6. Key concepts in EDC/HRE

6.1 Why do we need key concepts in EDC/HRE?

We conceive EDC/HRE as a process of constructivist learning.[20] Learners create or construct meaning and understanding by linking information to concepts. Learning and thinking takes place on the levels of the concrete and the abstract. Abstract thinking is based on concepts. Without reference to a shared set of concepts whose definitions we understand and have agreed on, no sharing and exchange of ideas, or debate, discussion or judgment would be possible.

Concepts are therefore indispensable, both for constructivist learning and ultimately for political decision making. Which concepts should we therefore choose? We live in pluralist societies, which means that individuals and groups promote different or even competing interests and values. Moreover, philosophy and social science comprise different, including controversial approaches. Therefore it is impossible to draw a set of key concepts from any one source. In constructivist learning, focusing on competence development, concepts are indispensable, and concept models in citizenship education are under discussion. We believe our model is one possible approach.

We have chosen the following set of nine key concepts because they refer both to the students' experience in a micro-society and the political community as a whole:

- identity;
- diversity and pluralism;
- responsibility;
- conflict;
- rules and law;
- government and politics;
- equality;
- liberty;
- media.

The key concepts create a spiral curriculum, as the volumes shift in focus from the school community (elementary level, Volume II) to the political community (upper secondary level, Volume IV), with Volume III including aspects of both (see Part 1, Unit 4, in this volume). The concepts of democracy and human rights – the core concepts of EDC/HRE – permeate all nine key concepts; they have been addressed in separate units in this manual. All key concepts can and must be linked to further concepts and categories, depending on the learners' age level and the subject matter. All three volumes include nine model units of four lessons each that address the same set of key concepts. They do so in different ways, showing how the same concept can be adapted to the level of understanding of students and to students at different age levels. If two or three volumes are combined in this way (vertically), a constructivist learning process guided and supported by a particular key concept is possible. At the same time, the key concepts are linked horizontally, forming a network of understanding. A rough indicator of the potential links is to what dimensions of politics[21] they refer.

6.2 The essence of the key concepts

This section briefly outlines the essence of the nine key concepts in this EDC/HRE edition, addressing their significance for EDC/HRE at the micro and macro level (school and the political community).

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20. See Unit 3 on constructivist learning in Part 1 of this volume.

21. For more information on the three basic dimensions of politics, see the work file in this volume (How can I address politics in my EDC/HRE classes?).

6.2.1 Identity

As natural rights, human rights focus on the individual. All human beings are endowed with human dignity and the right to live in freedom and to enjoy their rights free from discrimination. The state serves the individual and not vice versa. Personal liberty gives individuals the right to develop their personality freely, including key life choices such as values, partners, professions, and having children. In modern secular society, this liberty is a challenge, as the weakening of ties and traditions (family, religion, etc.) means making choices. Our choices affect others and vice versa, and therefore in shaping our identities we also carry responsibilities. In the school community, the students share their experiences and work on life choices that all young people must make, such as further education and careers.

The concept of identity is closely linked to diversity and pluralism, liberty, equality, and responsibility.

6.2.2 Diversity and pluralism

Modern societies are pluralist societies. Individuals exercising human rights of liberty will literally produce pluralism – a multitude of individual identities with different choices of lifestyle, priorities and interests, limited or supported, as the case may be, by the material resources available – income and property. Diversity includes difference based on gender, ethnic origin, class, age, types of learner, region, religious confession and values. Pluralist societies pose a challenge: what set of values can the members of a community accept? The stability of human rights-based communities depends on conditions that democratic states cannot ensure (the liberty–stability dilemma). The same applies to school, where students should learn to perceive and deal with diversity and pluralism as a challenge – it must be met, and it combines problems and risks with opportunities.

The concept of diversity and pluralism is closely linked to government and politics, liberty, conflict and responsibility.

6.2.3 Responsibility

Liberty is to be enjoyed by all, and therefore everyone must accept certain limits. This begins, for example, with an equal share of speaking time and attention to every student in class. In societies based on free trade and competition, the unequal distribution of income and welfare leads to an unequal distribution of opportunities to exercise liberty. In democracy, the principle of majority rule must be balanced with the protection of minority interests to ensure social cohesion.

Liberty and equality may be difficult to balance. One way to reconcile them is through personal responsibility, the other is through binding political decision making; both modes are necessary, as each have their limits. Laws cannot take care of every incident in daily life, and it is neither feasible nor desirable to have our lives completely monitored and controlled by state authority. A human rights-based community relies on our willingness and ability to take responsibility for our behaviour and the needs of others.

Responsibility is closely linked to liberty, equality, identity, rules and law, and conflict.

6.2.4 Conflict

Differences of opinion, competing needs and interests and conflicts are part of human life, and particularly so in pluralist societies. Many people consider conflict to be something harmful, standing in the way of harmony, that should therefore be avoided or even suppressed. However, conflict as such need not be harmful, but rather some modes of dealing with it. In EDC/HRE students should learn that in a framework of procedural rules, supported by a political culture of mutual respect, there is room for plenty of dissent and argument. Individuals and groups may, and indeed should, articulate their interests, to ensure that they will be taken into account. In the discussions and negotiations to follow, however, all sides should be prepared to negotiate for compromise. Without this dialectic, or constructive attitude towards one's own interests, no compromise would be possible.

In principle, any conflict over distribution of resources that can be reduced to a sum or figure can be solved by compromise. On the other hand, in conflicts involving ideology, values or even ethnic origin, a solution by compromise is impossible. A culture of civilised, that is, non-violent conflict resolution based on mutual respect is therefore indispensable for democratic citizenship. Conflict arises in school as in any other workplace or community, giving students the opportunity to learn how to resolve conflict peacefully and not to be afraid of it.

Conflict is closely linked to diversity and pluralism, government and politics, rules and law, and responsibility.

6.2.5 Rules and law

Laws provide the formal institutional framework for democratic, human rights-based communities. In principle everybody is expected to obey the law because it has been passed by majority rule. This is usually by parliamentary vote, which in turn rests on majorities in general elections, but it can also be by plebiscite. Laws are intended to reflect and protect human rights and set procedural rules for conflict resolution and political decision-making processes. Rules serve the same purposes, but are created by other bodies, and may exist in written or unwritten form.

We are expected to obey the law, but what happens if we feel the law is unfair or unjust? There are many cases of social and legal reform that were sparked off by civil disobedience: citizens deliberately disobeyed the law to challenge what they felt was unfair or a breach of human rights, to bring about a discussion and amendment of the laws in place.

Students must understand, and appreciate, the dialectics between rights of liberty and their protection and limitation through institutional frameworks. If the framework were lifted, liberty would turn into anarchy, and anarchy in turn into the rule of violence. In task-based learning, students experience this principle in school. A tight setting of tasks, time frames and rules does not stifle the students' creativity, but on the contrary, opens the door to a great realm of freedom and creativity. Students may also participate in reforming school laws that do not reflect democratic or human rights values.

Rules and law are closely linked to conflict, liberty, and equality.

6.2.6 Government and politics

In EDC/HRE, the key concept of politics focuses on the aspect of politics as a process of settling conflict and solving problems. Government covers the institutional aspect of politics, that is, political decision making within an institutional framework. Democratic government of school gives students the opportunity to learn how to influence and take part in decision-making processes to manage a community and define its objectives. The policy cycle model may be applied to decision-making processes both at the micro and macro level, that is, the school community and the political community as a whole (regional or national level). The media play a decisive role in controlling political decision makers, and also in agenda setting. The same applies to school, as the units on media in the three manuals (Volumes II-IV) show.

As a pair of concepts, government and politics refer to the different settings of political decision making. While government emphasises the hierarchical, institutionalised dimension, politics also includes the informal dimension – wider in scope, but also with less, or without, regulation of procedures. The informal, subsidiary side of politics is important for the efficiency of the institutional system. Both in school and in politics, institutions could not cope with all problems and issues, and they therefore depend on citizens to settle interpersonal disputes and conflict themselves.

Government and politics are closely linked to conflict, rules and law, responsibility and media.

6.2.7 Equality and liberty

These two key concepts are considered here together, for two reasons.

First, human dignity is the core value of human rights. The two basic principles of justice that make up human dignity in legal terms are equality (non-discrimination) and freedom (as experienced

through civil and political rights). A person's dignity is threatened through discrimination and through imprisonment. The first two generations of human rights focused on rights of liberty and equality of distribution and opportunity.

Second, there can be tension between liberty and equality. For example, freedom of expression implies that a student should be given the opportunity to state his or her opinion in class as he or she thinks right. Equality of opportunity for all students, on the other hand, requires speaking time to be fairly and evenly shared between all students. For the individual student, this may result in one or two minutes before the next student takes the floor. Individual freedom of expression must therefore be limited, perhaps quite strictly, to guarantee every student a chance to participate in the debate. To what extent a student suffers under such restrictions depends on how well she or he can make the point briefly and clearly. Therefore in EDC/HRE, students need to develop the competences to balance freedom of expression and equality of opportunity. These competences involve language skills, a clear understanding of the issue under discussion, and an appreciation of the framework of rules that provide the balance between liberty and equality.

Students must learn how to exercise their rights of liberty, for example freedom of thought, expression, and access to information. They must also learn to challenge discrimination, both on their own behalf and that of others. Teachers should be aware of unequal conditions and opportunities of learning rooted in difference, for example income and education of parents, or cultural background and ethnic origin. School and society cannot achieve equal distribution, but they should ensure equal starting conditions. In school, this sets teachers the task to account for students' specific learning needs. Equality means not treating everybody in the same way, but treating everybody in a way that serves his or her needs. This is, then, what teaching through human rights amounts to in practice.

Like democracy, liberty and equality are closely linked to all key concepts. No aspect of EDC/HRE is imaginable without addressing an issue related to liberty and equality, that make up human dignity, and the tension between them.

6.2.8 Media

This concept refers to the experience that, in modern society, we live in a media culture. Media are indispensable in our exercise of human rights – including freedom of expression, the exchange of information, access to information, political participation, control of government and political decision making, and agenda setting. The more complex our societies and structures of mutual global interdependence become, and the more support and guidance we need to understand the challenges and issues of the present and the future, the more we rely on media. Media pose a challenge – they open up new opportunities and tools for communication and participation, but also for manipulation and crime.

Media are commercial enterprises, and "telling and selling" tend to appear as one. Media transform information that they transmit. Students must therefore train competences both in using media devices (how to construct a message) as well as in deconstructing media-transmitted messages. Media also play an important part in the school community. Students may well be more aware of the fact that media are part of their daily lives than the generation of their parents and particularly their teachers may be willing to admit. Some young people are therefore often more experienced media users than their parents or teachers. In EDC/HRE, media competence is the key to participation and competence development in many other fields.

The key concept of media is closely linked to government and politics, identity, liberty and responsibility.