
Children's Rights Education: The Challenges and Opportunities of Inter- and Transdisciplinary Teaching

Maude Louviot, Zoe Moody & Frédéric Darbellay

In this article we present our reflections on children's rights education and its development through inter- and transdisciplinary practices in the school context. To enable school pupils to experience their status as subjects of the law to the full, their rights must feature on the level of both knowledge transfer and everyday application. An exclusively disciplinary approach proves insufficient to achieving this objective, and inter- and transdisciplinary teaching is deployed to provide a more comprehensive education in children's rights.

Keywords: children's rights education, 'education for', interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity

1 Introduction

Children's rights education is part of the mandatory school curriculum in francophone Switzerland (Plan d'études romand, 2010¹). In view of its dual presentation as a disciplinary topic (citizenship) and a cross-sectional field of education ('Communal life and the exercise of democracy'), we examine here the potential offered by the inter- and transdisciplinary treatment of this topic. The multidimensional nature of children's rights (psycho-social, legal aspects etc.) encourages the adoption of an approach that goes beyond the disciplinary transfer of the knowledge delivered by this section of the curriculum. As a topic of considerable social urgency, children's rights are also relevant and meaningful to the everyday lives of children; these are the situations they can experience their status as subjects of the law.

A number of questions arise here: what are the existing practices in relation to children's rights education and the benefits deriving from them? What place do inter- and transdisciplinarity assume in this specific form of '*éducation à*', that is 'education for'? What are the benefits and challenges involved in the practice of inter- and transdisciplinarity in the school context? We begin by outlining the challenges associated with children's rights education and then we conclude by demonstrating how it makes sense adopt an inter- and transdisciplinary approach to children's rights education.

2 Children's rights education

2.1 Children's rights

The General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on 20 November 1989. Today, it is the world's most widely ratified convention under international law. With the exception of the USA, all Member States of the United Nations are parties to this convention. The CRC contains 54 interdependent articles defining the fundamental rights and freedoms of children and the obligations of the signatory states and provide details about the procedures for its application. It encompasses all of the generations of rights, are civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights (Verhellen, 1999). Along with defining rights specifically aimed at children, this instrument also reinforces some of the human rights previously established in other conventions (Verhellen, 1996).

The aim of children's rights is to allocate a status to children: that of being the subject of the law. This status is associated with a vision of the child as a separate entity in the early years of life and not solely as a future citizen. Hence, rights are attributed to children in their everyday lives, from the playground to the school and from the street to the family circle. And although the question of the participation of children in learning processes and school governance is not entirely new in the field of education (Tan, 2011), as highlighted by Jeff (2002) the education system affords little space for the exercise of children's rights, giving priority instead to a more authoritarian and less participative mode of operation. Thus, the question

arises as to the nature of the link between the school setting and the diffusion and implementation of children's rights.

2.2 Children's rights at school

Despite the existence of an association between children's rights and education long before the adoption of the CRC, the research relating to children's rights has increased exponentially since its coming into force (Moody, 2016), and the instrument is often considered as the starting point for reflections on the topic of children's rights in these studies (Coppock & Gillett-Swan, 2016; Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie & Vandeveld, 2009). Our work on children's rights education is also based on this instrument.

The CRC has two articles that relate directly to education, articles 28 and 29. The first concerns the right to education. According to this principle, children have the right to good quality, free primary education, to priority access to secondary education, including general and vocational education, and to the adoption of an approach to discipline² in schools that is consistent with their human dignity. The second is devoted to the objectives of education. These include the development of the child's personality and abilities; respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; respect for all cultures; the fostering of the responsibility necessary for life in a free, equal and peaceful society; and respect for the natural environment. Article 42, which concerns the implementation of the Convention, covers the obligation of the State Parties to make the principles and provisions of the CRC known to the maximum possible number of people in a suitable manner. Schools are a priority actor when it comes to the transmission to children of the values associated with children's rights.

The implementation of children's rights in education operates on three levels: the right *to* education, the rights *by* education and the rights *in* education (Verhellen, 1999). The right *to* education implies that all individuals shall have guaranteed access to high quality, free and mandatory education. The rights *by* education refers to the fact of addressing children's rights in the school context. School pupils should be able to develop knowledge and concepts in relation to children's rights and, more generally, human rights over the course of their school careers. The rights *in* education encompasses the behaviour, attitudes and everyday activities that should be based on children's rights. It involves, therefore, the actual implementation of children's rights in the school

context. Hence school pupils must not only be aware of their rights and what it means to be a subject of the law, but this knowledge must be accompanied by the implementation of these rights, thereby enabling them to become aware of the concrete meaning of the rights and their consequences (Moody, 2016).

Hence, the everyday implementation of children's rights in schools would appear to be inextricably accompanied by the provision of information on the topic. This process enables pupils to experience their status on an everyday level and to be assured of the implementation of their rights (Reynaert, Bouverne-De Bie & Vandeveld, 2010). Therefore, education in the rights of the child materializes through the relationship between adults and children, through the establishment of structures that promote participation, through the everyday educational process, through the appropriate use of the media for information purposes and through the adoption of an approach of discipline that is tailored to children's rights. Such processes necessitate that teachers be trained in children's rights and in what their implementation means in the school context.

The research shows that education in children's rights presents a number of benefits for both pupils and their teachers. With regard to pupils, education in children's rights, in the sense of instruction aimed at the development of knowledge, enables them to understand what the rights in question consist of as well as the role of their own actions and the respecting of the rights of others (Covell & Howe, 1999). It should also be noted that children show greater respect to others in school contexts that prioritize the implementation of children's rights (Covell & Howe, 2001). Moreover, pupils who benefit from such teaching are more optimistic about the future (Covell & Howe, 1999) and show greater commitment to their school careers (Covell, McNeil & Howe, 2009). These results in greater self-esteem, greater pleasure in attending school, higher levels of motivation and more altruistic behaviour. With regard to teachers, the fact of being in the presence of pupils who are more involved in the school process is reflected in a lower risk of burn out (ibid.). Moreover, their pleasure in their work increases through collaboration with the pupils who have better debating skills and engage in more cooperative processes (ibid.).

These studies were carried out in schools that enable pupils to experience their rights in a concrete and everyday fashion by giving them the opportunity to be active, particularly in decision-making processes relating to the school context,

and providing them with a system of discipline that respects children's rights.

A general approach to children's rights goes beyond a purely disciplinary process. The disciplines are coordinated around specific and complex topics relating to children's rights with a view to developing transferrable knowledge about them. Certain experts originating from a non-school context may be involved for this purpose, thereby opening the school to the wider environment. Hence, the everyday experience of children's rights also exceeds the disciplinary boundaries and encompasses the education system in the broader sense. It may be understood, therefore that children's rights education calls for an inter- and transdisciplinary approach.

3 Inter- and transdisciplinarity

3.1 Definitions

The thinking on the decompartmentalization of disciplines clearly demonstrates the variety of axioms and concepts used to define the collaboration between disciplines. Nevertheless, the authors concur on a number of definitions. The concepts of disciplinarity, pluri-multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity appear to reflect a consensus that exists throughout the literature (see, in particular, Darbellay, 2005, 2015; Klein, 1990, 2010).

Disciplinarity corresponds to the system for the division of knowledge into disciplines. This division process can arise in both the academic and school contexts, and certain commonalities between these two types of knowledge can indeed be observed. First, the disciplines are defined institutionally and *a priori* as having little permeability (Darbellay, 2005). They correspond to a way of seeing the world and they became established over the course of history, tying in with the traditions, norms and culture of which they are part. Each discipline is expressed around a defined object of study (Darbellay, 2005; Maingueneau, 2010; Weingart, 2010). Moreover, the actors rooted in the discipline in question are specialists in it, and their identity forms around their disciplinary career (Sedooka et al., 2015; Lenoir et al., 2000). In the context of children's rights education, a disciplinary approach of the issue of unaccompanied minors would be for example carried out by one teacher solely, through the single perspective of geography. Therefore, the topic would be studied as a migratory flow exclusively,

excluding dimensions related to law, health and/or social integration for instance.

Nevertheless, academic disciplines differ from school disciplines in certain regards. First and foremost they do not conceive knowledge in the same way. The school disciplines are inspired by school knowledge, which is transformed to allow it to be teachable and capable of being understood by its target audience (Chevallard, 1991). This adaptation process is referred to as didactic transposition. It does not consist of the simple impoverishing of academic knowledge but enables the emergence of an original product with divisions between subjects and a meaning for the world to which it belongs (Schneuwly, 1995).

The different stages of collaboration between the disciplines enable the reconsideration of the disciplines in terms of the relations between them and the ways they exceed each other and integrate with each other. *Pluri-* and *multidisciplinarity* is situated on the first level of collaboration between the disciplines and corresponds to the juxtapositioning of different disciplines around a common object or topic. The disciplines and their way of approaching reality are maintained and respected. They are oriented around the same object with a sequential process of analysis carried out by each discipline independently of the others (Darbellay, 2005). In this context, the issue of unaccompanied minors would be studied in various classes such as geography, citizenship education and literature. However the different points of view would neither be integrated on a didactical nor on a pedagogical level (Lenoir et al., 2000), the teachers presuming or expecting the pupils to do such work alone.

Interdisciplinarity refers to the collaboration between several disciplines around a common object of study. There is true integration of the instruments and knowledge originating from different disciplines going beyond the juxtapositioning encountered in a pluri- and multidisciplinary approach. The objectives and methodology around which the disciplines are assembled are shared, the different disciplinary emphases implement a decentering of the point of view, and the result, that emanates from this collaboration cannot be reduced to the content that could be conveyed by one or other of these disciplines. This way of connecting disciplines makes it possible to deal with certain complex topics in a different and more general way than would be possible using a disciplinary approach (Rege Colet & Tardif, 2008). Studying unaccompanied minors in an interdisciplinary perspective would therefore require geography,

citizenship and literature teachers to collaborate in order to co-elaborate a pedagogical project that would bring their pupils to build a common and integrated understanding of the topic; broader than that they would have if they had studied the subject in each discipline separately. Assessing the project should also consider the degree of integration and the interdisciplinary skills the pupils have developed (Fourez, 2002).

Finally, *transdisciplinarity* refers to three definitions. The first corresponds to a general vision applied to a topic that is located beyond disciplines. The organization of the related knowledge is reconsidered and expressed around a theme rather than through its disciplinary incarnation. In this particular case, the disciplinary stability is challenged (Piaget, 1973). Second, transdisciplinarity refers to the collaboration between specialists from the academic or scholastic worlds and actors outside these worlds that have stronger links with the field under consideration (Darbellay, 2005; Klein, 2010). To deal with our question of unaccompanied minor, the teacher could for example ask a grown-up unaccompanied minor, or a social worker to share their experience with the pupils and answer their questions. Finally, the concept of transdisciplinarity can refer to the exploration of the relations that drive the complex link between the natural sciences, humanities and social sciences, for example by analysing the issue of unaccompanied minors in the perspective of natural catastrophes, which would involve physics and biology (Darbellay et al., 2008).

These different definitions are compatible with the division of knowledge into disciplines. On the contrary, they provide access to a complementary perspective. Hence, although the disciplinary approach to knowledge sometimes is considered as being under threat from the studies on inter- and transdisciplinarity, these different ways of constructing the collaboration between the disciplines are still and always based on a disciplinary logic. The work carried out on the interfaces between the disciplines should, in fact, be conceived as an added value in the context of both scientific research and teaching.

3.2 Inter- and transdisciplinary teaching

Inter- and transdisciplinary teaching is a key approach in the context of children's rights education, as for other forms of "education for" such as sustainable development, media and citizenship education. The thematic approach and the need for integration inherent in the competency-based approach raise questions

regarding disciplinary segmentation and lead to the inter- and transdisciplinary treatment of children's rights education. This brings us to the question of inter- and transdisciplinarity as it arises in this specific context. The curriculum for school pupils is traditionally organized around school disciplines and their training is constructed around a compartmentalized curriculum (Fourez, 2002; Goldschmid, 2002; Lenoir et al., 2000). However, parallel to the disciplinary approaches, complex topics (e.g. sustainable development, democracy etc.) and transversal competencies associated with the globalized society, in which pupils develop, are increasingly being incorporated into the various curricula.

With inter- and transdisciplinary teaching, the pupils are prompted to develop a general perspective on complex questions associated with the natural, human and social realities in which they are immersed (Lenoir, 2015). These topics do not have a specifically disciplinary referent, and their inter- and transdisciplinary treatment makes it possible to provide a general and enhanced vision of them. Knowledge originating from different disciplines is combined and is integrated to enable school pupils to make sense of such topics and bring them to life in a concrete and practical context (Morin, 1994; Perrig-Chiello & Darbellay, 2002). By establishing the link between the contributions made by the different disciplines involved, the pupil assumes a central role in the development and co-construction of these topics. This way of understanding the learning process supports the idea of the child as the actor of his or her own knowledge and, accordingly, complies with the requirements associated with children's rights education.

As we have seen, children's rights education involves the in-depth examination of the topic but also the active participation of children in the decision-making processes in their classroom and school. Inter- and transdisciplinarity offer a means of responding to the different levels of detail involved. By making different disciplines collaborate around the topic of children's rights and accompanying the pupils in the construction of links between these disciplines while developing their knowledge on children's rights, the pupils become actors in their own learning processes. Also, by organizing the school system as a whole around the respect of children's rights (rights respecting school charters, transparent penalty systems, representative consultation, etc.), pupils assume a role in the decision-making that affects them and can establish their participative rights around real issues. These different points of access

associated with children's rights education go beyond disciplinary approaches and entail moving away from them so that the school system as a whole is involved in the objective of implementing children's rights effectively.

Nonetheless, the thematic orientations addressed in the curricula face certain difficulties in relation to the implementation of inter- and transdisciplinary teaching. The disciplines are branded in the social representations and subject to hierarchization (Fabiani, 2012; Goldschmid, 2002; Lenoir et al., 2000), and it is important that teachers assume a certain distance from their own area of specialization and that each discipline involved in the collaboration is considered as equal to the others. The disciplinary identity of teachers, their perception of their own discipline and those of others, and the way in which they have made to collaborate will be influenced by their training (Darbellay, Sedooka & Paulsen, 2016; Lenoir et al., 2000). The training of teachers is fundamental to the successful implementation of inter- and transdisciplinary teaching (Di Giulio & Defila, 2008; Goldschmid, 2002). Moreover, some authors like Schneuwly (2016) query the foundations and limits of this disciplinary integration and see them as a form of impairment of the profundity of disciplinary knowledge. Other more structural difficulties may also affect the implementation of inter- and transdisciplinary teaching. The management of time slots, the provision of common spaces enabling inter- and transdisciplinary work, the possibility for specialized teachers to collaborate with others and to teach in cooperation with their peers are all central factors for the facilitation of inter- and transdisciplinary teaching. Hence the training of teachers, their disciplinary identity, and their vision of inter- and transdisciplinarity, as well as the structure of the school, all have a major influence on the implementation of inter- and transdisciplinary teaching.

4 Conclusion

In this article, we analyse the link between children's rights education goals and inter- and transdisciplinary teaching as a means to achieve those goals. Children's rights cover a wide range of complex subjects and learning processes and inter- and transdisciplinary teaching is a coherent and organised approach to address them. It allows pupils to be actors of their own learning and to be part of their knowledge building, while studying issues that concern them directly and are socially

relevant. Interestingly, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches promote rights to, in and through education: it indeed creates bridges between learning about children's rights and developing rights-respecting attitudes and values. Thus, inter- and transdisciplinary children's rights education is a key to the implementation of the CRC in schools.

How can the school system promote inter- and transdisciplinarity? Is it possible to overcome traditions and habits to give a broader place to these approaches? How can teachers be supported in implementing them? Do the actual curricula place sufficient emphasis on children's rights to address them in their whole complexity, too? Are actors in and outside schools aware of the range of benefits offered by children's rights education? This contribution has shed light on some aspects of those complex questions, underlining some blind spots too. Inter- and transdisciplinary approaches involve challenges, but they can be seen as an opportunity for the implementation of children's rights in schools.

(Foot)notes

¹ <https://www.plandetudes.ch/per>

² In the context of this section, the term *discipline* refers to the application of school rules.

References

- Chevallard, Y. (1991). *La transposition didactique. Du savoir savant au savoir enseigné*. Grenoble: La Pensée Sauvage.
- Coppock, V. & Gillett-Swan, J. (2016). Children's Rights, Educational Research and the UNCRC. In J. Gillett-Swan & V. Coppock (Eds.), *Children's Rights, Educational Research and the UNCRC: past, present, future* (pp. 7-16). Oxford: Symposium Book.
- Covell, K. & Howe, R. (1999). The impact of children's rights education: A Canadian study. *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 7, 171-183.
- Covell, K. & Howe, R. (2001). Moral education through the 3 Rs: rights, respect and responsibility. *Journal of Moral Education*, 30(1), 31-42.
- Covell, K., McNeil, J. & Howe, R. (2009). Reducing teacher burnout by increasing student engagement, a children's rights approach. *School psychology international*, 30(3), 282-290.
- Darbellay, F. (2005). *Interdisciplinarité et transdisciplinarité en analyse des discours:*

- Complexité des textes, intertextualité et transtextualité*. Genève: Slatkine.
- Darbellay, F. (2015). Rethinking inter- and transdisciplinarity: undisciplined knowledge and the emergence of a new thought style. *Future*, 65, 163-174.
- Darbellay, F., Cockell, M., Billotte, J. & Waldvogel, F. (2008). For a world knowledge dialogue. In F. Darbellay, M. Cockell, J. Billotte & F. Waldvogel (Eds.), *A vision of transdisciplinarity: Laying foundations for a world knowledge dialogue* (pp. x-xxix). Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes.
- Darbellay, F., Sedooka, A. & Paulsen, T. (2016). *La recherche interdisciplinaire sous la loupe: Paroles de chercheurs*. Berne: Peter Lang.
- Di Giulio, A. & Defila, R. (2008). Interdisziplinariät in der Lehre – Qualitätsmerkmale und Kompetenzvermittlung. In F. Darbellay & T. Paulsen (Hrsg.), *Le défi de l'inter- et transdisciplinarité: Concepts, méthodes et pratiques innovantes dans l'enseignement et la recherche; Herausforderung Inter- und Transdisziplinarität: Konzepte, Methoden und innovative Umsetzung in Lehre und Forschung* (37-61). Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes.
- Fabiani, J.-L. (2012). Du chaos des disciplines à la fin de l'ordre disciplinaire? *Pratiques*, 153-154, 129-140.
- Fourez, G. (2002). *Approches didactiques de l'interdisciplinarité*. Bruxelles: De Boeck.
- Goldschmid, M. L. (2002). Se préparer au travail interdisciplinaire. In F. Darbellay & P. Perrig-Chiello (Eds.), *Qu'est-ce que l'interdisciplinarité: Les nouveaux défis de l'enseignement* (pp. 71-88). Lausanne: Réalités sociales.
- Jeff, T. (2002). Schooling, education and children's rights. In B. Franklin (Ed.), *The new handbook of children's rights: comparative policy and practice* (pp. 45-59). London: Routledge.
- Klein, J. (1990). *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory & Practice*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Klein, J. (2010). A taxonomy of interdisciplinarity. In R. Frodeman (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of interdisciplinarity* (pp. 15-30). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Legardez, A. (2006). Enseigner des questions socialement vives, quelques points de repères. In A. Legardez & L. Simonneaux (Eds.), *L'école à l'épreuve de l'actualité, enseigner les questions vives, Issy-les-Moulineaux: ESF* (19-32).
- Lenoir, Y. (2015). Quelle interdisciplinarité à l'école? *Les cahiers pédagogiques*. Repéré à http://www.cahiers-pedagogiques.com/IMG/pdf/quelle_interdisciplinarite_a_l_école_-_yves_lenoir_-_version_integrale.pdf
- Lenoir, Y., Larose, F., Grenon, V. & Hasni, A. (2000). La stratification des matières scolaires chez les enseignants du primaire au Québec: évolution ou stabilité des représentations depuis 1981. *Revue des sciences de l'éducation*, 26(3), 483-514.
- Maingueneau, D. (2010). Analyse du discours et champ disciplinaire. *Question de communication*, 18, 185-196.
- Moody, Z. (2016). *Les droits de l'enfant: genèse, institutionnalisation et diffusion (1924-1989)*. Neuchâtel: Editions Alphil.
- Morin, E. (1994). Sur l'interdisciplinarité. *Bulletin Interactif du Centre International de Recherches et Etudes transdisciplinaires*, 2.
- Perrenoud, P. (1995). Des savoirs aux compétences, de quoi parle-t-on en parlant de compétences? *Pédagogie collégiale*, 9(1), 20-24.
- Perrig-Chiello, P. & Darbellay, F. (2002). Inter- et transdisciplinarité: Concepts et méthodes. In P. Perrig-Chiello & F. Darbellay (Eds.), *Qu'est-ce que l'interdisciplinarité? Les nouveaux défis de l'enseignement* (pp. 13-34). Lausanne: Réalités sociales.
- Piaget, J. (1973). L'épistémologie des relations interdisciplinaires. *Bulletin Uni-information*, 31, 4-8.
- Reynaert, D., Bouverne-de-Bie, M. & Vandeveld, S. (2009). A review of children's rights literature since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Childhood*, 16(4), 518-534.
- Rege Colet, N. & Tardif, J. (2008). Interdisciplinarité et transdisciplinarité: Quels cas de figure pour les programmes universitaires et les parcours de formation. In F. Darbellay & T. Paulsen (Eds.), *Le défi de l'inter- et transdisciplinarité: Concepts, méthodes et pratiques innovantes dans l'enseignement et la recherche; Herausforderung Inter- und Transdisziplinarität: Konzepte, Methoden und innovative Umsetzung in Lehre und Forschung* (15-35). Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes.
- Sedooka, A., Steffen, G., Paulsen, T. & Darbellay, F. (2015). Paradoxe identitaire et

- interdisciplinarité: un regard sur les identités disciplinaires des chercheurs. *Nature, Sciences, Société*, 23, 367-377.
- Schneuwly, B. (1995). De l'utilité de la «transposition didactique». In J.-L. Chriss, J. David & Y. Reuter (Eds.), *Didactique du français: état d'une discipline* (pp. 47-62). Paris: Nathan.
- Schneuwly, B. (2016). Le concert des disciplines. Des réponses possibles aux questions posées du point de vue de l'interdisciplinarité. *Educateur*, 2, 6-9.
- Tan, J. (2011). Education and children's rights. In P. Jones & G. Walker (Eds.), *Children's rights in practice* (pp. 109-123). London: Sage Publications.
- Verhellen, E. (1996). The Convention on the Rights of the Child. In E. Verhellen (Ed.), *Understanding Children's Rights: Collected papers presented at the first International Interdisciplinary Course on Children's Rights, Ghent: Children's Rights Centre* (pp. 27-43). University of Ghent.
- Verhellen, E. (1999). *La Convention relative aux droits de l'enfant*. Louvain: Garant.
- Weingart, P. (2010). A Short history of Knowledge Formations. In R. Frodeman (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity* (pp. 3-14). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Authors

Maude Louviot, PhD Candidate

University of Geneva (Valis Campus)

Zoe Moody, Prof.

University of Geneva (Valais Campus)

Frédéric Darbellay, Prof.

University of Geneva (Valais Campus)