



8. "But that means that I have the right to have a break, doesn't it?" Children's rights in the classroom

The teacher, Sadina Siercic has prepared the classroom carefully. The children are seated in groups. Their desks serve as group tables and on each, large envelopes have been placed. At one table, there are the rabbits, at another the bears, and the tigers are seated around the third. Full of excitement, a rabbit opens the envelope on his table. The teacher asks the 8-year-old to read the lines aloud to the class.

The rabbit reads, "Children have the right to the highest level of health and medical care attainable", and sits down again. "There is a number too," the teacher calls. "We're not doing arithmetic, but the number is important!" Obediently, the rabbit stands on his hind legs again and reads, "Article 24". The teacher is pleased. The rabbit may come to the board in front of the class. Article 24 is shown on a piece of coloured paper shaped like a balloon. The boy can then fix this balloon to the board.

On the board there is space for many balloons. Together, the balloons will carry a basket with the words "Children's Rights" written on it. The teacher is as happy as the little rabbit: "This is one of the rights that you have," she calls to the children. She continues, "In all your envelopes there are many more rights. Each right is a balloon." The children have understood. Now many hands are up in the air. They are all eager to open an envelope, read and come forward, fix the balloons to the board to let the basket fly and to be praised.

This goes on for the next forty-five minutes. Now it is a bear's turn. A young lady-bear's turn, to be precise. She has drawn Article 30. She reads, "Children belonging to a minority have the right to enjoy their own culture, to practise their own religion and to use their own language." From the next table a tiger adds, "Children have the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and to take part in cultural life and the arts - Article 31."

The third-grade pupils are in a cheerful, enthusiastic and active mood. There is a lot of movement and whispering, and everyone wants to be listened to.

Is this good teaching? Is this a good lesson on children's rights? How relevant is this lesson for the pupils present? How are their competences being developed? Perhaps I should mention that I observed this lesson in Goražade in autumn 1998.

Goražade is an Eastern Bosnian town that was cut off from the outside world, isolated and almost forgotten during the war. It nearly suffered the same fate of ethnic cleansing as Srebrenica. In view of this background, and given that the observed lesson took place only a few years after the Dayton peace agreement, to see topics like freedom of religious belief and protection of minorities addressed in this school in Goražade was an exciting experience and no easy task for pupils and teachers.

Let us look at one more detail from this lesson. Shortly before the bell rings, the teacher asks her third grade pupils what they had learned. A witty rabbit girl raises her hand and remarks, "Now I know that there is this Article 31 which says that I have the right to rest and leisure. That means that now I have the right to have a break, doesn't it? Well, now I am tired and I need a break!" The whole class begins to laugh. The teacher joins in with laughter at first, then looks thoughtfully at the class.

What happened? How did it continue? The teacher found herself confronted with a great difficulty. The pupil had not only learnt something in her lesson, but had also made an interesting attempt to apply it to an everyday situation. I could not read the thoughts of this teacher, but could only guess how difficult this situation must have been for her. It also made me reflect: is the Convention, that was conceived as a judicial instrument, intended to be used in this way? Should it be possible - as it is following the constructivist paradigm - that each person should be able to construct his or her own interpretation of it? What happens in the classroom, if this is allowed to happen?

At this moment, Sadina Siercic, the third class teacher from Eastern Bosnia, did not have the time to engage in reflection on complex judicial or societal issues. She had put a new concept out to the class and knew now that a deciding moment had been reached: she would now be setting a milestone for her class. She would now decide whether children's rights would remain a happy balloon lesson - without a direct impact on every-day thinking - or whether here in Eastern Bosnia, on this springtime morning lesson in the late 1990s, something would happen that we all wish for: a real examination and application of the children's rights convention! Sadina Siercic reacted in the following way: she looked at the class and then turned to the



girl and said: “Yes, you are right. Yes, Article 31 exists and guarantees you and other children rest and balance. This means that I need to think very carefully about how much homework I give you and others. I need to think about whether it is fair for pupils who finish their work during lesson time to have nothing to do at home and whether those who work more slowly and perhaps more carefully during lessons should have to take home more homework and therefore have less time to rest and recuperate. Yes, I need to think about such things, because I know about Article 31.” However, Sadina Siercic had not yet finished. She continued: “I need to tell you something else. You also know about Article 28. This Article guarantees your right to education. For you and for your friends this means that until the break, it’s education time!”

The class was quiet. The pupils were not very satisfied with this answer. So what had happened? An eight-year-old girl had made an effort to understand an internationally valid convention, ratified by her country and accepted as state law. But more than this, she had tried to connect the children’s rights convention to her everyday, lived experience

and even to apply it. She had tried to interpret it and had applied it to the right area of her life - as school is precisely the place where a child can contact his or her state directly. This is the place in which it is decided how the state encounters the child and how the child encounters the state.

And the teacher? This teacher had met her pupil on the same level. She had permitted what we call “empowerment”, whilst at the same time trying to react appropriately. Sadina Siercic from Goražade, together with her pupils, had begun to carve out a new path. She had - in a way more or less comprehensible to an eight-year-old - shown that there are within the Convention on the Rights of the Child, competing articles. Articles that, whilst not negating each other, have to be understood as interdependent. At any rate: in this class, on this particular morning, the children’s rights convention had been employed as an instrument - not merely one that needs to be known about, but one that should become an applicable value system that can help individuals evaluate their own actions within a larger context.

