

# **Design-Based Research for Integrating Child Rights Education into Religious Education in Germany: A pioneering research paradigm for linking teaching research with lesson design**

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## **Abstract**

Design-Based Research (DBR) has emerged as a widely accepted methodological framework in educational research worldwide, as it is a sustainable research paradigm for overcoming the frequently observed gap between research and educational practice (Reinmann, 2022; Tinoca et al., 2022). I use *The Rights of the Child and the School Subject of Religious Education* (CRE4RE) project as an illustrative example of DBR's potential to help close the theory-practice gap in the area of children's rights education (CRE) in religious education (RE). To do so, I link classroom research and lesson design. The first part of the paper provides an overview of the three interdependent project phases, which are based on the three steps of the research process model by McKenney and Reeves (2019). In the second part, I transfer a teaching module into practice to demonstrate how children's rights perspectives can be successfully integrated into RE. Finally, I identify project-specific opportunities and challenges in the use of the DBR approach to point out further design-based research perspectives, which favor a sustainable practical transfer of the double theory-practice output. I transferred a prototyped learning module into RE and tested and empirically evaluated it in a sample of N = 88 children and found substantial differences in the empathy scale's mean values, which also differed by gender. The article shows how a DBR approach can be used to integrate CRE into RE, thereby also highlighting the forward-looking significance of the research paradigm for RE and for the interlinking of teaching research and lesson design.

## **Keywords**

design-based research, religious education, children's rights education, human rights education, religious education, primary school, transfer, Germany

## **Introduction: Design-Based Research for combining religious didactic theory formation and lesson design**

In order to link the goal of evidence-based theory development with the development of high-quality practice on the one hand and to promote the previously missing transfer of science into educational practice on the other, Design-Based Research (DBR) is a globally well-received methodological framework concept in educational research and has thus developed into a forward-looking research paradigm (Reinmann, 2022). Numerous published studies

have exemplified how context-specific interventions are carried out in iteratively conceived design cycles, which in turn differ in terms of the quantitative and qualitative research methodology they have used, their sample sizes, and their design and duration (Tinoca et al., 2022). The DBR approach is becoming increasingly important, particularly in German-language subject didactics, which is "essentially responsible for the transfer of knowledge about subject-specific teaching and learning in the context of formal and institutionalized education" (GFD, 2023, p. 3).

However, at the same time, the lack of integration between theory formation and practice development has been lamented. This lack of integration also applies to RE didactics as an independent area of subject didactics and subdiscipline of RE. RE didactics shares its interdisciplinary profile and its interdependence between theory and practice with other subject didactics (Gärtner, 2022). First, a lack of a theory-practice link can also be localized in the religious didactics discourse because, on the one hand, practitioners and students demand a stronger practical orientation of religious didactics, and at the same time, subject-didactic findings and development are rarely transferred into RE teaching practice (Gärtner, 2018).

For this reason, Gärtner's (2018) research approach of Religious Didactic Development Research (rDDR), which has its roots in DBR and specifically promotes a "networking of practice development and research" (p. 13), has explicitly been established for the investigation of subject-specific religious teaching and learning processes. Using the example of The Rights of the Child and the School Subject of Religious Education (CRE4RE) project, I next show how design-based research on the linking of theory-building teaching research and lesson design can also contribute to closing the theory-practice gap in the area of CRE in primary-school RE. Based on the research process model by McKenney and Reeves (2019), the phases of the CRE4RE project are presented in a three-step model, with an overview of the interdependent research phase in the first part. The second part then describes how the learning module is transferred into RE lessons, accompanied by empirical testing. Finally, I identify project-specific opportunities and hurdles in the use of the DBR approach and point out further design-based research perspectives, which favor a sustainable

practical trans-fer of the outputs at theory and practice levels.

### **Reference project: DBR for Integrating CRE into RE in primary school**

In 2019, children's rights celebrated their 30th anniversary: On November 20, 1989, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which is now the most frequently ratified UN convention (Tobin, 2019). The document is thus an international human rights treaty and can be interpreted holistically in terms of the special protection, promotion, and participation rights of children, which is why these rights are also referred to in relevant specialist literature as "human rights for children" (Maywald, 2012, p. 17). However, in an increasingly religiously pluralistic society and in view of the growing political and social importance of the UNCRC, the lack of high-quality CRE and the explicit thematization of children's rights in RE in primary school are serious deficits. In accordance with the practical relevance of this educational problem, the three-phase process model established by McKenney and Reeves (2019) serves as the foundation for this project and is utilized as the framework for the subsequent chapter. As part of a problem analysis, I outline the importance of implementing CRE in various contexts. Moreover, an examination of current national and international research findings is intended to identify deficiencies and research desiderata in order to build upon them to specify the study's interest in knowledge (1. Analysis and exploration; McKenney & Reeves, 2019). The prototyped solution approaches (2. Design and construction; McKenney & Reeves, 2019) and the cyclical phases of evaluation and reflection (Feulner, 2021) are then presented in three iterative design cycles. To conclude the complex

research process, I then outline the double output of the DBR project.

### ***Problem and context analysis***

#### **The importance of children's rights in the educational context**

In the relevant specialist literature, CRE is defined as "a differentiation within human rights education and an educational process about human rights by, for and with children" (Fritzsche, 2017, p. 127), which in turn can make an "early and sustainable contribution to the development of a culture of human rights" (Fritzsche, 2017, p. 127). Despite the fact that children are the most vulnerable group in the face of the threat of human rights violations, they are also "the first group to learn about human rights, which is why children's rights education is considered to have a high chance of effectiveness" (Fritzsche, 2017, p. 127). In the context of primary-school education, CRE at the primary-school level can therefore also be described as an "early path to human rights" (Fritzsche, 2007, p. 259). At the 30th anniversary of the UNCRC, which took place in 2019, the monitoring process discussed successful progress in the implementation of high-quality CRE in the educational context from a variety of perspectives in extensive reviews and summarized emerging trends and challenges (Maywald, 2019). Whereas the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has become particularly important from a human rights perspective, which played a huge role in the implementation of inclusive education, the effectiveness of the UNCRC with respect to the educational mandate of schools is still pending. Maywald (2019), spokesperson for the National Coalition for the Implementation of Children's Rights, explained that CRE in the school context takes place selectively and in

some subjects but not systematically at several age levels, and that informing children about their rights under the UNCRC is not a mandatory part of the school curriculum in all German federal states.

Even if school theory-practice programs are currently being developed to implement a children's-rights-oriented teaching and school culture, there is a continuous need for development in this area and "a field for future joint work between practitioners and academics" (Krennerich & Gläser-Zikuda, 2022, p. 324). This target perspective was concretized in the Concluding Observation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on Germany's fifth and sixth reports, which called for the development of concrete practical materials related to children's rights and the need to ensure that teachers receive the support they need to teach children's rights (CRC, 2022).

#### **Children's rights in the context of theology and RE**

In the national and international discourse on public theology and RE, human rights have been of enormous importance for some time and are increasingly being considered in the relevant specialist literature (Pirner et al., 2016; Suhner, 2020). On the one hand, the potential of human rights as a viable framework for pluralistic-heterogeneous societies is emphasized (Pirner, 2023). On the other hand, human rights are justified from a social, theological, and pedagogical perspective as a separate learning object for thematization in RE (Altmeyer et al., 2017). Furthermore, Pirner (2023) emphasized human rights as an orientation marker of (school) RE as a fundamental normative basis of (religious) education and as an innovative approach for sustainable religious didactics within the framework of human-rights-oriented RE (Pirner, 2023). Nevertheless, there is still a lack

of a thorough didactic foundation of human rights in RE (Altmeyer et al., 2017). However, if children's rights are viewed from the perspective of RE, they seem to lag behind human rights. Although the rights of children and young people are sometimes placed at the center of the public-church discussion (Kirchenamt der EKD, 2022), they have yet to be given comprehensive consideration in both theology and RE research and practice. Only one systematic theological discussion has provided a basis for further RE considerations, namely, the habilitation thesis "Ethics of the Child" by Frank Surall (2009). But from the perspective of RE in schools, there is a lack of well-founded discussions and basic literature. For example, in the *Yearbook of Religious Education* (Altmeyer et al., 2017) on the topic of human rights, Spiegel (2017) explicitly addressed the topic of children's rights as an example of religious didactics. However, after the pedagogical contribution traced the historical outline of the development of the UNCRC, explained the basic principles of children's rights theory, and presented considerations for a children's-rights-oriented pedagogy and ideas for its implementation in the classroom, no subject-specific concretization was offered from the perspective of RE and didactics. Additionally, there have been significant shortcomings in the curricular integration of children's rights into the subject curricula. The lack of integration of human and children's rights in the German curricula for RE represents a significant gap, especially at the primary-school level.

### **Children's rights and CRE in current national and international research**

The principles inherent in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) intend for children to be informed about their rights (BMFSFJ, 2022), an idea that is also enshrined in the resolution of the Standing

Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs on human rights education in schools (KMK, 2018). At a national level, there is a growing call to educate children about their rights in order to comply with both Articles 29 and 42 of the UNCRC and to "contribute fundamentally to the realization of all other children's rights" (Gilett-Swan & Thelander, 2021, p. 252). However, an enormous deficit in children's knowledge of their rights is apparent in national studies. The pilot study for the *Children's Rights Index* by the Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk (2019) found that, of the surveyed children, only 19% were quite familiar with children's rights, 57% only knew of children's rights by name, and 16% had never heard or read anything about children's rights (Stegemann & Ohlmeier, 2019). As part of the global study *Children's Worlds - The international Survey of Children's Well-Being*, the Children's Worlds+ study by the Bertelmanns Stiftung presented the German results with the aim of providing in-depth insights into the needs of children and young people in Germany and surveyed children aged 8 to 14 (Andresen & Möller, 2019). Among 8-year-old children, 33.3% stated that they did not know what rights they were entitled to. Of the surveyed primary-school children, 37% said they were aware of children's rights, whereas 21.5% said they had no knowledge of children's rights. Similarly, 71.7% of 8-year-olds were not familiar with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is striking that the proportion of those who had never heard of the Convention decreased sharply with age. Only 46.6% of 14-year-olds stated that they did not know about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The LBS Children's Barometer (2018) also found that 46% of the 9- to 14-year-olds surveyed were aware of the Convention (Müthing et al., 2018). The *Second Children's Rights Report* (2019) examined children's and young people's ratings

of the implementation of the UNCRC of the Child in Germany (National Coalition Germany, 2019b). A very large number of children (78%) stated that they had already heard of children's rights, whereas 14% were unaware of children's rights (National Coalition Germany, 2019b). However, the *Children's Worlds+ study* (2019) also revealed that only 24.6% of 8-year-olds and 60% of 14-year-olds knew what rights they were entitled to (Andresen & Möller, 2019). On the basis of the results, the Children's Rights Report made demands, also in terms of awareness (National Coalition Germany, 2019b, p. 9):

- Children's rights should be firmly anchored in the curriculum, and it must be ensured that all children and young people know their rights.
- Children's rights must be included in the Basic Law, as this is the only way to raise awareness among adults as well as children and young people.
- Children's rights should be made available to everyone in child-friendly language.

The Germany-wide UNICEF survey *My Place. My Rights. Jetzt rede ich* asked 12,009 children and young people up to the age of 17 about their perceptions of the implementation of children's rights in the classroom (Deutsches Komitee für UNICEF e.V., 2019). A total of 46% stated that they had already discussed children's rights in class. Children between the ages of 10 and 11 (i.e., children attending fourth grade) were the most likely (55%) to have talked about children's rights in class. However, the results also showed that 40% of the children and young people surveyed had never discussed the topic of children's rights in class. This finding shows that children's rights are still a long way from finding their way into all classrooms and

confirms the call for children's rights to be thematically anchored in the curriculum.

Furthermore, studies on children's knowledge of their rights and the implementation of children's rights can be found at the international level. The second research report of the *Children's Worlds Study* (Rees et al., 2016) focused on the results of the 8-year-old age group and presented results from 16 countries. Three questions were asked about children's rights, with the first two questions relating to awareness of children's rights: (a) "I know what rights children have," (b) "I know about the children's rights convention," and (c) "I think, in my country, adults in general respect children's rights."

Data summarized across 15 countries (Poland was excluded as the questions were not asked in this age group) showed that 46% of respondents stated that they knew what rights children have. Only a small proportion of 23% said they did not know anything about children's rights, and 32% chose the answer *not sure* (Rees et al., 2016). Similarly, 32% of 8-year-olds said they knew something about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but 40% said they did not know about the Convention (Rees et al., 2016). In Colombia, 73% said they were aware of children's rights, compared with only 30% in South Africa and the United Kingdom. The same can be said of awareness of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Here, the level of agreement varied from over 60% in Colombia and Norway to less than a quarter of respondents in six countries: South Africa, South Korea, Nepal, Germany, Malta, and the United Kingdom (Rees et al., 2016). Although knowledge of children's rights is an essential prerequisite for exercising one's own rights, the results of the various studies have shown that children in primary school in particular have varying degrees of contact with children's rights, a finding that raises questions about whether

CRE is being implemented in schools. Current research has shown that issues relating to the teaching and learning of children's rights have become increasingly important in German educational research in educational contexts in recent years (Brantefors & Quennerstedt, 2016). On the other hand, Quennerstedt and Moody's (2020) study, which analyzed children's-rights-related research fields in the educational context from 1889-2019, showed that only a little educational children's rights research has actually examined dimensions related to central educational and pedagogical areas (e.g., teaching processes, learning processes, educational content, and the pedagogical situation in the classroom). It can be concluded from these findings that the transformative dimensions of CRE have been largely overlooked in previous children's rights research, a conclusion that also applies to research in the area of RE.

### ***Research question and interest***

The initial focus of DBR is on a problem in educational practice that has yet to be solved (Reinmann, 2017). From the state of research outlined above, it can be deduced that the widespread absence of subject-specific insights into the preconcepts, knowledge levels, progression of, and hurdles in children's-rights-related teaching and learning processes in RE for primary-school-age children represents a glaring re-search deficit at the theoretical level. Furthermore, a validated competence model of children's-rights-related competence is missing, especially at the primary-school level. Such a model is needed to differentiate the students' learning process into competence levels on the basis of research. At the level of school practice, there is a need for subject-specific learning innovations on the topic of children's rights to didactically develop concrete design principles and promote the implementation of CRE in RE. The CRE4RE project, which is located at the

interface of RE, primary-school pedagogy, and empirical educational research, takes up the research findings and desiderata presented above and addresses the question of what specifically Protestant RE at the primary-school level can contribute to human rights education in relation to children's rights.

The project addresses the following guiding research question:

How can a religious didactic learning innovation for RE students in primary school be didactically designed to foster children's rights competencies in the context of RE?

In accordance with the overarching objective of DBR, the principal research focus can be delineated at three distinct levels (Gärtner, 2018; Reinmann, 2005): At the level of local subject-specific theory formation, it is advisable to gain subject-specific insights into the processes, challenges, and conditions of children's-rights-specific teaching and learning processes. A theoretically based and subject-specific model of children's-rights-related learning should be empirically supported and differentiated into subject-specific learning dimensions and competence levels. At the level of instructional learning innovation, the aim is to conceptualize a religious didactic teaching-learning arrangement that integrates design principles developed from theory, which in turn are operationalized in a multistage differentiation process. With regard to theory-practice transfer, evidence-based and participatory transfer strategies are to be implemented in such a way that an optimal link for transferring between religious didactic theory formation and RE practice in primary school is guaranteed from the very beginning, so that both the research and development products can be implemented in practice.

**Research methodology framework:  
Adaptation of a context-specific DBR  
model**

In accordance with the epistemological interest and context underlying the educational problem of this study, the generic model by McKenney and Reeves (2019) in the context of DBR formed the basis of this research project. For this purpose, the context of the school and teaching practice problems were first analyzed from different perspectives in three interdependent research phases (1. analysis and exploration; McKenney & Reeves, 2019). Subsequently, concrete solutions were designed (2. design and construction; McKenney & Reeves, 2019). The teaching-learning innovations were then tested in five iterative design cycles, mostly in real teaching situations, and evaluated using quantitative and predominantly qualitative research methods (3. evaluation and reflection; Feulner, 2021). Finally, the learning innovation was implemented in concrete school practice and disseminated beyond the respective project boundaries, taking into account common transfer strategies (4. implementation and dissemination; McKenney & Reeves, 2019; Gräsel & Parchmann, 2010). At the end of the complex research process, the DBR project produced a double output in the forms of subject-specific teaching and learning theories as research products (5. theoretical understanding) on the one hand and practical teaching and learning arrangements as practical products (6. intervention) on the other (Reinmann, 2005).

As an approach to researching subject-specific didactic teaching and learning processes in German-speaking countries, DBR is increasingly being taken into account, particularly through the research approach of subject-specific didactical design re-search (DDR), which is modeled on the specifics of

subject-specific didactic theory formation. This research format has also become established for RE didactics as Religious Didactical Design Research (rDDR; Gärtner, 2019) and also involves the "networking of practice development and research" (Gärtner, 2019, p. 13). According to Gärtner (2020), the didactics of RE are particularly intensified through the explication of overarching characteristics of rDDR, which can be summarized as follows:

- rDDR is intervening (i.e., geared toward developing theory and practice);
- rDDR is iterative (i.e., complex theory-practice problems are empirically tested and further developed several times, which can result in a complex research cycle);
- rDDR is process-oriented (i.e., learning paths and processes are viewed as a complex and context-dependent scenarios);
- rDDR generates local theory building (i.e., it refers to the intermediate space between "big" teaching-learning theory and individual case observation);
- rDDR is object-oriented (i.e., it is decidedly oriented toward an explicit learning object);
- rDDR is networked (i.e., different disciplines, theoretical and practical areas and, in particular, different stakeholders are involved);
- rDDR refers to the natural learning environment (i.e., the instructional testing takes place under the influence of a variety of variables, contexts, and actors).

The strong object and process orientation necessitates the implementation of a suitable approach to be balanced for each learning object. Consequently, it must be re-

structured and made more concrete for religious didactics and its specific learning objects (Gärtner, 2020). Due to the special features inherent to the subject of RE, the sub-steps of rDDR illustrated by Gärtner (2018) are integrated into McKenney and Reeves (2019) overarching research phases. The cycle model of DDR by the FUNKEN Re-search College begins directly with the specification and structuring of a concrete learning object and thus accentuates the dedicated object orientation of DDR (Prediger et al., 2012; Gärtner, 2019). Nevertheless, a comprehensive problem and context analysis of the educational problem as well as a systematic classification of the state of research on at least a national level by conducting a literature review has not, or without much detail, been provided in the framework of subject-specific didactic development research, as the research format has been aimed at close research into very specific learning objects, which are usually clearly inherent to the subject itself. However, the combination of the two research process models (i.e., DBR and rDDR) is necessary because:

- The fact that children's rights have largely not been addressed in RE lessons to date must always be placed in an overarching educational problem context, which is not related solely to the subject didactics itself and must therefore be examined in the overall context, at least in the beginning, by means of a problem analysis. Therefore, the research process cannot begin directly with the specification and structuring of the learning object, as Gärtner (2022) described for rDDR. It must be preceded by a problem and context analysis (McKenney & Reeves, 2019);
- Human Rights Education (HRE) and CRE involve tasks that cross-

cut several subjects (Suhner, 2020) at the primary-school level, and therefore, other subject didactics in primary school also make contributions. In order to crystallize subject-specific contributions, a context analysis must come first in order to be able to localize the contribution under a subject-specific demarcation on the one hand but also while considering interdisciplinary cooperation on the other;

- the subject of children's rights is not exclusively inherent to any particular school subject (e.g., RE). For this reason, the overall context and the resulting conditions must always be included in the context analysis;
- the teaching-learning processes that are related to the subject matter have not been sufficiently or sometimes not at all empirically researched, even outside the subject- and school-specific boundaries. A research-pragmatic narrow definition of the learning object is therefore not suitable, but rather, the complexity of the learning object should be taken into account by adopting an exploratory approach;
- learning and teaching research is not yet sufficiently widespread in empirical RE, which makes a narrowly defined orientation toward the object of learning difficult, as in many cases, the learning prerequisites of primary school students first have to be determined;
- the dovetailing of religious didactic theory formation and RE practice can only succeed in terms of quality if common transfer strategies are considered and implemented from the outset. McKenney and Reeves' (2019) generic model also provided this kind of implementation, but the rDDR model



did not, due to the logic behind its limited, strictly subject-specific research focus;

- international connectivity must continue to be ensured, as the implementation of children's rights in the form of high-quality CRE is of international importance and cannot be limited exclusively to German-speaking countries.

The reasons for the research outlined above and the outline of the research methodological framework resulting from the combination of the DBR and rDDR approaches led to a project-specific, complex research process that I outline below.

**Overview of the complex research process**

Due to the complexity of the overall project, I provide an overview of the iterative research process and the associated cycle-specific features below.

**Cycle 1: Design and construction of a religious didactic learning innovation**

McKenney and Reeves (2019) summarized that the "process of design and construction are systematic and guided by theory, but they also include inventive creativity, allocation of emerging insights, and openness to serendipity" (p. 127). In this phase, good theories were put into practice in the design and construction of solutions to problems (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). In addition, empirically based concepts were transferred into a prototype for teaching innovations in a multistage operationalization process. These innovations were then operationalized as

pedagogical guidelines through the application of design principles (Euler, 2017).

The following table provides an overview of Cycle 1 after the design and construction process:

**Table 1:** Cycle 1 of the CRE4RE project

Alpha-Testing		
<b>Cycle 1</b> (August 2021- February 2022)  <i>Primary school teachers</i> <i>RE teachers</i> <i>Religious educators</i>	<b>Goal at the theoretical level:</b> Conceptualization of a subject-specific competence model of learning processes related to children's rights for RE in primary school	<b>Goal at the practice level:</b> Structuring and specification of the subject matter; Conceptualization of a subject-specific teaching-learning arrangement; cataloguing of design principles derived from theory
	<b>Method:</b> analyses of problems and requirements with a literature search to specify the learning object and viable design principles; expert review	
	<b>Results:</b> first prototype of the competence model and the religious didactic learning innovation	

**Iterative evaluation and reflection in Cycles 2 to 4**

The prototypes were iteratively evaluated and gradually improved in a total of three additional design cycles, which differed in terms of their duration, objectives, empirical methodology, and results (see Table 2). The testing took place in real classroom situations and was evaluated using predominantly qualitative but also quantitative research methods (Feulner, 2021).

This phase yielded a plethora of intermediate products, including written theoretical frameworks, research tools and plans, and reports on the implementation and testing of interventions. However, to facilitate a fundamental understanding and practical application, the principal outputs of this phase were responses to research questions, implications for integrated design proposals, and recommendations for redesign.

**Table 2:** Cycles 2-4 in the CRE4RE project

<b>Beta-Testing</b>		
<p><b>Cycle 2</b></p> <p>(February 2022-July 2022: 11 x 90 min as double lessons RE; an all-day school festival)</p> <p><i>Researcher</i> <i>RE teachers</i></p>	<p><b>Goal at the theory level:</b> initial insights into pre-concepts, learning paths, &amp; challenges</p>	<p><b>Goal at the practical level:</b> Piloting of central tasks; application-oriented operationalization of the design principles</p>
	<p><b>Method:</b> Pre- and posttest, child interviews, lesson observation protocol, learning diary, audio recordings</p>	
	<p><b>Results:</b> Initial findings on typical challenges and in-depth specification of the subject matter; revised teaching-learning arrangement</p>	
<p><b>Cycle 3</b></p> <p>(April 2022-March 2023: 21 x 90 min as double lessons and 6 x 45 min as individual lessons in religious education in class a); a school festival with <math>n = 638</math> students (used as Children's Rights Day); Time for pre- and post-surveys</p> <p><i>Researcher</i> <i>RE teachers</i></p>	<p><b>Goal at the theory level:</b> in-depth insights into learning-pathway-related opportunities and hurdles</p>	<p><b>Goal at the practical level:</b> Testing the complete teaching-learning arrangement, differentiation of the teaching-learning arrangement</p>
	<p><b>Implementation of the design cycle:</b></p>	
	<p><b>Method:</b> Field design experiments in two third/fourth-grade classes, evaluation with a view to learner outcomes through written student diaries and with a focus on practicability through teacher diaries</p>	
<p><b>Results:</b> differentiated learning landscape with tried-and-tested in-depth modules and insights into children's learning opportunities and obstacles</p>		
<b>Gamma-Testing</b>		
<p><b>Cycle 4</b></p> <p>(April 2023-November 2023)</p> <p><i>Researcher</i> <i>RE teachers</i></p>	<p><b>Goal at the theoretical level:</b> final differentiation of the competence model into competence levels</p>	<p><b>Goal at the practice level:</b> final operationalization of the design principles</p>
	<p><b>Method:</b> Design cycles with six RE lessons; pre-posttest; learning diary</p>	
	<p><b>Results:</b> Practically and empirically supported religious didactic learning landscape that promotes the learning process related to children's rights; insights into conditions for effectiveness</p>	

**Implementation and dissemination in Cycle 5**

The final step of the complex research process involved the dissemination by means of a material transfer strategy, that is, an implementation of the theory-based developed and reviewed religious didactic learning landscape children's rights. It comes with a target group-specific practical aid for RE teachers, available in both analog and digital forms, as an open educational adaptable resource that is to be disseminated by OER-experienced communities and by RE training institutions.

**Table 3:** Implementation and dissemination in Cycle 5 of the CRE4RE project

Implementation and dissemination	
<b>Cycle 5</b> (December 2023 - June 2024)	<b>Goals:</b> Finalization of the religious didactic teaching-learning arrangement for use in religious education & embedding of the final religious didactic teaching-learning arrangement in the practical aid
<i>Researcher</i> <i>RE teachers</i>	<b>Method:</b> final revision with regard to linguistic hurdles and structural transparency; collection of meaningful examples for teachers' handbook
	<b>Results:</b> Handout for RE teachers with a learning landscape, practical material and instructions for initiating learning processes related to children's rights in primary school RE lessons as well as findings on typical learning paths, challenges, and results

subject curriculum for Protestant RE in the third/fourth grades, which can be assigned to learning area 10 *Facing challenges in living together*, primary school students describe how people live under injustice in both their local area and worldwide and develop shared visions of a better, peaceful world. In compulsory and optional teaching modules, core topics related to children's rights are developed from a theological and RE perspective.

In particular, explicitly Protestant ideas about a successful life and coexistence, such as freedom, equal treatment, peace, justice, and the integrity of creation, play a guiding role in the development of visions for the future.

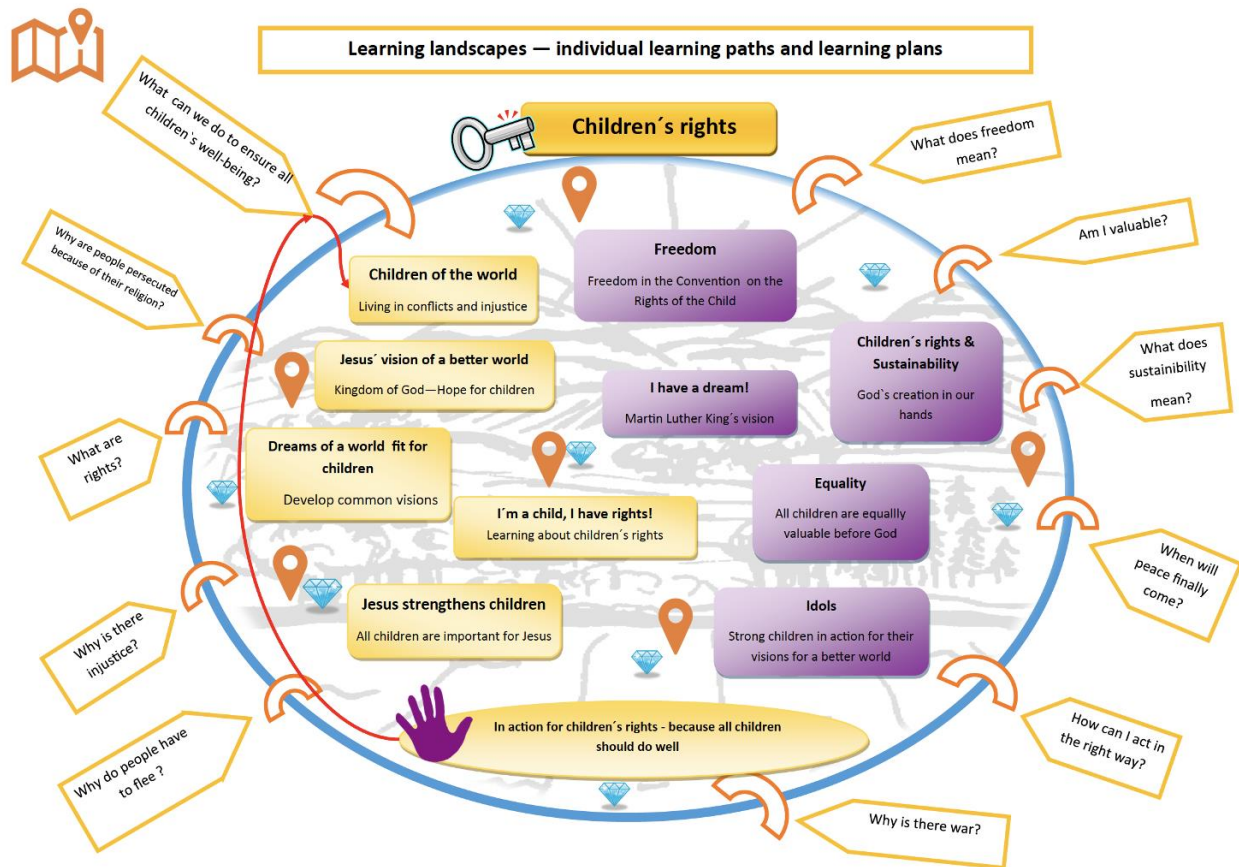
In addition, interdisciplinary learning paths are presented to illuminate exemplary subject areas in a networked and multi-perspective manner and thus do justice to the complexity of the subject matter. The goal of the Learning Landscape and thus of the learning path is to get students involved in their school by taking action to promote

children's rights in the sense of active citizenship. Students are therefore encouraged to take responsibility for themselves and for others, for the environment, and for the future.

**Output I: Development product**

The children's rights religious didactic learning landscape (see Figure 1), which attempts to take into account the important theological foundations of Protestant school education (EKD, 2017), can be viewed as an output of the project described a Under a key guiding competence expectation of the Bavarian

specific competence models of RE, competence

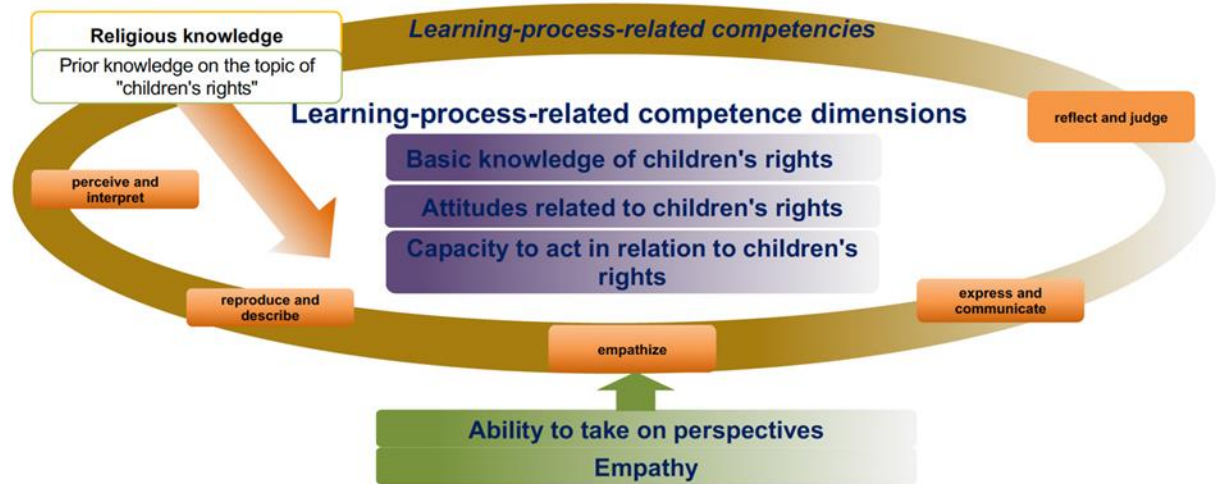


**Figure 1:** "Children's rights" learning landscape as a development product (© A. L. Fleischmann)

### **Output II: Research product**

A subject-specific competency model for children's-rights-related learning (see Figure 2) was developed as an output of religious didactic theory development, which focuses on the competency dimensions of children's-rights-related basic knowledge, children's-rights-related attitudes, and children's-rights-related ability to act (Schweitzer, 2017; KMK, 2018). This model was based on overlapping consensus on the objectives of children's rights education, RE, and primary school education. Building on this overlapping consensus, a review of subject-

models in the field of CRE, or with an affinity to children's-rights-oriented learning (e.g., education for sustainable development, ethical education, education in values) and finally primary-school-specific competence models of other subject didactics (subject didactics) was carried out. The emerging learning-process-related competence dimensions of basic knowledge, attitudes, and the ability to act were concretized through learning content and then framed by the process-related competencies and outlined in terms of developmental psychology and thus adapted in terms of content for primary-school-aged children.



**Figure 2:** Competence model of children's-rights-related competence for religious education in primary school (© A. L. Fleischmann)

### Transfer of a digital learning module: Interweaving theory and practice

A central contribution to the much-lamented theory-practice gap can be made by the transfer of practice (Gräsel, 2011), which is also important for RE didactics as an original task anchored in the self-image of subject didactics. The following is an example of how the learning module *Children of this World* from the Learning Landscape (see Figure 1), which has already been tested in cycles several times, was implemented in RE practice. To this end, it was extracted from the learning landscape, further developed with digital support, and evaluated in primary-school RE lessons as part of another micro-cycle. To support the transfer, researchers and practitioners cooperated throughout.

### Design and construction of the "Children of the world" learning module

In the context of the didactics of human and CRE, Pirner (2017) emphasized the importance of elementary approaches via real

people's real experiences of suffering and injustice. For this reason, real experiences of injustice by children around the world were integrated into the design of the *Children of the world* learning module, which in turn functions as the starting point of the learning path. The experiences are presented as narrative stories and compassion-oriented religious didactic methods (picture viewing, role play, writing a prayer of lament) that are intended to promote the children's-rights-related learning path in its affective-emotional dimension. In the CRE4RE project, the following module-specific competence expectations were defined:

The students:

- perceive that children live under conditions of injustice and inequality both locally and worldwide and describe their living situation.
- take an interest in these children's life situations by adopting their perspective and formulating associated feelings.

These competencies are also taken into account in the psychological dimensions of empathy and perspective taking of the competency model and are expressed through the process-related competency "empathizing and taking part" (see Figure 2). For this micro-cycle, the existing stories have now been integrated as audio stories in a digital learning app as an audio file, which is

structured as a map with continents and provides additional differentiation tasks (e.g., videos, texts, songs). In the digital learning module, the children report on injustice and inequality in the world as well as war, flight, and child labor in the audio stories. The learning landscape was implemented digitally using the genial.ly website, which made it possible to enrich interactive slides with videos, texts, images, and audio files and link them together. The digital learning module was tested in accordance with the following procedure: (a) introduction of the learning module in plenary, (b) independent processing of the learning tasks in accordance with individual learning requirements (audio stories and processing of the differentiated tasks), and (c) reflection in plenary.

### **Research question and hypotheses**

The overarching objective was to facilitate the transfer of module-related content into school practice through a distinct design cycle. This approach aimed to enhance the ability of educators to empathize with their students, thereby promoting the integration of compassion-oriented religious didactic methods into the digital learning module. Furthermore, the aim was to examine whether empathy differed between girls and boys after the digital learning module was implemented, as relevant studies have decidedly pointed to gender-specific differences in social skills such as empathy (McDonald & Kanske, 2023).

This aim resulted in the following cycle-specific research question:

Can the Children of the World learning module foster the self-assessed empathy skills of primary-school students as part

of children's-rights-related competence in the context of RE?

The following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The learning module has a positive effect on the children's ability to empathize (the mean values of the two dependent groups, i.e., pretest to posttest, differ).

H2: There is a difference between girls and boys in empathy on the posttest.

### **Evaluation and reflection**

#### **Data collection and sampling**

The design experiment took place in a primary school in the state of Bavaria (Germany) in two third-grade and three fourth-grade classes, with the two third-grade classes and one fourth-grade class surveyed on the first survey day and the remaining two fourth-grade classes surveyed on the second survey day. The following procedure was followed: (a) pretest, (b) implementation of the learning module by the teacher in a 90-min lesson, and (c) posttest. After adjusting the data, a sample of  $N = 88$  students was obtained, 42% of whom were girls and 57% were boys (see Table 4; one participant was excluded due to missing information on gender).

**Table 4:** Sample by gender and age

**Note.**  $87 \leq N \leq 88$ . One participant indicated "diverse" as their gender, so they were not included in analyses involving gender.

Gender	Age				Total sample
	8 years	9 years	10 years	11 years	
Girls	3	13	20	1	37
Boy	0	15	35	0	50
	<b>3</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>87</b>

### Instruments

The empathy self-assessment scale (Cronbach's alpha = .86) validated in the TIMSS study (Wendt, 2007) for primary-school students was used as the measurement instrument to depict the construct of empathy as a sub-competence of a competence related to children's rights (Table 5). The students completed this scale immediately before and after the learning module was implemented.

**Table 5:** Empathy scale (TIMSS, 2017) on the pre-test and post-test

Variable	How do you feel when others are unwell?
	Please choose one rating for each line.
Emp_1	It depresses me when I see someone being laughed at.
Emp_2	It takes a lot out of me when I see someone crying.
Emp_3	I often feel compassion for people who are worse off than me.
Emp_4	I feel sorry for children who are often teased.
	1 = totally true; 2 = somewhat true; 3 = somewhat not true; 4 = not true at all

### Data analysis

The subsequent data analysis was carried out using R (version 4.2.0). After checking the reliability of the scale, the items were combined into one scale, and the mean values were tested for differences with Welch's t test (variant of the t test for unequal variances) to test the hypotheses.

### Results

The reliability of the empathy scale was determined with Cronbach's alpha. The internal consistency was satisfactory for the pretest ( $\alpha =$

.64) and high for the posttest ( $\alpha = .80$ ). The mean values on the children's empathy scale showed a slight but statistically significant increase (dependent Welch's t test) from pretest to posttest,  $t(87) = 2.8, p < .05$  ( $\Delta M = 0.17, 95\%$  CI [0.05, 0.29],  $N = 88$ ), providing support for H1. The mean value for empathy on the pretest was  $M = 3.36$  ( $SD = 0.63$ ), but it increased to  $M = 3.53$  ( $SD = 0.57$ ) on the posttest, representing a small effect size (Hedges'  $g^1 = .28; 95\%$  CI [-

.58, .02]).<sup>2</sup> With respect to gender, there was a significantly higher mean value for girls ( $M = 3.72, SD = 0.35$ ) than for boys ( $M = 3.38, SD = 0.65$ ),  $t(79) = -3.1, p < .05$  ( $\Delta M = 0.34, 95\%$  CI [0.12, 0.56]) with a medium effect size (Hedges'  $g = .62; 95\%$  CI [0.18, 1.05],  $N = 87$ ). To check for whether

gender differences already existed on the pretest, I computed an independent samples t test, which showed slightly higher perceived empathy in the girls ( $M = 3.44, SD = 0.52$ ), but it was not statistically significantly higher than the mean for boys ( $M = 3.23, SD = 0.75$ ) due to the relatively small sample size,  $t(61) = -1, p > .05$  ( $\Delta M = .15, 95\%$  CI [-0.43, 0.14]; Hedges'  $g = .22; 95\%$  CI [.19, .65],  $N = 87$ ).<sup>3</sup> The Pearson correlations (Table 6) showed a significant positive mean correlation between empathy and gender (i.e., female) of the children surveyed on the posttest ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ). The gender difference found on the posttest could largely be

<sup>1</sup> Hedges'  $g$  is a variation of Cohen's  $d$  that corrects for biases due to small sample sizes (0.2 = small effect size; 0.5 = medium effect size; 0.8 = large effect size; Hedges & Olkin, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> A sensitivity analysis using "g\*power" (version 3.1.9.7, Faul et al., 2007) yielded that the minimum effect size that could be

detected, if the effect truly existed, with 80 % power ( $\alpha = .05$ , one-tailed) is  $d = .27$ .

<sup>3</sup> The sensitivity analysis for the two independent Welch's t tests revealed that if the effect truly existed, with 80 % power ( $\alpha = .05$ , two-tailed) the minimum effect size under the given sample size conditions is  $d = .61$ .

attributed to Items 2.2 ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ) and 2.4 ( $r = .23, p < .05$ ).

empathy scale showed that the positive change could mainly be attributed to Items Emp\_2 and

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. emp1.1	2.91	0.89											
2. emp1.2	3.02	0.88	.29**										
3. emp1.3	2.94	0.90	.19	.42**									
4. emp1.4	2.98	1.03	.27**	.35**	.33**								
5. emp2.1	3.56	0.64	.29**	.38**	.21*	.07							
6. emp2.2	3.44	0.76	.28**	.45**	.19	.18	.53**						
7. emp2.3	3.57	0.66	.25*	.18	.15	.14	.28**	.46**					
8. emp2.4	3.74	0.60	.24*	.38**	.25*	.14	.57**	.64**	.59**				
9. empPre	3.36	0.63	.55**	.63**	.46**	.36**	.37**	.45**	.37**	.44**			
10. empPost	3.53	0.57	.40**	.44**	.24*	.13	.67**	.82**	.73**	.80**	.55**		
11. sex	0.43	0.50	.08	.17	.00	-.06	.13	.30**	.13	.23*	.11	.30**	
12. age	9.61	0.58	.04	.04	-.11	.06	-.13	-.02	.04	.10	.04	.00	-.16

**Table 6:** Means, standard deviations, and correlations

**Note.**  $87 \leq N \leq 88$ . *M* and *SD* represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. The confidence interval is a plausible range of population correlations that could have produced the sample correlation (Cumming, 2014).

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

Comparisons of the mean values from the pretest and posttest showed that, overall, after completing the learning module, students' self-assessed empathy had increased. From this result, I conclude that the digital learning module successfully promoted self-assessed empathy (as a sub-competence of a children's-rights-related competence). The differences in the mean values of the individual items on the

Emp\_4 (see Table 5) and that the methodological elements in the audio stories of the learning map promoted these sub-aspects of the items particularly well. It was also noticeable that the differences in the mean values on the overall scale could mainly be attributed to the girls (see Table 6). Apparently, girls benefitted more from the digital learning map, a finding that also goes hand in hand with the gender-specific differences mentioned above. Finally, the results must be interpreted in context and in relation to the federal state of Bavaria. Future studies should use a larger sample, a control group, and a follow-up survey to investigate the long-term effects of the module. Overall, however, the results showed that the use of experiential and empathy-oriented approaches in the digital learning map can certainly contribute to successful CRE in primary-school RE and that the module was successfully transferred into practice.



#### **4 DBR in RE: Project-specific potentials and challenges**

In addition to many advantages, the relevant specialist literature also discusses obstacles associated with DBR (Easterday, Lewis, & Gerber, 2014; Gärtner, 2018). Although the DBR approach was found to be a beneficial research method in the context of the project for promoting the integration of CRE in primary-school RE through a theory-practice transfer, it also has some disadvantages. For this reason, I now present both opportunities and obstacles that have been identified in the application of the research approach in RE.

##### **Opportunity: object-oriented and contextual theory formation in the process**

The topic of children's rights is not specific to RE. There are no empirical findings on learner perspectives or conditions for success from research in RE. The processual character of DBR will enable researchers to conduct exploratory and flexible investigations of mediation paths, learning processes, and teaching-learning strategies as well as competencies, thus providing a bridge to previously unconsidered areas of re-search.

##### **Opportunity: cyclical design of a context-specific learning innovation**

The iterative design cycles enabled me to use repeated testing in both the laboratory and classroom settings, whereby the number of students also differed. Through re-peated testing under different conditions, the children's-rights-related learning innovation can be increasingly adapted to the target context and made more concrete.

##### **Opportunity: Collaboration between researchers and practitioners for theory-practice transfer**

Networking researcher-practitioner cooperation can be seen as an elementary component of DBR (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012), the implementation of which ensured a continuous and profitable exchange between theorists and practitioners of different interfaces throughout the project. In the initial phase, the close contact with a training center for RE in primary school proved to be particularly useful, which led to further project contacts with experienced religious educators.

In addition, the project funding from the Barbara Schadeberg Foundation opened up contact with schools with a Protestant profile, which aroused the interest of other Protestant schools in the project and led to increases in networking, which in turn provided for a transfer of project-related practical results to other schools. The research-methodology framework of the DBR approach also ensured that RE teachers from different denominations and subject didactics were directly involved in both the proto-typing process and the continuous evaluation process, which, according to Gräsel (2019), can be seen as a positive factor of influence for transfer success and in any case leads to strong identification with the innovation. Particularly in the prototyping phase in Cycle 1, detailed comments on the handout, intensive evaluation discussions, and expert groups ensured that the children's-rights-based learning landscape, including the handout, was practical and suitable from when the project was first implemented in the research grant, whereby the concrete benefits of the project were also emphasized. In addition, the specific goal of the project was always made clear, namely, the publication of a handout with practical modules in both paper and digital form and with the possibility of individual adaptation, which can

immediately be used in schools and can also be used across federal states. Such transparent communication has contributed to RE teachers being convinced of the benefits of the religious didactic learning landscape themselves and also at the student level, as visible success in learning could be achieved. Exploratory insights were also gained with regard to subject-specific basic theories, which can ultimately be developed further in the context of larger studies.

### **Opportunity: Positive influence of Protestant schools**

According to Gräsel (2019), another factor of influence for a theory-practice transfer is the consideration of specific characteristics of the individual schools, whereby the inclusion of Protestant schools proved to be particularly beneficial for the success of the project. Implementation was facilitated by anchoring aspects of children's rights in a school profile based on a Christian view of humanity and a school culture that is already children's-rights-oriented and implements certain children's rights in everyday school life. In addition, a high level of networking between the RE teachers at the participating schools and a positive interdisciplinary culture of cooperation was developed, thus ensuring a particularly smooth implementation of the project, especially the action-oriented application in Cycle 3, in which cooperation between primary and secondary modern schools took place across all types of school. As a result,  $n = 638$  children took part in the children's rights rally, and an innovative element was quickly disseminated within the school.

### **Challenge: Resources**

In summary, DBR requires a great deal of human, time, and financial resources. The time required to implement the project within the design cycles initially proved to be a

particularly major hurdle. On the one hand, this time investment was due to the fact that little research has been conducted into learning processes in connection with children's rights, and therefore, a 9-month conception and prototyping process of the religious didactic learning innovation itself preceded the actual evaluation phase. This also confirmed the problem formulated by Gräsel and Parchmann (2010) that "cooperation between practitioners and academics is not per se productive" (p. 210) with regard to different convictions, interpretative horizons, understandings of roles, and goals, so that in the initial design phase, any discrepancies between the convictions of the theorists and practitioners had to be constructively addressed in dialog. In addition, subject-specific self-constructions of survey instruments had to be undertaken, which were facilitated by preliminary work from other subject didactics, but which in turn had to be adapted to the desired innovation. The actual evaluation phase required a high degree of additional commitment and initiative on the part of the religion teachers, also accompanied by a high consumption of personnel resources at the respective school. Especially at the beginning of the first design cycle, in which the project worked with only one religion class, the characteristics of the religion teachers, who were involved in the development process with their skills and convictions, played a special role in a successful transfer, as they had a decisive influence here. For this reason, a perspective-rich further development of religious didactic innovation across several design cycles with different practitioners is essential. Overall, working as a researcher-practitioner in tandem and the associated planning discussions also required time resources on both sides. The challenge of limiting the timeframe of a DBR project is exacerbated by the need for several iterations in relation to theory development. The

project-related effort involved in instrument planning and construction, access to the field, the implementation of the teaching unit with lesson absences and follow-up means that a cycle can extend across several months or even years. Due to the testing in RE in primary school, all field tests were conducted during regular lesson times, meaning that vacation periods also had to be taken into account. Furthermore, it is to be expected that high costs will be incurred if materials or technology need to be purchased, or if travel needs to be made possible for the purpose of cooperating with stakeholders.

**Challenge: Lack of generalizability of the results and verification of the sustainability of the learning process**

The learning effects examined in the project are related to the learning processes examined in their respective contexts, that is, they cannot be generalized, but can only be transferred iteratively to new target contexts. Furthermore, they do not provide empirically validated evidence of sustainable effects of the teaching-learning innovations. Concrete evidence of effects and their sustainability could be provided by an intervention study, for example, in a quasi-experimental pre-post control group design. In the case of the project, this intervention study would have to be preceded by a specific instrument design for children's-rights-related competence measurement and an associated validation study. The development of a robust design can be considered to have been achieved once a concrete impact has been established.

**Design-based research perspectives on the integration of CRE in the context of RE**

Finally, four central research perspectives that can drive the transfer and

implementation of the project-specific research and development products through further design-based research are highlighted below.

***Further design-based teaching research***

First, there are further subject-specific research perspectives in the context of religious didactic teaching research at the primary-school level that have resulted from the preliminary work that has already been conducted. Examples include research into the significance and influence of psychological learning prerequisites (e.g., motivation and interests) on the learning process related to children's rights or a comprehensive empirical analysis of pre-concepts related to children's rights. Likewise, in-depth DBR research projects on teaching-learning processes on specific subtopics of children's rights—such as the topic of "dignity" from an RE perspective—are also possible.

***Design-based training courses research***

For the professionalization process of primary-school RE teachers in relation to children's rights, it would appear to be fundamentally expedient to offer further training on the topics of human rights and children's rights in schools and RE, in which teachers are professionalized for the core elements of the generated theories alongside an introduction to children's rights theory. On the other hand, they should be familiarized with the teaching modules specific to children's rights, which they should then try out in their lessons and reflect on their teaching experience. The result is a direct practical transfer of the religious didactic learning landscape, whereby the experiences of the RE teachers can in turn serve as further development and adaptation of the learning landscape. As part of the project, a training course has already been designed; it could be tested and developed further in the DBR format in the future.

### ***Design-based training research on the integration of children's rights perspectives in teacher training***

Moreover, by anchoring human and CRE in university curricula throughout Germany, subject-specific primary-school teacher training should be supplemented by the perspective of human and CRE. Integrating the learning landscape into a university course and testing and evaluating it in the DBR format would increasingly test and implement the concepts in this target context.

### ***Design-based school development to anchor children's rights in school profiles***

The last option is design-based school development to anchor children's rights in Protestant primary schools. From the perspective of public theology and RE, the responsibility for the implementation and realization of children's rights is a substantial part of the mission of Protestant education in RE and Protestant schools (Losansky, 2022). The implementation of elements of children's rights specific to the learning landscape in the context of a children's-rights-oriented teaching and school culture, such as the learning modules of the action-oriented application of the learning landscape for the school profile (see Figure 1), would promote the integration of aspects of children's rights into the target context of schools.

### **Closing remarks**

In this article, and in relation to the project, I showed how the use of a design-based research approach can integrate children's rights perspectives into RE. I also highlighted the forward-looking significance of the research paradigm for RE didactics. An interweaving of religious didactic theory and RE practice can be

seen at numerous points in the DBR project, such as during the problem analysis, during the design cycles, and in the practical transfer of the project output. The dual output also has a teaching-related and a scientific dimension, whose combination of innovation developed for RE and religious didactic theory makes a decisive contribution to overcoming the subject-related theory-practice gap and also to high-quality design-based educational research.

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