

Chapter 3 – Getting to know human rights



Introduction

The illustration shows a series of objects that are familiar to children and young people. Each may be read as a symbol of a human right or child's right – a tent (leisure), an umbrella (protection), a plate with food (physical needs), a book (education, freedom of thought), a teddy bear (leisure and play), a flag (protection of citizen's rights by the state), a first aid kit (medical care), an envelope (freedom of communication and expression), a house (privacy). The globe may stand for the idea of protecting human rights for every human being. The symbols are arranged, playfully, above each other, and we may imagine them spinning around. In this way, they are linked to form a whole that adds up to and means more than its parts. Take out one piece, and the whole structure will collapse.

This picture is an example that shows how powerful seemingly simple symbols can be. Finding symbols for human rights is an exercise that can be given to very young pupils, as well as older students too, naturally. It allows them to link their personal experience to human rights and to explore the significance of human rights for their lives, and several of the exercises in this chapter follow this approach.

The exercises in this chapter address human rights – the core topic of human rights education. Other chapters, such as the one on values, emphasise teaching through human rights – with human rights as a pedagogical guideline. These exercises focus on teaching about human rights:

- knowing human rights: the students know one, or several of the human rights in detail and understand the basic principles;
- reading human rights – slowly and carefully, as every word matters;
- linking human rights to everyday life; the students view their personal experience and their wants and needs through a human rights perspective.

This is an approach that is suitable for students of any age.

Several exercises are examples of task-based learning. The students produce a poster or a treasure box and create symbols that stand for certain human rights. By appealing to the students' creative skills, such exercises provide a change from the standard text-based approach.

All exercises require careful reflection in class. The students should understand that human rights may be violated, and therefore need to be protected by laws and means of enforcement (police, a system of punishment).

With older students it is possible to take some further steps. Human rights are fundamental rights, which means no authority needs to grant these rights or is in a position to take them away from

us. The students need to know about the existence of the basic human rights treaties such as the European Convention on Human Rights. They need to understand that our rights have limits that are set by the rights of others. We need to find out for ourselves how to do this and, if necessary, legislators and judges will have to decide. As reports by the Council of Europe or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) show, the state itself can also be a threat to human rights. In such cases, citizens may appeal to their national constitutional courts or to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Exercise 3.1. – The human rights poster

Educational objectives	<p>The students understand the following aspects of human rights: their basic structure (who enjoys a human right – content – means of enforcement); the problem of violating human rights; means of protecting human rights.</p> <p>The students practise their reading skills.</p> <p>The students develop their creative skills.</p>
Resources	<p>Large sheets of paper, A4 size paper in a variety of colours, felt pens, scissors, glue, old magazines and newspapers, pictures and photographs; text of the European Convention on Human Rights or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.</p>

Procedure

1. The students form groups of four.
2. The teacher assigns one article representing a human right to each group. Older students can decide which article they wish to deal with and explain their choice (see step 4).
3. Each group prepares a poster on a human right. The poster consists of the following parts:
 - a. the title giving the human right;
 - b. the text from the European Convention on Human Rights or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
 - c. a picture symbolising the human right (e.g. a car may stand for freedom of movement or a closed front door could stand for privacy);
 - d. an analysis of the structure of the human right (for advanced classes), referring to:
 - the persons who enjoy this right;
 - the contents (what the right protects or grants);
 - the means of implementation or enforcement;³
 - e. a symbol (e.g. a wheel for freedom of movement or lips for freedom of expression).
4. The groups present and discuss their posters in class.

Extension

The poster can also contain examples of violations of the human right in question and how it can, or should, be enforced.

Variation

As indicated above, the structure of the poster can be varied according to the age group and the students' knowledge of human rights. The exercise may serve as an introduction or as an application.

When set for advanced classes, the exercise could include aspects such as the type of human right (granting an individual liberty, protecting equality, granting social rights). These could be related to the "generations" of human rights.

³ See Yves Lador, *Teaching Guide to the European Convention on Human Rights*, Geneva/Strasbourg, 1997, p. 53f (how is a human right created?).

Used on its own, this exercise could lead to an isolated academic approach focusing on a single human right. It is therefore recommended to combine this exercise with others that refer to the human rights process, for example the students' personal experience, issues of violation and implementation of a human right and discussion on the universal nature of human rights.

Exercise 3.2. – The strings

Educational objective	The purpose of this exercise is to present a global perspective of our common origin and common home as an introduction to human rights education. All people share the same origin, the same earth and they have the same rights regardless of where they live or in what situation. This exercise visualises large figures to make them more apprehensible for children.
Note on method	This exercise stands out in so far as it gives a model of a lecture by the teacher, rather than group work.
Resources	Two pieces of string, 4.8 and 6.7 metres long, preferably a world map or a globe.

Procedure

1. The teacher shows the students the 4.8 metre string and lets them guess how long it is. When the students have agreed that it is 4.8 metres long, she asks them how many millimetres this is.
2. 4 800 millimetres can symbolise the history of our earth, since it is supposed to be 4 800 million years old.
3. The teacher goes back to the creation of the planet and goes through the main events of the earth's history, 1 millimetre being 1 million years. How long have human beings been on this earth? She/he shows them the last 1-2 millimetres and compares it to the rest of the string. Maybe human beings are not that important? Perhaps we should be very careful to take care of the planet we live on?
4. The teacher tells the students a little bit about the history of man. As far as we know human beings originated in Africa. In the beginning, we were all Africans! Then man migrated from Africa and eventually populated the whole earth. Today we are many countries and many different groups, speaking many different languages and having different religions and cultures, but originally we were all the same.
5. The teacher shows the students the second string. How long is it? Today we are 6.7 billion people on earth.⁴ Thus 1 millimetre on the string corresponds to 1 million people. She shows the size of some of the larger countries on the string. What is the size of our country? Some people seem to divide the world into "our people" and "foreigners". The string shows us that most people are "foreigners"! But we all share this planet as our home and we have to learn how to live together on it. The countries of the world, through the United Nations Organisation, have decided that even if we are different and live in different places, we all have the same rights.

Extension

From this introduction the teacher can go on to discuss environmental questions, human rights in general, prejudice and stereotypes (see the chapter "Perceiving others"), geographical questions and international relations.

⁴ The teacher should update this figure if necessary and adapt the length of the string accordingly; 6.7 billion was true at the time this book went to print (2008).

Exercise 3.3. – The human rights tree

Educational objective	The students develop a conceptual framework to judge human rights.
Resources	Coloured pens, large sheets of paper to put on the wall.

Procedure

1. The teacher divides the students into small groups of three to five people.
2. He/she asks them to draw a nice tree and call it “our human rights tree”. Near the bottom of the trunk of the tree they should write “human rights”.
3. Then the tree should have some main branches with some of the key concepts the students think are, or should be, included in human rights. Around these main branches there can be a number of smaller branches with things they think are connected to the main ones.
4. After a given amount of time the groups put their drawing on the wall and explain to the others what they have written on it. These posters can be left on the wall for some time. They will serve as decorations and can possibly also be used again during later lessons.

Extension

After having learned about the students’ ideas about human rights, one can go on to study human rights or children’s rights in more detail and find out to what extent the actual rights correspond with what the students have written.

Exercise 3.4. – The balloon ride

Educational objectives	<p>The students become aware of universal values in human rights. They understand that some human rights are implicitly contained in others but, within the system of human rights, it makes a difference if specific human rights are protected or not.</p> <p>The students understand that human rights are unalienable, and that the arbitrary abolition of human rights borders on dictatorship.</p>
Note on use	<p>This game can be used as an introduction at the beginning of a lesson sequence on human rights or as a transfer exercise at the end.</p>
Resources	<p>Pens and paper, preferably large sheets to be put on the wall; list of the rights to be thrown away/prioritised.</p>

Procedure

1. The teacher manages the game. The students form groups of five to six people. Each group receives a poster and marker pens. The students draw a hot air balloon above the ocean or the local scenery. The sand ballast sacks symbolising ten human rights are stuck on to the poster (see list below).
2. Now the game begins. The students are to imagine themselves travelling with the “human rights balloon”. The balloon starts to sink and the passengers have to drop some ballast to avoid a serious accident.

The task for the students is to prioritise the human rights represented by the ballast sacks. They will use criteria such as the following. Is one right implicitly contained in another? Is one right of particular importance for democracy, or our personal needs?

3. However, the balloon keeps sinking and more ballast has to be thrown out at regular intervals. The students have to drop more ballast sacks. After four or five sacks have been thrown overboard the balloon reaches the ground safely.
4. Reflection in the plenary round. Each group presents their list to the whole class/group and explains (some of) their priorities. Then the lists can be compared. Are there many differences? There should also be a debriefing about the work in the groups. Was it difficult to agree? Was it difficult to give priority to some human rights rather than to others? Hopefully it can be agreed that all the human rights listed are important but that people might differ in their priorities if they had to choose.

In a functioning constitution, the abolition of any of these rights would cause serious damage to democracy. Human rights are natural rights and therefore unalienable. The balloon ride was therefore a simulation of a situation that we hope will never happen – the rule of a dictator.

If the students come to question the rules of the game on these grounds, then its learning objective has been fully achieved.

It is possible to extend the reflection by examining which of these rights has been included in the country’s constitution, and how these rights are protected.

Extension

When the exercise is done with younger students, the pieces of ballast – the rights – should be exchanged with items more familiar to the students, for example “free elections” could be substituted by “toys”. In the debriefing, these items could then be linked to children’s rights.

Materials

Information

The ballast in the balloon consists of the following rights:

- free elections
- freedom of property
- equality of men and women
- a clean and healthy environment
- access to healthy food and clean water
- the right of education
- freedom of thought, conscience and religion
- clothing and housing for all citizens
- private life without interference
- freedom of movement.

Exercise 3.5. – Wants and needs

Educational objective	The students understand the difference between things they want or would like and what they really need.
Resources	Paper, pens, scissors.

Procedure

1. The teacher asks the students to draw some of the things they think they need on pieces of paper (the teacher may prepare the pieces before the lesson or make the students cut them out themselves). They can make around 8-10 drawings each.
2. When the drawings have been done, the teacher divides the students into groups.
3. Each group then has to agree to put away all but five of the drawings. Only the five most important things should be left on the table. Then the groups explain to each other what they have chosen. Have they all chosen the same?

Extension

The teacher hangs a clothes-line (string) across the classroom and pegs a number of the drawings onto the line. He/she discusses with the class which drawings can be removed, things they do not really need. In the end there should only be five drawings hanging on the line. Can the students agree on which five?

Exercise 3.6. – The treasure box

Educational objectives	This is an exercise for children under six. They understand that children have rights, realise that such rights exist and understand that it is important to respect them.
Resources	The treasure box is an extremely pretty box that the children have decorated and filled themselves (with newspaper articles, UNICEF pictograms illustrating children's rights, dolls and various objects).

Procedure

1. In the beginning, the box contains:
 - two pictograms representing the right to equality and the right of the physically or mentally disabled to assistance;
 - two dolls representing children from Guatemala.
2. By collecting objects representing the rights of the child and putting them into the treasure box, the children understand the importance of these rights. The treasure box project should be continued until the end of primary school.
3. In addition to the class's large treasure box, each student has his or her own little treasure box.

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Illustration from Chapter 3

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Teaching democracy

A collection of models for democratic citizenship and human rights education