

## COOPERATION BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY AND THE OMBUDSPERSON FOR CHILDREN IN THE EDUCATION OF TEACHER'S FACULTY STUDENTS FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

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### Abstract

Protection and promotion of children's rights is an indispensable part of teachers' work. Unfortunately, the majority of violations of children's rights are perpetrated by persons closest to the child, including teachers. In addition to home, school is the place where children spend most of their time and, consequently, challenges, responsibility for recognising violations of children's rights and potential for protection of children at school is significant. That is why it is important for teachers to have information about children's rights, to recognise the situations in which children are endangered and means and mechanisms of their protection. This paper presents an elective course on children's rights, which is a part of future teachers' education for the protection of children's rights, and which is realised in cooperation of the University of Split and the Ombudsman for Children. The aim of the course on children's rights is to familiarize students with children's rights and to make them critically reflect on protection, exercise and promotion of those rights. As a part of the qualitative and quantitative analysis, the paper includes students' evaluations and feedback and the lecturer's reflexion. Students and the lecturer estimate the contents of the course as very important and useful for working with children and their future profession, and the course can serve as an example of positive practice for other universities.

**Keywords:** *Education, rights of the child, ombudsman, students, evaluation.*

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### 1. Introduction

The educational curriculum on protection and promotion of children's rights is of crucial importance for future teachers if one takes into account the extent of teachers' influence and their role in the upbringing, education and protection of children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as other international and national documents, guarantees children the exercise of all their rights. Unfortunately, most violations of children's rights are perpetrated in the places where children should feel safest, i.e. in their homes and schools, by persons closest to the child, such as parents and teachers. The institution of the Ombudsman for Children in the Republic of Croatia monitors, protects and promotes children's rights. It monitors the harmonisation of national regulations with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, monitors whether the Republic of Croatia meets the obligations it has as a party to the Convention and observes individual violations of children's rights. According to reports on violations of children's rights that the Ombudswoman for Children receives, most violations occur in schools. The range of violations that children experience in schools is wide, including exposure to violence by peers and adults, inaccessibility of education, violations of privacy, violations of the right to participation and expression of opinion, and the right to information. The rights of children with special needs – children with disabilities, children of national minorities, children with behavioural problems, foreign children, children with health problems and other specific groups of children are violated as well. Violations occur especially in the process of continual assessment and evaluation of children and imposing pedagogical measures. When analysing violations in the area of education, one can notice that some violations result from insufficient awareness and information on the concept of children's rights and on the possibilities of child protection, a lack of content on children's rights within the framework of both the initial education of teachers as well as their professional development. According to Hedbjörk, Per Helldahl, Tegler, and Steele, (2019) "In higher education, there is space for improvement in formalisation and quality assurance of learning outcomes related to human rights." This view is based on the reports of three countries on education for human rights in numerous programmes in Croatia, Portugal and Sweden. Surveys clearly indicate the importance of teachers and their competences, as well as their attitude to education for human rights. A hesitation or resistance to include contents related to human rights is sometimes present among teaching staff, and normative aspects of the issue of human rights are sometimes perceived as opposite to the scientific base of higher education. Reports show that shifting focus on knowledge, competences and skills

that students need to develop for their future professional life, in line with a stronger formalisation of the intended learning, might be an efficient way of avoiding such conflicts between science and education for human rights. Furthermore, there is space for greater involvement of teachers, working in other departments, non-governmental organisations or as practitioners. It seems that national legislation and government's initiatives play an important role in integrating the content of human rights in higher education programmes. "Since the area involved is the field of human rights, it is surprising that only 24% of programmes include professionals from the non-state sector, and less than 14% from the public sector specialised for this domain. In under 5% of programmes, lectures on human rights are not given by their staff at all" (Matešić, Ivković Hodžić, 2018, p. 48). "State reports show that in those countries where special goals in relation to human rights are defined by national legislation, respondents more explicitly name them as important" (Hedbjörk, Per Helldahl, Tegler, and Steele, 2019, p. 5). National action plans for rights and interest of children in the Republic of Croatia name future teachers' education on children's rights as one of the measures. "The current state strategy in Croatia puts the concept of the child/student as an active citizen in the focus of the educational process, and civil education is currently conducted as a cross-curricular topic in primary and secondary schools throughout the country. The implementation of these policies obviously affects higher education because professionals in the field of education need to have knowledge and awareness of human and children's rights, as well as skills for fostering civic participation" (Hedbjörk, Per Helldahl, Tegler and Steele 2019, p.17). As a result of the lack of teaching staff and interest, there are very few courses on children's rights at universities, and most of them are conducted as elective courses. Higher education plays a vital role in providing students with knowledge and skills required for facing situations they might encounter in their future careers when human rights are violated or endangered. "It is crucial to empower higher education on human rights in all areas where professionals are expected to protect children's rights in daily practice (education, healthcare, social care, judiciary, police, leisure time). Theoretical knowledge should be clearly connected with practical skills. Therefore, a closer cooperation with practitioners and professionals, as well as valorisation of former students should be encouraged" (Hedbjörk, Per Helldahl, Tegler, and Steele, 2019, p.7). Employees of the Office of Ombudswoman for Children occasionally hold lectures on children's rights as guest lecturers at faculties educating students for working with children, and these are primarily teacher education faculties. Students, as well as university professors, consider such lectures useful for their future work and the University has engaged an employee of the Office specialising in pedagogy with the experience of working at school as an associate teacher in conducting the course Law in everyday life at the Department of Teacher Education of the University of Split. The aim of this paper is to present the elective course on children's rights as a part of future teachers' education for children's rights. The course is taught in cooperation of the University and the Ombudsman for Children.

## **2. Course description "Law in everyday life"**

The cooperation of the Office of Ombudswoman for Children and the University aims at facilitating the enrichment of the study programme of teacher education with contents on human rights. The starting point in joint design of learning outcomes of the course was the issue of competences, i.e. knowledge, skills and attitudes that students need to develop in order to be ready to comprehensively and in a timely manner protect children's rights and actively participate in realisation and promotion of children's rights. Future teachers are expected to know and be able to face situations endangering children's rights (family, peer violence and cyberbullying, inappropriate behaviour of parents towards children during divorce, too low and too high parents' expectations, parents' failure to follow recommendations of educational professionals in relation to education of children with developmental difficulties, relation with media in case of harm to children, taking children from parents and placing them in foster families or social welfare institutions, inappropriate behaviour of children endangering the child and others in the class, children with mental health problems and other family or social problems). This presupposes being familiar with human rights, national legislation and procedures, i.e. protocols for handling such situations. The aim of the course is to learn about children's rights and to critically reflect on their protection, realisation and promotion. The course is realised in the form of 15 hours of lectures and 15 hours of exercises. The expected learning outcomes are: to understand the concept of the child's needs, rights and best interests; to understand the importance of timely and comprehensive child protection; to be able to identify situations of vulnerability of children and know the ways and mechanisms of their protection; to build awareness of personal and professional responsibility to protect children and promote children's rights; to understand the importance and needs of human rights education; to be able to promote the rights of the child and create protective prevention programmes; to have a critical approach to child protection issues. The course is elective within the teacher education programme and it has been conducted in the winter semester since the academic year 2011/2012. Teaching methods used within the course include: workshops; discussions and work in small groups; pair work; field work – visits to social welfare institutions accommodating children and educational institutions providing education for children with special needs, visiting the institution of

the Ombudsman for Children; case studies and problem solving; keeping a log recording cases of children's rights violations, and role-plays. Students are encouraged to research and participate in resolving specific questions and issues. That enables students to develop critical perspective on human rights issues, while theoretical knowledge is clearly matched with practical skills. When it comes to education for human rights, "students emphasise the importance of flexibility in learning methods and promotion of cooperation between students and teachers. They emphasise the need not only for informative courses but also interactive courses which would equip students with tools for facing challenges of human rights in their future professional lives" (Hedbjörk, Per Helldahl, Tegler, and Steele, 2019, p.6). Students also have an opportunity for self-reflection through workshops, and at the end of the course an analysis of students' competences required for timely and comprehensive protection of children is conducted. Students do a self-assessment of the competences they possess and which they are satisfied with as well as of those they should develop further. Students' responsibilities include: participation and performing teaching and extracurricular (individual and group) activities that enable the acquisition of learning outcomes provided by the course; writing and presenting a seminar paper (workshop or research); passing an oral exam; if desired, keeping a log of the observed violations of children's rights (in media, in the family, in the surroundings). Grading and assessing students during lessons includes: student activity during class (regularity, critical discussion, conclusions) - 20%. Students have to complete one essay on a given methodical topic in agreement with the teacher. The seminar is publicly presented and evaluated - 30%, and there is an oral exam - 50%. The final grade of the course will be formed on the basis of all the named grades and student's self-assessment. After having attended the lectures, students take the oral exam.

Human rights have to be observed as an umbrella concept, a part of the learning process, and not an end in itself. Human rights should be taught about in the atmosphere which respects those rights and a comprehensive understanding of the concept of human rights is required. Therefore, teachers' competences are crucial for learning outcomes of the course. The lecturer of the course is a pedagogue and possesses knowledge and extensive experience in the field of monitoring realisation of children's rights in the area of education, which presents a significant quality contribution in designing, conducting and evaluation of the course programme.

*Table 1. Course content detailed by weekly class schedule (syllabus).*

<b>LECTURES:</b>	
Introductory lecture.	1 lesson
The needs, rights and best interests of the child - fundamental determinants.	1+1
International and national regulations governing the protection of children. The Ombudsman for Children and other institutions for protecting children.	1+1
The level of protection and the state of children's rights in the Republic of Croatia and in the world. The most common forms of violation of children's rights.	1+1
Protection of children in the family (the rights and duties in the relationship between parents and children, violation of the rights of children in the family, support to the family in child protection)	1+1
Child abuse and neglect - types, causes, symptoms, treatment (domestic violence, violence in educational institutions, bullying, cyberbullying, violence on the street).	1+1
Comprehensive protection of children in the educational system (kindergartens, schools, clinics).	1+1
Protection of children with special needs - recognition, needs, opportunities, problems (children with disabilities, gifted children, chronically ill children, children with behavioural disorders, children belonging to minorities...).	1+1
Competence of teachers in identifying violations, the protection and promotion of children's rights.	1+1
Education for human rights - challenges-opportunities-difficulties.	1+1
Cooperation of families, kindergartens/schools and the community - fundamental factor of comprehensive protection of children (forms, opportunities, difficulties, challenges).	1+1
Protecting children in their free time. Cultural rights. Participation. Media and the child (protection of children's privacy, positive activities for children and about children).	1+1
Health care rights of the child. Protecting children from accidents.	1+1
Social, economic, judicial protection of children's rights. Child labour and child trafficking.	1+1
Creating a preventive protection programme.	1+1
The evaluation of the programme.	1

### 3. Methodology

As a part of the qualitative and quantitative analysis, the paper uses the University's surveys and students' feedback obtained through an individual interview with each student as well as the lecturer's reflection containing the grade point average students achieved at the exam. The first part of the survey refers to students and contains the question: Assess your own ability to meet the course requirements. The second part of the survey refers to the quality of teaching and teaching work, and it includes the following questions: the course teacher/associate teacher introduced the content and syllabus in a clear and comprehensible manner, the course teacher/associate teacher clearly determined the manner and criteria of students assessment, lectures are held on time and regularly, the course teacher/associate teacher presents teaching contents intelligibly, teaching is conducted in line with the syllabus, teaching materials are appropriate and comprehensible, the course teacher/associate teacher is committed to presenting teaching content in a quality manner, the course teacher/associate teacher encourages students to be active during lessons, the course teacher/associate teacher is polite in communication with students. Students have an opportunity to write additional comments within the survey.

Participants: students of the Department of Teacher Education of the University of Split attending the course in the last 10 years. On average 20-30 students take the course each year, and 256 students participated in the evaluation.

### 4. Results and discussion

The process of implementing new courses includes the evaluation of teaching within those courses, while students provide direct information on what they really think about the course (Hounsell, 2003). Each year, within the institutional evaluation of the quality of teaching work, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split conducts student surveys including questions on students, the quality of teaching and teaching work. The global index in all components of the course Law in everyday life in the academic years 2011/2012, 2012/2013, 2014/2015, 2015/2016, 2016/2017, 2017/2018, 2018/2019, 2019/2020, 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 ranged from 4.8 to 5.0 in the given range from 1 to 5. Summative assessment according to Patton (2002) examines the overall effectiveness of the programme, policy or product effectiveness to make a decision on the continuation and assesses the possibility of enhancing it in other situations. Evaluation of the teaching process is an important part of professional practice of each teacher, so with the aim of improving her practice the lecturer herself conducted interviews with each student after the exam to obtain a deeper insight and details that cannot be obtained only through quantitative data. Interview questions were open-ended and the same for all students: How did they like the course and what shall they take from it? Did the course fulfil the expectations they had stated in the introductory lecture? What would they improve, i.e. what can we do to make the course better? Students rarely participate in evaluation of the teaching process and rarely have an opportunity to offer their suggestions with the aim of improving it, so they participated gladly. Interviews with students prove to be a very valuable data source, because data were collected in a relaxed atmosphere after the exam had been passed.

Here are some students' answers to the first question in the interview: "The most valuable and useful course, it has absolutely met my expectations.", "Nobody has ever informed us on the means of protecting children.", "Now I feel safer and I know how to react in certain situations.", "The best course, exceeding my expectations", "The most interesting part were specific situations showing us how children's rights are violated and what can be done about it.", "I liked when we visited the Office of the Ombudswoman for Children. Then I saw for the first time the book – the Convention on the Rights of the Child and not just any but written in Braille.", "The most useful part was practicing giving statements to media, and learning what I am allowed to say without additionally violating the rights of the child.", "I liked the workshops on the protection of children from violence and problem-solving.", "So far, nobody has prepared us for work with conflicting parents in this way.", "The most interesting course which is directly connected with practice", "The course which helped me become aware of my competences.", "I was particularly impressed by the topic of enforcement, i.e. taking a child in school and placing it in a social welfare institution and how to react in such a situation.", "Before this course I had not known that I could come upon such situations in my practice.", "After this course the responsibility and the role of a teacher are much clearer to me.", "The topic of treatment of divorced parents, their rights and responsibilities towards children has impressed me a lot.", "No objections at all. A very interesting content of the course and a great lecturer, who is always available for all student questions.", "The lecturer is accessible, interesting, and she accepts our opinions.", "The lecturer has extensive knowledge and experience, which she gladly shares with us, and at the same time she wants to hear our opinion.", "One of the best courses and one of the best lecturers.", "The lecturer is very accessible, and a great teacher.

Compliments for her work.” All students agree that this course should be a compulsory course and that students of all majors should attend it.

The answer to the second interview question mostly was that they would not change anything. The following were some additional answers: “This course should include more hours,” “The course should be an obligatory course,” “Even more field work and visits to institutions,” “All contents should be presented through problem-solving scenarios,” “Not enough hours for such important topics.”

As summative evaluation implies evaluation of educational outcomes and it is performed at the end of a certain course, a semester or a year it included the analysis of final grades of students. The grade point average of students’ final grades in this course depending on the year ranged from 4.8 to 4.9 of the maximum 5.0.

The results of evaluation over 10 years show efficiency of the course in all areas. Students and lecturers assess the content of the course as important and useful for working with children and their future profession. In addition to acquiring knowledge on the concept of children’s rights, working on problem tasks, self-reflection and other practical tasks empowered students and contributed to their professional development.

## 5. Conclusion

The cooperation of the Ombudsman for Children and the University of Split proved to be an example of good practice and partnership of the two institutions for the wellbeing of students and eventually children they will teach. The cooperation will be complemented, extended and deepened. The combination of the theory on the concept of children’s rights, methods of education for human rights and experience in monitoring of realisation of children’s rights proved to be an excellent combination in creating contents and outcomes of this course and one-time lectures and workshops which the Office employees hold at faculties. The extraordinary contribution of this cooperation is visible not only in spreading the knowledge on the concept of children’s rights but also in their direct protection as well as the development of professional interest of students for the topic of children’s rights.

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