

Empowering and Promoting Children's Rights by Implementing Skills Labs Using Engaging Learning Activities

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Abstract: Despite the efforts to advance children's rights' protection, many children's rights are still not respected in many places. This makes it more necessary than ever to raise the awareness of children's rights and prepare new generations of students to protect children's rights via empowering them to engage in activism. Drawing upon human rights education (HRE) models in conjunction with UNICEF's methodologies, and the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), the current conceptual article suggests that by designing theoretically based engaging and meaningful learning activities, teachers can address the goals of HRE by raising the awareness of children's rights, fostering accountability, and encouraging students to engage in activism to protect children's rights. First, this article outlines a conceptual framework for designing meaningful and engaging learning activities within an adapted HRE model, combining the elements of HRE and UNICEF. Next, the educational innovation of Skills Labs in Greek education is introduced, and the TPB's foundation on designing learning activities is briefly explained. To clarify our proposal, three sample Skills Labs with example learning activities are presented, adhering to the three main HRE objectives of gaining knowledge–taking responsibility–taking action to protect and consolidate children's rights. Finally, this article explains the mechanism of how the TPB can support the effectiveness of this proposition and concludes with some important implications for practice.

Keywords: human rights education; rights of the child; learning activities; raising awareness; activism; theory of planned behaviour



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1. Introduction

Nowadays, children face new risks, such as climate change, migration, wars, and massive inequalities that threaten their future [1]. Children's rights are taking central stage in discussions of international politics, international organisations, and the public opinion in Western democratic societies. Despite the fact that children's rights have been enshrined in legal documents, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ref. [2], many children in the world are still encountering substantial challenges since children's rights are still not respected, and in many cases, they are violated [3]. The urgency to address the issue of violation and disrespect for children's rights becomes more apparent when we look at statistical information that reveals the extent of this blatant violation. For example, a systematic review revealed that one billion children between the age of 2 and 17 have experienced violence [4]. Since many rights violations are not taking place in isolation, rather they are mutually reinforcing and overlap [5], it makes sense to

educate students about the different types of children's rights so that they can be aware of how the different rights are connected [6] and what can be conducted by the community to defend them.

Cultivating students' awareness and fostering students' activism to protect children's rights are of paramount importance for addressing the pervasive violations of children's rights that are being recorded worldwide. Educating children about their rights can have a beneficial impact on children's lives, as educational programmes have shown [7]. Therefore, the present conceptual article synthesises the literature on children's rights and psychological theory of TPB to design educational activities that aim to raise students' awareness of children's rights and to engage students in activism to defend children's rights within the safety of a regulated learning environment. Additionally, in this paper, we present an analysis regarding how educational activities promote children's rights according to three levels of human rights education (HRE), namely knowledge, awareness, accountability, and activation [8], and the three strands of UNICEF [9]: *"Teaching and learning about, through and for rights"*. By highlighting effective strategies and presenting sample activities focused on empowering students to become active agents of change in promoting and protecting children's rights, the current conceptual article contributes to the dialogue on HRE.

This article begins with a brief introduction of HRE as the foundation on which educators can base the design of their instruction and learning activities to raise the awareness of children's rights and actively engage students in children's rights protection. Next, this article introduces the context of the educational innovation of *Skills Labs*, which were recently implemented in Greece, as a means of delivering these learning activities in school settings. Directly afterwards, we draw upon the psychological theory of planned behaviour [10] as the theoretical underpinning of the design of learning activities. Afterwards, we present and describe why and how we designed the proposed sample activities, which have the potential to cultivate awareness and empower students to engage in children's rights protection. Finally, this article culminates with a brief discussion.

2. Children's Rights and HRE as the Pathway to Raising Awareness and Engaging Students in Activism

Nothing is more important in the history of human rights than the UNCRC in 1989 written by the General Assembly of United Nations. The UNCRC constitutes a significant milestone that was the result of many years of concentrated actions to protect children's rights. Nowadays, the UNCRC is part of the national legislation of the majority of the United Nations' member-states and comprises a fundamental educational module for human rights in some member-states (e.g., Denmark, Australia) [11].

HRE is usually defined as an umbrella term that involves the education and training of learners to equip them with skills and knowledge to cultivate their attitudes and behaviours with the ultimate goal of empowering them to actively assist in constructing a universal culture of human rights, as well as defending this culture from blatant violations of human rights [12]. Part of the HRE is teaching about children's rights that is based not only on the UNCRC but also on other international legal documents that consolidate these rights [13]. Children's rights should not be taught in schools as a standalone module; rather, they should be horizontally incorporated across curricula because the standalone teaching of human rights cannot be used to make clear links with the multiple facets of human rights [14]. Hence, the current article considers the actual involvement of students with the issues of children's rights inside the school context from an early age as pivotal. In this line, we suggest that for effective teaching and learning about children's rights, teachers should design their instruction based on HRE models proposed by [8,15]

(i.e., knowledge, awareness, activation) integrated with UNICEF’s methodology called “Teaching and learning about, through and for rights” [16].

More specifically, UNICEF’s teaching and learning methodology is structured in three strands as follows. *Strand A*: Instruction *about* children’s rights takes a whole-school approach, aiming to build students’ knowledge about rights to enhance child well-being and the school, in general. Additionally, Strand A targets pursuing global justice advocacy and sustainable quality of life [16]. In contrast to Strand A, in *Strand B*, instruction is considered to occur *through* children’s rights and regards the infrastructure of schools so that it can be compliant with a rights protection perspective [16]. In *Strand C*, teaching *for* children’s rights goes beyond the narrow borders of the school and aims to reach the wider community and beyond by enabling students to become global citizens [16]. These three strands by UNICEF align well with the three revised HRE theoretical models advanced by Tibbitts [8].

The integration of these methodologies and adaptation to the primary school level (ages 10–12 years) can be easily understood by the joint consideration of their corresponding elements, in three distinct levels (Figure 1).

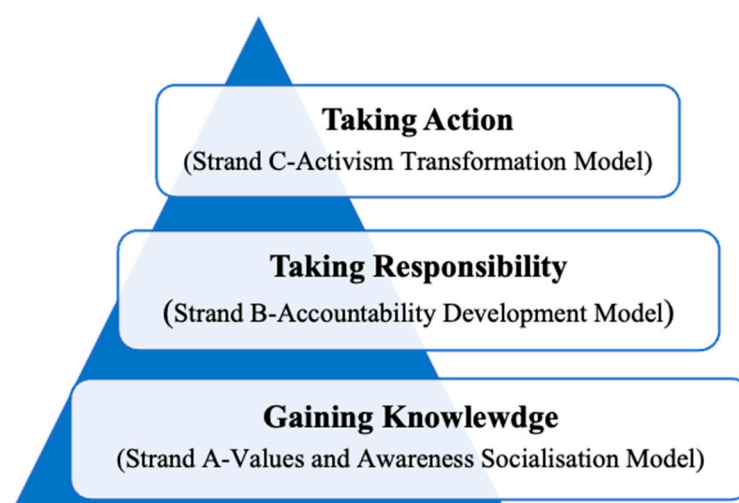


Figure 1. The adapted learning pyramid for primary school.

In the first level, UNICEF’s *Strand A* and Tibbitts’ [8] *Values and Awareness Socialisation model* are combined, aiming to enhance students’ knowledge about children’s rights and to recognise and adopt human rights values.

In the second level, *Strand B* [16] in conjunction with the *Accountability–Professional Development model* [8] aims to address the respect toward human rights and sensitise both policy makers and learners in terms of human rights issues through daily life experiences and self-reflection. Although the professional aspect of the model proposed by Tibbitts [8] may concern teachers who play a vital role as school agents, it seems irrelevant regarding primary school students; this is why we omitted this part/term in the adapted learning pyramid we propose here (see Figure 1).

In the third level, including *Strand C* [16] in combination with the *Activism–Transformation model* [8], the focus is to address the importance of empowering students to engage in activism not only to protect their own rights but also to promote and protect others’ rights and, especially, those of vulnerable social groups.

Following the above, we propose a reformulation: the adaptation of HRE for primary school students by integrating the three strands of UNICEF with Tibbitts’ [8] models into a simplified adapted learning pyramid model of HRE [15], as schematically presented in Figure 1. This proposition summarises and visualises in a meaningful, comprehensible way

the main learning objectives of HRE for the primary school context and is useful in guiding the design and instruction of child's rights-focused lessons.

Locating the correspondence between the three models and three strands in a pyramid shape shows the increasing degree of challenges and difficulty required to achieve the aims put forward by each model/strand. That is, the higher up we go, the harder it is to achieve the aims suggested by the model/strand.

3. Skills Labs in Greek Schools: A New Innovative Module in the National Curriculum

In response to current challenges and the need to protect children's rights, the Greek Ministry of Education in 2021 rolled out a new innovative school module/subject, namely Skills Labs, as a part of the compulsory curriculum for all grades of kindergarten, primary school, and junior high school [17]. This innovative module was the result of the "*Platform 21+*: *21st Century Skills Labs*" initiative, which was designed and piloted by the Institute of Education Policy (IEP) [18] along with the Ministry of Education in Greek schools. It is worth mentioning that this mandatory educational initiative for all schools in Greece, public and private, was awarded by the European Network of Global Education with the GENE Global Education in School-Based Programmes 2020/2021 award, for being a high-quality inspiring paradigm [19]. According to IEP and Eurydice [20], Skills Labs are designed to promote and implement the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals [21], focusing on Goal 4 "Quality Education" and especially emphasising Target 4.7 "Ensuring relevant learning for citizenship in a global world".

Skills Labs' principal objective is the development of students' 21st-century skills (4Cs: communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking) and digital skills, which are vital in contemporary multicultural, rapidly evolving societies. Following the structure of *open curriculum programmes* and relevant processes, Skills Labs are organised in four thematic units dealing with major current issues and are implemented (for 1–3 h per week for primary school, one hour per week for lower secondary school) with student-centred, participatory, and inquiry-based learning methods through interdisciplinary projects, workshops, and educational activities.

Relevant to the present article, one out of the four units of Skills Labs is named "*I Am Interested and Active. Social Empathy and Responsibility*", and one out of its three subsections is dedicated to human rights [17,20]. In this framework, the subject of children's rights is receiving significant attention as an integral part of the mandatory curriculum, which is delivered to all students of the Greek educational system.

At this point, and before the presentation of the educational activities, it is considered important to provide relevant empirical evidence supporting the implementation of Skills Labs [22]. According to the Scientific Unit of the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP) on Skills Labs, the evaluation results of the first implementation of Skills Labs were obtained through a survey conducted via an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed through the Panhellenic School Network and was carried out between 15 June and 30 June 2022, with the participation of 11,039 schools (5156 kindergartens, 4166 primary schools, and 1717 junior high schools). Overall, the survey findings indicated that teachers assessed Skill Labs positively, recognising their value and contribution to the whole educational process. Teachers largely agreed that Skills Labs have become a key component of school functioning, mainly due to students' positive response to both the content and the new methodology. Skills Labs have helped to strengthen the development of soft skills, life skills, and digital and science skills while also shaping a contemporary framework for educational programmes [22].

Indeed, the findings from relevant studies on the pilot implementation of Skills Labs are along these lines. For example, a relevant research [23] reported on 16 semi-structured interviews with primary and secondary school teachers from various regions of Greece, revealing that Skills Labs contribute to students' acquisition of soft skills such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, organisational thinking, initiative-taking, and decision-making. Furthermore, Skills Lab implementation aided in the comprehension of various concepts and the improvement in several learning outcomes, such as the development of social (communication, collaboration), cognitive, and digital skills and the advancement of STEAM education. Accordingly, another research [24] in kindergarten indicated that teachers agreed on the necessity of introducing innovative programmes into the educational process, as they believe these programmes modernise education and enhance teachers' abilities to achieve educational objectives. Additionally, teachers viewed the integration of Skills Labs into the school schedule positively, as it provided a structured approach to incorporating soft skills into schools [25]. Research also underscores that Skills Labs' implementation can be beneficial for both students and teachers [26].

Nevertheless, even though this educational innovation seems very promising and has great features, in-service teacher training regarding the implementation and teaching of this new module comprised only a 32 h online workshop which was not completed by every teacher enrolled in the training workshop [20,27,28]. Teachers' views on this training workshop on the implementation of Skills Labs were rather mixed. For example, in a relevant study, about 18–20% (29–33 out of 124) of teachers found the training not helpful, useful, or practical at all, while another 31–33% (51–54 out of 124) found the training to be barely helpful or useful and of little practical value [26]. Therefore, simple and straightforward practical guidelines and recommendations on how to effectively design meaningful and engaging learning activities about children's rights are very important to achieve educational objectives.

4. The TPB as the Foundation of Learning Activity Design

To show how educational activities for children's rights can lay a foundation for changing students' behaviours in terms of protecting children's rights, the current conceptual article draws upon the psychological theory of planned behaviour [10,29]. The core purpose of the TPB is to understand the predictors of and the change in human behaviour in a social context [30]. Three factors lie at the core of the theory which are postulated to influence human behaviour, namely attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control [31]. Although many definitions of the concept of attitude have been proposed [32], attitude toward a behavioural reaction can be understood as beliefs about the potential consequences of the target behaviour [31]. Subjective norm is the second central component that serves as an antecedent of behaviour and can be further distinguished in injunctive norms (i.e., whether individuals or groups approve or disapprove of an action) and descriptive norms (i.e., whether significant others are known to engage in such behaviour) [31]. Finally, perceived behavioural control manifests as the availability of control factors (e.g., time, skills, abilities) and control beliefs such as self-efficacy to achieve the desired standard of behavioural performance [29,31].

The TPB could be particularly important for human rights education because it can serve as a theoretical backdrop that supports the design and implementation of educational activities, aiming to cultivate not only students' awareness of children's rights but also their willingness and intention to engage in proactive behaviour to defend children's rights. The reason for this is that the TPB suggests that the three main components predict the subsequent intentionality of engaging in a target behaviour, which is known to strongly predict the actual target behaviour [30,33,34].

In the framework of HRE, the TPB can have direct applicability through the design of educational activities in the following ways. First, students' attitudes toward children's (and, in general, humans') rights have been of central importance in HRE, which also aims to change attitudes [35]. Hence, channelling the power of human rights education to change students' attitudes could be the first step in the design of educational activities to foster intentionality to protect children's rights, which could result in behavioural manifestation. Second, educational activities in human rights education can enhance students' subjective normative beliefs by raising the awareness of all the students in a specific schooling context about the value of children's rights. The universal respect and observance of children's rights is a core goal of human rights education [8]. Third, educational activities aiming to engage students in activism to defend children's rights can serve as antecedents of students' perceived behavioural control. The underpinning logic here is that the learning environment is usually a safe environment [36] that can empower students to build a sense of impact and self-efficacy and to self-determine their actions [37]. This sense of empowerment is achieved through human rights education since students can become empowered when they learn about their rights through educational activities, and subsequently, they can exercise agency in protecting their rights [38].

Overall, the above arguments suggest that carefully designed educational activities that aim to teach, raise awareness, and motivate students to action can be helpful for increasing students' intention to engage in children's rights protection activities, which might lead to real activism, in line with the tenets of the TPB [31]. Hence, in the current conceptual article, we show how engaging learning activities can be structured and delivered through the means of Skills Labs to enhance students' attitudes toward children's rights and empower them to actively engage in the protection of children's rights (see Figure 2).

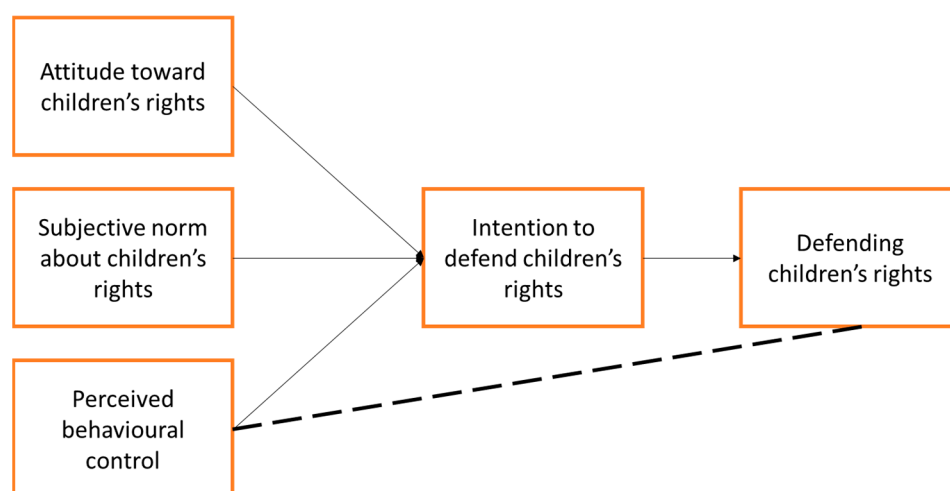


Figure 2. Theory of planned behaviour as applied to human rights education.

5. Three Skills Labs Corresponding to the HRE Adapted Pyramid Levels and the TPB

To illustrate our arguments with practical examples, we designed three Skills Labs which include engaging learning activities corresponding to the three levels of the HRE adapted learning pyramid (Figure 1) and the tenets of the TPB as guiding principles. We designed these Skills Labs to be utilised by all Greek educators who are required to implement the relevant module. It should be noted that IEP provides a repository with recommended educational materials (i.e., Skills Labs educational scenarios). Therefore, our specific teaching proposal could be integrated into the existing educational resources as part of the repository of Skill Labs. It is essential to note that each teacher designs the activities

of the Skills Labs in collaboration with their students and can cooperate with colleagues, parents, local associations, and the broader community. Integrating schools with local communities is one of the main objectives of Skills Labs [20]. According to the above, we designed three Skills Labs with the aim of enabling students without mobility impairments to actively promote the rights of children with mobility impairments. Specifically, regarding children's rights, through the three proposed Skill Labs, the aim is for all involved students to exercise the following rights included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [2]: article 3 (best interests of the child), article 6 (life, survival and development), article 12 (respect for the views of the child), article 13 (freedom of expression), article 15 (freedom of association), article 23 (children with a disability), article 29 (goals of education), and article 31 (leisure, play, and culture).

According to the above, it is recommended that the teacher implementing the proposed three Skills Labs collaborates with and visits, along with their students, a basketball sports club for individuals (both adults and children) with mobility impairments. During and after the visit, they can work together to organise and carry out a mixed basketball tournament. Important clarification: All players, both with and without mobility impairments, compete in wheelchairs.

According to the above, the overarching learning objectives of the three proposed Skills Labs were the following. With the completion of the learning activities, the students will be able to conduct the following:

- (a) Identify their rights and responsibilities arising from these rights (gaining knowledge);
- (b) Become aware and associate their rights with responsibilities in daily life (taking responsibility);
- (c) Raise awareness in their broader social circle and society in general and show how students can engage in activism (taking action).

The following activities aim to engage students in the 5th–6th grade of primary school (ages 10–13 years) who attend both public and private schools primarily in urban areas, as this is where sports clubs for individuals with mobility impairments are located, via meaningful and joyful tasks in knowledge acquisition regarding children's rights, skills development, and behavioural change for protecting and consolidating the rights of vulnerable groups and especially the rights of children with mobility impairments. The specific age group of fifth and sixth graders was selected because developmental research suggests that children aged between 10 and 13 years old become more empathetically concerned and show greater sympathy [39].

As pertains to our methodological foundations, we base our learning activities on participatory/interactive learning methodologies purposefully selected to build students' understanding of and skills regarding children's rights [8]. We also draw upon empowerment methodologies to make students believe in their agency to change their environment [8]. The three sample Skills Labs are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Three Skills Labs following the adapted learning pyramid model.

First Lab: “Let’s play with our rights and desires” (gaining knowledge/Level 1) Duration: 90 min Main learning outcomes: At the end of the activities, the students will be able to conduct the following: Distinguish between children’s rights and desires; Discuss and reflect on children’s rights and desires; Promote positive social behaviour.

Table 1. Cont.

Equipment/Instructional Materials: Board game «Desire or right?» (Created by the authors; see Supplementary Materials)

At this point, it is worth noting that before the students play this specific game, they learn about children's rights by playing with UNICEF cards [40] which depict children's rights based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These cards can be printed and cut out.

Description of the activity:

First step

Students are allocated to four groups and are given the printed board game with a labyrinth, answer key cards, the instructions of the game, pawns, and dice.

The game's rules are as follows:

Throw the dice once, and the team that obtains the highest number begins first.

The first team answers the question corresponding to the number on the dice. If the team answers correctly, their pawn advances on the board as many boxes as the number on the dice. If the team answers incorrectly, then they follow the instructions on the card. The checking of the answers is based on the cards provided.

Next, the second team follows the same process. The winning team is the one that reaches the last box first.

Second step

When the students reach box 21, they realise that their friends requiring wheelchairs do not have access to an appropriate playground for disabled persons. Then, the teacher asks what we can conduct together to address this problem. How can we contribute to improve the daily lives of our friends in wheelchairs? Maybe we can organise a joint basketball game for charity purposes?

It is decided that all students' suggestions be recorded on how they can assist children in wheelchairs through brainstorming. After noting down the suggestions, the two most popular ones are identified. The students who proposed these ideas are then asked to argue in favour of them. Finally, the two proposals are put to a vote to determine which one will be implemented next.

Second Lab: "Let's play wheelchair basketball together" (taking responsibility/Level 2)

Duration: A month

Main learning outcomes: At the end of the activities, the students will be able to conduct the following:

Develop their own accountability and empathy;

Promote social awareness and solidarity;

Familiarise themselves with the needs and capabilities of individuals with mobility problems;

Draw up a strategy for reducing children's rights violations;

Enhance organisational and collaborative skills through voluntary participation;

Improve physical exercise and health through participation in sports activities.

Equipment/Instructional Materials: A basketball court and basketball wheelchairs. Computers and printers for creating promotional materials are also required.

Description of the activities:

First step

The first step is to start organising the charity event. The teacher discusses the concepts of charity and solidarity with the students, showing suitable material such as a video or PowerPoint presentation of successful charity events, and discusses the value of supporting individuals with special needs, as well as the power of sports to unite people with differences.

Second step

Students are divided into groups and are assigned tasks for communication, venue arrangements, and securing sponsorship and entertainment. Students and teachers decide on the date and venue of the game. Active collaboration with local communities such as sports clubs and other schools to promote the event is recommended. In this effort, professionals or individuals who have experience in wheelchair basketball are invited for a demonstration.

Table 1. Cont.

At the same time, students create posters, flyers, and social media posts to promote the charity event. Students and teachers alike are responsible for securing and distributing sponsorships and donations to support the event (balls, wheelchairs, water, souvenirs) and preparing the venue (court setup, spectator seating, sound system).

Third step

On the day of the game, the students who are responsible for communication welcome players and spectators and hold a brief opening ceremony. The players start the wheelchair basketball game (all students are in wheelchairs irrespective of their disability status).

Fourth step

The day after the game, there is a reflective discussion with the children about their experience and what they gained from organising and participating in the game. Feedback is collected to improve future events. Students also create memorabilia (e.g., video or photo album) and distribute them to participants and sponsors as a thank you.

Third Lab: “Let’s create an accessible playground for all” (taking action/Level 3)

Duration: A month

Main learning outcomes: At the end of the activities, the students will be able to conduct the following:

Engage in activism;

Express their voices to protect children’s rights;

Be sensitive to social issues;

Develop their own argumentative skills;

Fight for children’s rights;

Encourage interactions between the school and the wider community;

Address social problems by speaking up to higher authorities.

Equipment/Instructional Materials: Computers and printers for creating promotional materials

Description of the activities:

First step

Having completed the charity activity and collected some donations, we inform the students that the donations are not enough to build an accessible playground. What should we do now? Can we think of other solutions to build an accessible playground? Teachers suggest to the students that, with the assistance of teachers and parents, they can walk through the town/city to collect signatures for an open petition to the mayor to fund the construction of the accessible playground.

Second step

The students decide to participate in the campaign, but before the campaign can commence, some promotion is needed. So, they use social media accounts to create posters and flyers.

Third step

As an alternative activity, the students can campaign for the accessible playground using a theatre play with a set scenario that concerns the absence of accessible playgrounds and how that constitutes a violation of children’s rights. Additionally, the students ask passersby to sit in wheelchairs and imagine how it must feel to children with mobility problems. Next, the students ask the passersby to find a way to play in an open space since there is no suitable playground for disabled children.

Passersby are also engaged in critical discussion. The students hand out flyers (after the theatre play) and collect any donations to charity.

Fourth step

After the above activities, there is an open call to all to visit the mayor and responsible authorities to share the petition letter and argue in favour of building an accessible playground for disabled children.

Bold text indicates the key elements of the three Skills Labs

Italics text indicates the successive steps of the educational procedure of the three Skills Labs

6. Discussion

The present conceptual article contributes by weaving together the models [8] and strands of HRE with the TPB [31] to show how educational activities can be designed to promote the goals of HRE via the new innovative module of Skills Labs in Greek schools. The three sample Skills Labs including engaging learning activities are meant to be inspiring examples of instructional practices, showing how we can raise students' awareness about children's rights (Skills Lab 1), make students accountable (Skills Lab 2), and empower students to engage in activism to protect and consolidate children's rights (Skills Lab 3).

Based on the TPB [31], it is expected that engaging in activism in collaboration with significant others (e.g., parents, teachers, friends, etc.) will elevate/augment both facets of subjective norms because students will experience in reality that significant others approve of this action (injunctive norm) and engage in such an action (descriptive norm). Moreover, it is expected that by self-experiencing activism, i.e., by overcoming any obstacles and second thoughts they face, students will be convinced that they have all the necessary capabilities to control their behaviour (i.e., engaging in activism for children's rights).

In conclusion, the present article highlights theoretically how psychological theory can be used to enhance the goals of HRE by designing engaging activities that target students' attitudes, their perceptions of significant others, and their self-efficacy to bring forth change. We strongly believe that the learning activities outlined here will be valuable examples of how to address all learning objectives of HRE and will inspire and help teachers design their instruction of it. An innovative module such as Skills Labs as a safe space for learning about/through/for children's rights and engaging in activism seems pivotal for the implementation of HRE in the primary school context. Importantly, the three proposed Skills Labs should be implemented, tested, and evaluated for their effectiveness through studies involving primary school students and in-service teachers in multiple contexts. So, we further suggest that future longitudinal (qualitative and quantitative) research is necessary to address the effectiveness of the HRE adapted learning pyramid in practice, and the TPB would be a useful theoretical framework for this line of research.

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