported by Icelandic scholars (Bjarnadóttir & Geirsdóttir, 2018; Ragnarsdóttir, 2018).

Programmatic diversity and flexibility in the 2011 curriculum guides aimed to decrease the number of students dropping out or leaving upper secondary school (Ragnarsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). Despite laws and policy supporting issues of inclusion, equality and rights, academic performance and social status seem to continue to play a significant role in determining which school students will attend (Ragnarsdóttir, 2018, p. 7). The teachers’ narratives support this claim. Helga is critical of the selection process and the pressure placed on certain students. She previously worked in a grammar school that selected students based on their performance in the core subject areas before moving to a comprehensive school with a more academically diverse group of students: “Do you know what you are missing when you don’t want to bring in these people because they don’t have an 8 in maths?”

Viktor, a mathematics teacher working in a comprehensive school, suggests that mathematics as a core subject works to label students as “those who are able and those who are not able”, greatly influencing students’ sense of wellbeing: “When you fail maths, and you’re not sure what you want to do, and your self-confidence isn’t high, you don’t allow yourself to experiment and try different things”. Unquestioned acceptance of the dominance of certain subjects in the upper secondary school system by multiple stakeholders, including students, means that teachers who want to introduce new subject areas or content, such as human rights, depend on electives or pedagogy applied in the context of their own subject teaching. This questions the sustainability of implementing socially oriented curriculum aims. As Tumi’s statement about his own elective course suggests, sustaining what individual teachers do in the name of human rights is challenged by a system that is ambivalent and complacent towards change to the accepted ways of doing things:

Interesting things could be happening, but they are not supported, and they are not opposed. So, they might disappear because if you are getting a couple of new teachers, who are not interested or do not understand or whatever, they would just throw this stuff out, so the change wouldn’t be sustained.

All teachers associate HRE with student-centred and participatory pedagogies and development of socio-moral dispositions within their own subject teaching (Gollifer, 2021, 2022). Learning through human rights is more evident in the teachers’ practices than learning about or for human rights, or a combination of these. Transformative pedagogies depend on more than ethical and moral aspects of rights and require a critical human rights knowledgebase (Jerome et al., 2021; Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018; Parker, 2018). Given that teachers depend on tacit knowledge of human rights and HRE in the absence of institutional accountability to support their human rights work, it is likely that teachers’ practices are influenced by dominant discourses about the value of traditional teaching, encouraging them to adopt conservative forms of practice (Wilkins, 1999, in Jerome, 2016). The fact that teachers self-identified as working with human rights suggests that they are acting as gatekeepers (Jerome, 2016); they create a space for human rights in a system that generally resists change by maintaining what traditionally takes place in upper secondary schools. Their dependence on tacit knowledge and lack of engagement with others about their work, constrains transformative HRE (Gollifer, 2022). A focus on the socio-moral development of individual students without being able to draw on critical human rights and HRE knowledge may not be sufficient to “tackle systemic inequalities and the marketisation of education” (Jerome, 2016, p. 152). In particular, when inertial constraints dilute teachers’ agency to advocate for their understanding of purposes of education. As Jónasson (2016) points out, vested interests



control what takes place in schools, including which subjects are important, which standards of achievement should apply, and which practices should be sustained.

The student association is often referred to as an example of student participation in school decision making and democracy in schools. Article 39 of the 2008 Education Act states that student associations at upper secondary schools are responsible for students' social activities, their general interests and their welfare (Act on USS 92/2008). The article goes on to say that the association can "set its own rules regarding its composition, role and working methods". However, student associations operate under the responsibility of the school concerned. Several teachers referred to the student associations in their schools as examples of unhealthy hierarchies reinforcing what Selma, an English teacher, refers to as "a pecking order" amongst students. Tumi refers to student associations as creating and maintaining unhealthy hierarchies while being perceived as examples of democratic practices in schools:

They have these elections, and they have popularity contests and stuff like that but it's not so much about empowerment of each individual student ... I think many students feel that they [the association] are cliques that are controlling, and they feel disenfranchised.

Tumi's reference to feeling disenfranchised reflects Drinkwater's (2019) point that in school contexts where the student population is from the same mainstream culture, democracy is not being practised if students are not engaged in critical dialogue about the choices that are made in the name of democracy. Bjarni refers to an annual multicultural event organised by the student association. In his description he focuses on what students with an immigrant background do: "We have had a dance from girls from Vietnam, cooking classes from Asia and tapestry from Eastern Europe ... we are promoting other cultures by letting students do it themselves". In schools where dominant sociocultural realities are assumed as the norm, "democratically" elected student committees are not necessarily democratic if they do not ensure representation. Instead, they can create "silences around certain forms of diversity" (Osler & Starkey, 2010, p. 17). Tumi refers to individual teachers making attempts to hold students accountable when events organised by students verge on what he refers to as "borderline sexist...I don't know, I am not saying racist, but you know, scary, a little bit iffy". Despite article 39 clearly stating that student associations operate under the responsibility of the school concerned, external businesses sponsoring student events seem to have more control than teachers or at least provide student associations with the means to act autonomously without being held to account. Tumi describes the student association in upper secondary schools as "like a corporation ... sponsored by business".

School systems that make subject and student hierarchies acceptable challenge teachers' attempts to engage with transformative pedagogies. Transformative HRE is more than student-centred teaching or human rights addressed in electives which struggle to get student numbers because they may be competing with more traditional subjects or those with vested interests. It is also about creating school cultures that reflect human rights principles and that challenge exclusive practices. Without institutional accountability to develop a critical human rights and HRE knowledgebase amongst stakeholders, such practices will be allowed to persist and protect the conservatism of the education system.

#### *Creating hostility towards new content and teaching methods*

In this section I argue that lack of accountability to provide opportunities for teachers to collectively and critically discuss how to work with social curricular aims, such as the pillar of democracy and human rights, can create an environment of hostility amongst subject teachers and other stakeholders. In the same way that tacit knowledge can dilute the transformational potential of teachers' work, so too can hostility towards new content and teaching methods.

Selma and Ella recall resistance to their attempts to identify ways to work with human rights and social justice themes. As Ella points out, other teachers exert pressure that leads to feelings that “you are not doing what you are supposed to do”. She recalls discussions with other English teachers in her school about the fundamental pillars and describes being told; “Don’t bring in that word [referring to human rights], what do you mean when you say that – sustainability, human rights, what are we talking about, we teach English”. Lack of critical engagement to legitimise what teachers do constrains their capacity to collectively organise to provide possibilities of alternatives. Instead, individual teachers find themselves having to justify their work with human rights:

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

Selma’s reference to forgetting to do what she is paid to do reflects recognition of working in a system resistant to change. These examples reflect Wilkins’ (1999, in Jerome, 2016) suggestion that the worldview of some teachers is informed by “dominant discourses about the value of traditional teaching and scepticism towards politics”. He found that this led to student teachers adopting conservative conceptualisation of citizenship education, irrespective of the curriculum calling for radical change.

Selma’s experience of being involved in the development of the 2011 national curriculum guide at the national level is a good example of how dominant perceptions on what schooling is for and how it should be organised can create hostile situations (Gollifer, 2022). Despite feeling that she had learned from the experience of being involved at the national level, once back at her school, Selma felt stressed by the reaction of teachers. As previously stated, while the core subjects (mathematics, English and Icelandic) are allocated a certain number of credits and teaching hours, the remainder of the curriculum can be decided by the school. As Selma states, “This is such a political thing, and how do you sort of, what do you put in that recipe? Do you throw Danish out?” She describes teachers becoming defensive as they sought to defend their own subjects and recalls feeling the need to defend her work on gender in her English language teaching when asked by another teacher: ‘Are you implementing gender issues because you are a feminist?’ Simon’s narrative includes reference to a heated email exchange about the gendered nature of extracurricular clubs. The description of the incident reflects a hostility towards constructive dialogue about topics such as gender, and how these can be addressed in teaching and school practices.

Dominant discourses impact other stakeholders, such as parents and students. Tumi points out that based on his experience, “parents tend to be sort of, you know, there are all sorts, but they tend to be conservative”. This conservatism is towards what and how students are taught. Ella describes students complaining and arguing about her choice of assessment and use of discussion in class, telling her that they want to “be taught” and “not be the teacher”. Introducing changes that conflict with expectations of what and how schools should teach creates hostile environments that teachers can find challenging. In reference to Goodson’s claim that profound indifference and active hostility dilute personal and professional commitment to change (Goodson, 2007, p. 220, in Jónasson, 2016, p. 7), Jónasson (2016) points to the influence of vested interests. He suggests that vested interests control who can talk about what and also the way content is defined by the existing subjects. Such control results in lack of incentive, time and space for stakeholders to engage in dialogue on reasons for curricular change, informed by wide-ranging perspectives (Jónasson, 2016, p. 7). This may result in teachers reverting to more traditional and didactic approaches and in extreme cases, as discussed earlier in the context of Ingimar, leaving the profession.

Lack of accountability to provide opportunities for teachers to collectively and critically discuss

how to work with social curricular aims creates hostility amongst education stakeholders. This hostility works to support inertia towards the introduction of new content and ways of teaching, therefore diluting the transformational potential of teachers working with human rights to encourage a critical stance towards one's society and local and global environment.

## Implications for teacher education

I have so far illustrated how lack of institutional accountability towards human rights in school curricula allows Jónasson's conceptualisation of inertial constraints to curriculum reform to persist. The interrelated factors of teachers' dependence on tacit knowledge, school practices that allow subject and student hierarchy and hostility to change suggest that social aims of education are not adequately addressed in schools. In this section, I discuss the implications of these findings for teacher education, leading me to propose a relational approach to teacher education to disrupt inertia that constrains the transformational potential of teachers' attempts at incorporating new content and ways of working.

It is important to distinguish between characteristics of the secondary school system and how these can work as constraints that resist change. For example, an inertial constraint is not only the decision by education authorities to maintain the three compulsory subjects and acceptance of traditional subject teaching. Upper secondary school teachers are trained as subject specialists, resulting in an understandable strong commitment to their subjects. As Harðarson (2013) points out, a focus on subject aims and overarching aims on personal and social development should not be mutually exclusive. The inertial constraint lies in the lack of teacher education on human rights and dialogue on its place within the existing curriculum. If teachers are not encouraged to explore possibilities for human rights and democracy within the school curriculum, dominant purposes of education are maintained. In the same way that the school curriculum is organised around traditional subjects, so too is teacher education, not allowing the inclusion of new content "unless there is space for them among the existing subjects" (Jónasson, 2016, p. 8). Jónasson further argues that the ongoing professional development of teachers is not given the consideration and importance that it requires. As my findings indicate, teachers lack the opportunities to build their human rights and HRE knowledge, having to instead depend on tacit knowledge. This unconscious/undeveloped knowledge draws on moral and political convictions towards injustice. However, if teachers are not provided with the opportunities to share their perspectives on how they understand the status of social aims of education represented by the six curriculum pillars, unjust dominant practices persist, and hostility is allowed to breed. This restricts the transformative potential of teachers' work with human rights, which requires four pedagogical principles: an explicit pedagogic intention; critical engagement on the purposes of education; a critical holistic approach; and cosmopolitan perspectives (Gollifer, 2022).

The preparation of upper secondary school teachers at the University of Iceland's (UoI) School of Education includes 40 ECTS of mandatory courses and 20 ECTS in elective courses, in addition to the students' master's degree in a specialised subject area. Two of the core mandatory courses include *Introduction to teaching* (KEN104F) and *Curriculum and school development in secondary schools* (KEN213F). In earlier work, I use the UoI's School of Education teacher education programme to suggest that upper secondary school teachers are provided with limited opportunities to develop critical awareness of the role of social aims represented by the six curriculum pillars and depend on the pedagogical intentions of instructors running mandatory and elective courses (Gollifer, 2021). For example, if I were running a subject specialisation course, I would include an explicit focus on human rights and HRE in the context of the curriculum pillars. Depending on individual rather than institutional responses creates an ad hoc and patchwork approach to social aims of education and allows traditional practices to influence school curricula. This situation limits possibilities for human rights to be addressed in the upper secondary school teacher education programme at the UoI's School of Education. The question, however, is "Who

should then become the agents or facilitators of change or development that relate to educational content?” Jónasson (2016, p. 11).

In response to his question, Jónasson (2016) suggests that over-dependence on government on one hand, and on unsupported teachers in schools, on the other, would be unrealistic. The findings in this paper support these suggestions. Governments tend to be slow in responding to their moral and legal commitment towards educational reform. Yet, placing responsibility on individual teachers who depend on tacit knowledge cannot sustain commitment to social aims of education in contexts of hierarchy and hostility. Jónasson (2016) further points to the role of international agencies and the responsibility they can play in acting as a catalyst for educational change. However, despite the transformative intentions and progressive legal frameworks of institutions such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe, change at the local level is irresponsibly slow. I want to suggest that institutions responsible for teacher education at the local level should function as the agents of change. It is not in the scope of this paper to examine in any depth the feasibility of this proposition in view of Jónasson’s questions on the competence, drive, vision, fundamental knowledge, urge, status and authority of the agent of change (p. 7). Rather, my intention is to raise awareness of the responsibility of the different institutions in Iceland providing teacher education, towards human and ecological wellbeing, in particular when the UN sustainable development goals are core components of institutional strategic planning.

If we accept that institutions responsible for training teachers should, and assume that they can, take responsibility for providing opportunities for educational change that supports the social aims of the national curriculum guides, what approach to education would respond to the challenges experienced by the teachers in this study? In previous work (Gollifer, 2021, 2022), I illustrate how teachers’ narratives can be used as content and contexts to critically analyse human rights-related concepts to develop their human rights knowledge. It is important to remember that the teachers in my study have all self-identified as working with human rights and social justice. I now suggest that applying a relational approach raises recognition of the need for diverse perspectives. The teachers’ stories in my study illustrate how teachers respond differently to the curriculum pillars. Their stories further indicate that the lack of opportunity to discuss the status of the pillars in any depth can result in unquestioned acceptance of how things are done in upper secondary schools. A relational approach to teacher education responds to Jónasson’s (2016) concern that “few people who are engaged in education have the wide-ranging overview or perspective over all the different but pressing reasons for curricular change” (p. 9). Learning about the social aims of education, such as learning *about*, *through* and *for* human rights, *in relations with* multiple and diverse others, not only ensures a wide-ranging overview but also provides opportunities to intrinsically act through one’s own initiatives, as I now explain.

A relational approach to HRE draws on the concept of narrativity as a political action (Adami, 2014). By this Adami refers to Arendt’s understanding of subjectivity as a communal form of life in which plurality is the essential component of the human condition; narration as a political act creates opportunities to learn in relations with diverse others about what it means to be in the world. This creates opportunities for teachers to engage with responsibilities they face in ways that lead them to recognise their subjectiveness and their freedom to make a choice in relation to these encounters. This contrasts with instrumental approaches to teacher education in that working in relations with diverse others does not aim to determine what should be taught but focuses more on the purpose of addressing certain content areas. The focus on the why demands more from the self in terms of needing to position oneself in relation to worldly responsibilities. Biesta (2020, 2022) understands this positioning as a process of subjectification, or as the agency or the freedom to act as relative to the subjectification of others. Subjectification is one of three domains of the purpose of education identified by Biesta, the other two being qualifications (knowledge and skills) and socialisation (cultures, traditions and practices). He argues for all three domains to create educative processes that raise recognition of the responsibilities of human existence in and with the world.

Teacher education as a relational activity to understand the social aims of education, including human rights and the role of HRE, offers an opportunity for upper secondary school teachers to critically engage with lack of accountability towards social and ecological wellbeing in schools' intended and implemented curricula.

## Concluding remarks

In this paper I sought to illustrate the impact of inertial constraints on upper secondary school teachers' work with human rights. Leaving teachers to work as individuals dependent on tacit knowledge of human rights and HRE, supports systemic complacency to address injustice in societies and in schools. Lack of accountability to provide opportunities for teachers to collectively and critically discuss how to work with social aims allows unjust practices to persist and creates hostility amongst education stakeholders when faced with new content and ways of teaching. I have shown how inertial constraints to educational reform can dilute the transformational potential of teachers working with human rights, raising questions of significance for teacher education. In response to Jónasson's question about the agents or facilitators of change or development that relate to educational content, I place responsibility on institutions responsible for preparing teachers and educators for their role in the school system. I further suggest a relational approach to teacher education, a process of learning in relations with diverse perspectives to generate greater teacher agency to respond to systemic inertia. Greatly influenced by the sense of urgency underlying Jón Torfi's scholarship on educational change, inertia and potential futures, I believe that relational approaches to teacher education in Iceland provide an interesting possibility for pedagogical experimentation and future research.

This paper concludes by leaving unanswered questions, including those related to the feasibility and conditions or preparation for a relational approach to teacher education. However, my intention was to raise questions of significance for teacher education in Iceland, and internationally, and create space for critical dialogue on responsibility for social aims of education, including human rights, in contexts of systemic inertia towards educational change.

### **Kerfislæg tregða gegn breytingum í menntun: Tilvik um mannréttindanám á Íslandi**

Þrátt fyrir að mannréttindi séu einn af grunnþáttunum í aðalnámskrá á öllum skólastigum á Íslandi virðist menntakerfið tregðast við að innleiða nýjar áherslur í námi. Þetta er ekki aðeins áhyggjuefni heldur jafnvel siðlaust í ljósi þeirra mannlegru og vistfræðilegu áskorana sem einkenna nútíma samfélög. Jón Torfi Jónasson er á þeirri skoðun að menntakerfi taki ekki breytingum nema að fyrir hendi sé skilningur, og jafnvel virðing, fyrir þeim þáttum sem hindra umbætur. Í greininni er stuðst við gögn úr umfangsmeiri frásagnarrannsókn á mannréttindamenntun til að draga upp mynd af reynslu framhaldsskólakennara af kerfislægum hindrunum gagnvart mannréttindum á Íslandi. Þemagreining leiðir í ljós kerfislæga tregðu sem veldur því að kennarar vinna einir og reiða sig á dulda þekkingu á mannréttindum í skólaumhverfinu. Að þekkingin sé dulin styður við ríkjandi starfshætti sem eru mótdrægir nýju efni og hugmyndum. Að lokum er rætt um afleiðingar þess að stofnanalega ábyrgð á mannréttindum skortir sem vekur upp álitamál hvað varðar kennaramenntun og mannréttindanám, jafnt á Íslandi sem á alþjóðavettvangi.

**Efnisorð:** Mannréttindamenntun, framhaldsskóli, endurskoðun námskrár, tregða í skólakerfi, kennaramenntun

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### Um höfund

Sue E. Gollifer (sueg@hi.is) er lektor í alþjóðlegum menntunarfræðum við Háskóla Íslands. Hún er með doktorspróf í mannréttindamenntunarfræðum. Rannsóknaráherslur hennar eru umbreytandi kennslufræði til að þróa félagslega og vistfræðilega vellíðan; kennaramenntun félagslegs réttlætis; og alþjóðavæðing háskólanáms í samhengi við aukna fjölbreytni nemenda.

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