

Chapter 4 – Perceiving others



Introduction

The picture shows a girl viewing a boy through a magnifying glass. The image created by the magnifying glass is similar but not identical to the boy in reality. The boy does not know what this image of him looks like. It may be wrong or true, even showing more detail than the boy is aware of or that he would like to expose. They are both smiling, so the differences between perception and reality do not seem to present a problem. The girl is smiling at the image, not the boy himself.

We all direct our magnifying glasses, as it were, at other people and store their images in our minds. We judge people by these mental images. They are the raw material out of which we create stereotypes. We all draw on such simplifications of the complex world that none of us is able to understand fully. If stereotypes turn into prejudices, particularly negative ones, they may sow disruption and hostility in society.

The exercises in this chapter help the students to become aware of their perceptions and prejudices of others, to reflect on them critically and to correct them if necessary. This chapter therefore focuses on the social dimension of democracy and human rights. Our mutual perceptions, prejudices and ways of interacting with each other provide the basis on which democracy and human rights need to be rooted. It is not sufficient to have democracy and human rights laid down as the principles of the government and the constitution; their social and cultural roots are equally important.

Generally, the students should understand the function of stereotypes in reducing the complexity of our societies and the world we live in. They should also understand that stereotypes may be dangerous, sowing the seed for hostility in a society. This may happen particularly when we meet people who are foreign and evoke feelings of fear. Education helps people to identify prejudices and misleading stereotypes and correct them.

Older students may also understand that our perceptions and prejudices ultimately contribute to a culture that either supports, or undermines, democracy and human rights in a community. Literally, democracy begins with me – and you.

Exercise 4.1. – All different, all equal

Educational objectives	<p>The students learn to know and accept each other in a group.</p> <p>The students discover what they have in common that they were unaware of.</p> <p>The students become aware of attitudes and practices related to difference.</p>
Resources	<p>A piece of chalk or a string to make a line on the ground.</p>

Procedure

1. The teacher calls out a series of characteristics one by one. As soon as it is mentioned, those who recognise that they have the characteristic cross the line.

Examples: all those who ...

- are wearing jeans
- have blue eyes
- are older
- have visited other countries in Europe
- regularly read a newspaper
- have been subjected to discrimination
- have homosexual friends
- have prejudices, etc.

The students can be asked to suggest characteristics, but the teacher must be aware of what might be sensitive.

2. The students discuss the following issues:
 - Did anyone find themselves in a group with someone with whom they thought they had nothing in common?
 - How does it feel to be part of a large group?
 - How does it feel to be alone?

Variation

As soon as a characteristic is mentioned, students move in the class to form groups composed of people with the same characteristics. They stay together for a moment in order to discuss what they have in common. What they say concerns preferences and behaviour, for example.

Exercise 4.2. – Difference

Educational objectives	<p>The students experience difference and understand that difference is rooted in social structures.</p> <p>Experience of difference is crucial in adolescence. Young people want to attract attention, be recognised by adults and respected by other people. An important aspect of forming identity in adolescence is the separation from adults, particularly parents.</p> <p>The students understand that there are so many biological differences that no one can identify them all. For example, it is impossible to say that one form of intelligence is superior to another. Differences that matter between people are rooted in society – for example by values, social status or social change. In classes in which students belong to cultural minorities, it is a good opportunity for these students to show them in a non-discriminating context.</p>
Resources	A large sheet of paper.

Procedure

1. The teacher lists as many types of differences between people as possible on a large sheet of paper.
2. The class is divided into four groups. Each team lists a particular type of difference:
 - physical differences
 - psychological differences
 - social differences
 - cultural differences.
3. Assessment: students think about the differences between people:
 - “I realise that I know ...
 - ... but I’ve learned ...
 - My greatest surprise was ...”

Extension

The teacher explains why human beings are both similar and different.

Students imagine, in writing, two situations in which it is difficult to experience difference. This can then be discussed with the whole class.

Exercise 4.3. – True and false

Educational objectives	<p>The students become aware of the stereotypes in their minds and reflect on them critically. They understand that simplifications and stereotypes help us cope with the complexity of the world in which we live.</p> <p>The students develop their abilities to make judgments and decisions. In doing so, they are encouraged to develop a critical attitude.</p>
Resources	<p>The classroom must be cleared of desks and chairs. A “true” and a “false” space are defined in opposite corners of the class.</p>

Procedure

1. The students stand in the middle of the room. The teacher reads a series of true or false statements about women, men, various nationalities, etc.

Reacting to each statement, the students go to one corner or the other according to what they believe is true or false.

The students with no opinion stay in the middle.
2. The teacher invites the students to explain their choices.

The teacher provides the correct answer. It is essential that this step is never omitted.
3. The students respond to the teacher’s input. The teacher encourages them to explain how they have perceived others, particularly if these perceptions have been proved incorrect.

Extension

The students analyse the manner in which the media deal with issues related to minorities, gender, violence, etc. They identify examples of stereotypes, prejudice, superficiality or thorough and investigative journalism. The students try to correct information that they believe is wrong or incomplete.

Exercise 4.4. – First impressions

Educational objectives	The students are able to identify stereotypes and become aware of the diversity of impressions and perceptions that people have of each other.
Resources	The students practise active listening and learn respect for others. Photographs of people which may evoke different reactions by students are stuck on a large sheet of paper (the teacher should choose characters very different in terms of age, culture, ethnic group, etc.).

Procedure

1. The students form a circle. The teacher gives each student a sheet of paper.
2. The teacher asks each student to look at his/her photo:
 - “I see ...”
 - “I think ...”
 - “I feel ...”
3. The students write their first impression on the bottom of the page. They fold the bottom of the page so as to hide the text and pass the sheet to the person on their left.
4. This continues until all the sheets have gone quickly round the circle.
5. The students compare their first impressions:
 - In what ways were your first impressions different or similar?
 - What struck you at your first impression?
 - Which aspects did you not take any notice of, and why?
 - What did the activity show you about yourself?

Extension

The exercise may be done with a very small number of photos, or even just one photo or ethnographic video. Each student may also be asked to write his/her impressions on a piece of paper.

The teacher can give information about other cultures: food, music, family structure, etc.

Exercise 4.5. – We all have prejudices

Educational objectives	<p>In this exercise, the students question stereotypes and prejudices about other people and minorities. They discover the perceptions of different minorities.</p> <p>The students become aware of their limits of tolerance and of their confrontational value systems.</p> <p>The students are trained to develop their skills of active listening in seeking an agreement.</p>
Resources	<p>One copy of the activity sheet (the scenario) for each student.</p>

Procedure

1. Each student receives a copy of the scenario and reads it silently.
2. Each person chooses three people with whom he/she would prefer to travel and three more they would rather not travel with.
3. The students form groups of four.
 - They compare their individual choices and respective reasons for their choices.
 - They try to agree on a list with three preferences and three dislikes.
 - They choose a spokesperson for their group.
4. Each group presents its list of preferred and excluded companions to the whole class, giving the reasons for their choices.
5. The teacher encourages a free discussion of experiences, for example:
 - What were the main determining factors?
 - If the group has not agreed on a list of preferences, why not?
 - Which stereotypes does the list of passengers imply?
 - Where do these images come from?
 - How would you feel if no one wanted to share a compartment with you, for example?

Extension

The list may be adapted depending on the age group and the students' social background, but it should include people who represent minorities that are clearly discernible at first sight and others that are not.

Minorities and discrimination can also be studied through literature or history.

Materials

(see next page)

The scenario

You have begun a long train journey which is going to last for several days. You are sharing a sleeping compartment with three other people.

Which of the following passengers would you prefer to share your compartment with?

With which of the passengers would you not want to share your compartment?

- a fat Swiss banker
- an Italian disc jockey who takes drugs
- an African selling exotic articles
- a gypsy who has just come out of prison
- a feminist German rock singer
- a homosexual foreign student
- a young Romanian woman carrying a young child
- an English skinhead who is drunk
- an HIV positive prostitute
- a very poor refugee
- an armed foreign soldier
- a young woman who only speaks French.

Exercise 4.6. – We are all equal, but some are more equal than others

Educational objectives	<p>The students identify and analyse the reasons and motives for discriminating against others.</p> <p>This exercise focuses on how socio-economic factors affect the chances of social success.</p>
Resources	Large thick sheets of paper and marker pens.

Procedure

1. The teacher divides the students up into groups no larger than six. The groups must be made up of an even number of students. Each group receives a sheet of paper and a marker.
2. He/she asks one half of the groups to draw a caricature of a social winner, the other half a caricature of a loser.
3. The teacher asks the groups to list the characteristics of their model: socio-economic level, profession, sex, ethnic group, leisure activities, choice of clothing, basic outlook, way of life, type of housing, consumer habits.
4. He/she asks the groups to exchange their drawings and interpret them.
5. The drawings are hung up on the wall. Each group is asked to interpret the drawing they have received to the whole class.
6. The “artists” comment on their intentions. By communicating the ideas behind the drawings and the effect of the drawings on the viewer, the students may be expected to touch on the following questions:
 - What are the main characteristics of success?
 - What are the main characteristics of failure?
 - What are the factors that make the difference between “winners” and “losers”?
 - Are the people represented from certain groups?
 - Do all people have the same chances of success, regardless of their social background?

Extension

What are the reasons for discrimination against, and exclusion of, people who are different because of their culture, origin, sexual behaviour, language, etc?

What are the reasons for inequality among humans? Is equality possible, and desirable, or not?

Exercise 4.7. – The tourists

Educational objectives	<p>This role-play simulates a clash of cultures and allows the students to observe the stereotypes they bring into the role-play. It will help students to become aware of possible conflicts in such situations. The exercise makes the students vary their perspectives, by “putting themselves in other people’s shoes”.</p> <p>The students develop their communicative skills.</p>
Resources	<p>A piece of paper or cardboard, coloured markers; if possible, some tourist equipment, e.g. a camera.</p>

Procedure

Note on method

An ideal arrangement would be to work with two different classes, each with a teacher as their leader. The role of the two teachers is to remind the students of the instructions and characteristics of their respective groups: the “tourists” and the “Xs”.

1. The two groups meet in their respective classrooms. They have 15 minutes to create the context in which the action will take place and to prepare their roles.

The tourists write up information about their country, develop their expectations for the journey and prepare the equipment they will have during their journey, e.g. camera, portable telephone, foreign currency. If the real objects are not at hand, they may be symbolised by drawings.

The “Xs” define their culture: family structure, economy, type of crafts, clothing, and housing. The “Xs” must be as “primitive” as possible. They give themselves a name.

The cultural elements must be homogeneous. They can also be symbolised by drawings.

2. This activity may be done in the following class period.

Two tourists, while shopping for souvenirs and taking pictures, meet members of the “Xs”.

They go back to their group and recount their experience. They describe what they have noticed about the strange culture of the “Xs”.

The “Xs” share their impressions of the first meeting with the tourists, giving their opinion of the tourists’ attitude.

3. The tourists invade the land of the “Xs”, who do not wish to change their ways.
4. The two groups meet for feedback:
 - How do the tourists feel?
 - How do the “Xs” feel?
 - What do the tourists think of the “Xs”?
 - What do the “Xs” think of the tourists?
 - The tourists explain what they found difficult about the behaviour of the “Xs”.
 - The “Xs” explain what they found difficult about the tourists’ behaviour.
 - According to the tourists, what could the “Xs” have done to make contact easier?
 - According to the “Xs”, what could the tourists have done to be less disturbing?
 - If you had to go back to the “Xs” country, what should you know or do in order to behave appropriately?

Extension

The students interview members of their community who have visited other countries or invite them to spend a lesson in class in order to share their experience of meeting people with a different cultural background.

Variation

The students imagine an ideal society and indicate the significant changes compared with their own culture.

Exercise 4.8. – Globingo: "A human being is part of the whole world".

Educational objectives	The purpose of this game is to show that a human being is part of the whole world.
Resources	A sheet of bingo squares for each student. Question sheet. Questions for group discussion.

Procedure

1. The students fill in the squares according to the questions asked. Each square has got two lines: one for a name, one for a country. They should try to find for each square the name of one of their classmates, and the name of the country which fits.

There are a variety of questions which can be asked. You usually need A to L but you can add different ones, though students are only allowed to use the name of a classmate once. Otherwise they have to cross out one square and can't get a "bingo" in that row.
2. After the game, there could be a group discussion. The students will find out that migration is something normal in just about every family and nation. They will talk about global situations and the world as a network.

Materials for teachers

Questions: find someone in the room who ...

- has travelled to some foreign country
- has got a pen pal in another country
- is learning a foreign language
- has got a relative in a foreign country
- enjoys music from a foreign country
- has helped a visitor from a foreign country
- enjoys eating food from a foreign country
- has a car made in a foreign country
- lives in a home where more than one language is spoken
- has got a relative who was born in another country
- has seen a story about another country in the newspaper recently
- has recently talked to someone who has lived in another country
- has learned something about another country on TV recently.

Questions for group discussion

1. What did you learn about one another in this process?
2. What was the most surprising thing you learned about your fellow students?
3. What does the game tell you about our world?

Materials for students: Bingo Sheet

A name: _____ country: _____	B name: _____ country: _____	C name: _____ country: _____	D name: _____ country: _____
E name: _____ country: _____	F name: _____ country: _____	G name: _____ country: _____	H name: _____ country: _____
I name: _____ country: _____	J name: _____ country: _____	K name: _____ country: _____	L name: _____ country: _____

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Illustration from Chapter 4

Democracy and Human Rights Education – Volume VI

Teaching democracy

A collection of models for democratic citizenship and human rights education