

SAFE SCHOOLS IN THE DIGITAL AGE – CHILD RIGHTS-BASED DIGITAL POLICIES IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Children's increasing engagement in digital environment poses significant challenges for education systems, particularly regarding institutional responsibility for safeguarding children's rights beyond the physical school space. While international child rights standards increasingly emphasise the duty of States and educational institutions to ensure safe and inclusive digital environments, school-level implementation often remains fragmented and underregulated. This paper examines how Hungarian primary schools address digital behaviour, online safety, and cyberbullying within their Internal School Regulations (*házi rend*), understood as key instruments of school-level governance. Despite the relevance of international norms—mainly the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and General Comment No. 25—there is currently no binding national guidance in Hungary requiring schools to regulate online conduct or digital harms within their institutional frameworks. The study addresses two research questions: (1) To what extent do Hungarian primary schools regulate device use, online behaviour, and cyberbullying through their internal regulations? (2) How can a child rights-based analytical framework be developed that is capable of serving as a foundation for the design of internal school policies governing online behaviour? Methodologically, the research combines a qualitative content analysis of 20 randomly selected internal school regulations, one from each county in Hungary assessed against a child rights-based coding framework. It is not representative, but illustrative in nature. The analysis focuses on institutional responsibilities, procedural safeguards, complaint mechanisms, and the integration of child rights principles into organizational rules. The paper argues that ensuring safe digital school environments is not solely a pedagogical or technological issue, but a matter of educational governance and organizational accountability. It concludes by identifying core elements for a centrally supported, flexible regulatory template grounded in a child rights-based approach, aimed at strengthening institutional responses to digital risks while supporting equity, participation, and social justice in education.

Keywords: *Organizational issues, educational policy and leadership, right to education, online children's rights, institutional responsibilities.*

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, digital technologies profoundly shape children's lives, providing opportunities for learning and socialisation but also exposing them to risks that threaten their safety, privacy, and well-being. Schools therefore have a dual responsibility: to develop children's digital competences and media literacy, and to ensure the protection of their rights in both physical and digital contexts. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), complemented by General Comment No. 25 on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment (General Comment No.25; UNCRC, 2021) forms the core international framework, setting out how children's rights must be safeguarded in the digital environment.

While new instruments increasingly address online risks, differences in scope and enforcement leave considerable cross-border inconsistencies. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights report (2025) stresses that child protection systems across EU Member States remain fragmented and poorly coordinated, limiting their effectiveness. Similarly, the Child Online Safety Toolkit underlines that many policies are still reactive rather than preventative, creating gaps in protection. These findings point to the urgent need for integrated, harmonised, and child-centred approaches that embed safety and rights into digital environment “by design and by default”.

Children face concrete online risks such as harmful content, harassment, grooming and exploitation, which remain insufficiently addressed. Research shows large gaps in national legislation, rising exposure with age, and that while sexual content is often not seen as harmful, online bullying is the most upsetting for children (Livingstone et al., 2011).

Schools are key to prevent and address risks, yet current measures often lack a child-rights-based approach, weakening their effectiveness. Research and children's voices highlight the need for stronger education, safer digital environment and policies that systematically integrate children's rights (UNICEF, 2021; Collins & Paré, 2016; ECPACT, 2024).

To conclude, the missing link lies in the absence of comprehensive comparative research that bridges international standards with national and school-level implementation. While international and European bodies have produced a rich body of normative texts and guidance, there is little systematic analysis of how these standards are operationalised within schools, or how national legal systems mediate their application.

The objective of this research is to advance understanding of how children's digital rights can be effectively safeguarded in schools. The study is innovative in three ways. First, it brings together international law, European Union law, and national school-level regulation in a systematic analysis, an area that remains underexplored. Second, it develops an evaluative framework for assessing school codes of conduct against children rights standards. Finally, provides a structured analysis of school codes of conducts in Hungarian schools as a sample.

The focus is on developing a Child Rights-Based Analytical Framework to assess how children's digital rights are addressed in school-level regulation. Instead of proposing model policies or best practices, the research offers a legally grounded analytical tool based on international and European children's rights standards. The framework translates these standards into evaluative criteria that can be applied across different educational contexts. Developing this framework is the main objective and primary outcome of the research.

2. Methodology

The research uses legal analysis to examine international and European children's rights law. These sources are analysed to identify key obligations and principles relevant to children's digital rights in education. This analysis underpins the analytical framework and explains the selection of its criteria. The framework was developed through a child rights-based approach, drawing primarily on the four general principles of the UNCRC—non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development, and child participation—as well as their interpretation in digital contexts under General Comment No. 25. These normative foundations were translated into four school-level governance dimensions: child-friendliness, clarity, responsibilities, and online safety, which together informed the development of sixteen analytical criteria for assessing internal school regulations.

In addition to framework development, the research includes an applied, illustrative analysis of school-level digital regulation in Hungary. This does not intend to empirically test or validate the framework. It demonstrates the framework's usability, provides contextual insight by pointing out the structural challenges in school-level digital child protection, and reveals tensions between legal norms and institutional practice.

Hungary was selected for its accessibility, legal familiarity, and identifiable regulatory gaps. The analysis is not representative, not comparative and does not intend to generalise findings, it is only illustrative.

3. Child Rights-Based Analytical Framework

The framework is based on the Child Rights-Based Approach under the UNCRC, including its interpretation in General Comment No. 25. The approach provides normative principles, such as best interests, participation, non-discrimination, development, and protection and methodological guidance, focusing on children as rights-holders, duty-bearer responsibility, and context sensitivity.

The framework builds on international children's rights law and European legal standards related to digital regulation and education. These frameworks provide the normative basis for identifying state and school-level obligations, without prescribing specific regulatory models. They are used to develop analytical criteria for assessing how children's digital rights are addressed in school-level rules and practices.

The analytical framework developed for this research is grounded in a child rights-based approach, which treats children as rights-holders whose protection, participation, dignity, and developmental needs must be reflected in institutional governance, including within schools' digital environment. The framework draws on the four general principles of the UNCRC—non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development, and child participation—and translates these normative principles into a school governance context. This makes the framework child rights-based because it moves beyond a narrow focus on discipline or device control and instead evaluates whether institutional regulation reflects children's rights, wellbeing, and participation in digitally mediated educational settings.

Based on these foundations, the framework establishes sixteen analytical criteria for assessing internal school regulations. These include whether schools regulate students' use of privately owned digital devices and the type of regulation applied (such as bans, restrictions, or conditional permission); whether internal school regulations address data protection and privacy; whether they contain specific rules on online misconduct, including cyberbullying; and whether they establish clear procedures, sanctions, and appeals mechanisms for handling online incidents. The framework also examines broader child rights dimensions, including references to safe and healthy environment, access to psychological support, explicit recognition of children's rights, child representation, parental responsibility, teachers' roles in online matters, regulation of off-campus behaviour, and whether the wording of internal school regulations is child-friendly and age-appropriate and the question of non-discrimination and equality.

Taken together, these criteria provide a structured means of evaluating whether school policies approach digitalisation merely as a matter of regulating devices, or as a broader question of institutional responsibility for safeguarding children's rights in online and hybrid educational spaces. In this sense, the framework is (1) based on children's rights standards (2) serves as an analytical tool, not as a policy model (3) can be applied across different legal and educational contexts (4) takes institutional and contextual constraints into account.

4. Hungary as an applied illustration

To illustrate the practical applicability of the child rights-based analytical framework, the research includes an applied, illustrative analysis of school-level digital regulation in Hungary. This exercise does not seek to empirically validate the framework, nor does it aim to produce representative or generalisable findings. Rather, its purpose is threefold: first, to demonstrate the usability of the framework in a concrete institutional context; second, to provide contextual insight into the structural challenges of school-level digital child protection; and third, to reveal tensions between international child rights norms, domestic legal expectations, and institutional practice at the school level.

Hungary was selected as the illustrative case due to legal familiarity, accessibility of school regulatory documents, and the presence of identifiable regulatory gaps concerning children's digital rights in education. The analysis examined the internal school regulations (*házi rendek*) of 20 state-maintained Hungarian primary schools, with one school randomly selected from each county and the capital to ensure geographical diversity. While the sample is not representative and does not support broader generalisation, it provides sufficient illustrative depth to identify recurring regulatory patterns and institutional blind spots. The focus on primary schools is particularly justified given the importance of this developmental stage for establishing media literacy, responsible digital device use, and behavioural norms that may shape children's long-term online conduct.

Using the sixteen criteria of the child rights-based analytical framework, the illustrative findings suggest that, although Hungarian schools have largely incorporated national rules on mobile device use, broader digital child protection remains significantly underregulated. Internal school regulations rarely address online misconduct directly, provide almost no specific procedures for handling digital incidents, and generally fail to clearly define the responsibilities of schools, teachers, or parents in responding to online harms. References to children's rights, participation, and child-friendly rule design also remain limited.

Taken together, the illustrative analysis highlights a broader structural issue: while children's digital lives are increasingly integrated into educational realities, school-level governance frameworks have not yet adapted in a systematic, rights-based manner. This reinforces the need for clearer institutional guidance and more coherent child rights-based digital governance within schools.

5. Conclusion

Children's digital lives are increasingly integrated into education, yet school-level governance has not kept pace with this transformation. This paper has argued that safeguarding children in digital environment is not merely a pedagogical or technological issue, but a matter of institutional responsibility and rights-based governance. By developing a Child Rights-Based Analytical Framework, grounded in international and European Union children's rights standards, the research provides a structured tool for assessing how schools address digital rights, online safety, and institutional accountability.

The illustrative Hungarian case demonstrates that, while device use is increasingly regulated, broader issues—such as cyberbullying, procedural safeguards, clearly defined responsibilities, and child participation—remain largely overlooked. This highlights a wider governance gap between normative legal expectations and school-level practice. Strengthening digital child protection in education therefore requires clearer institutional guidance, child-centred regulatory design, and the systematic integration of children's rights into internal school governance.

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