Chapter 7 – Taking part in politics

Introduction

The picture shows a man and a woman, supported by a girl and a boy, advocating their causes in public. The man's poster shows the globe as a symbol of the world, while the woman is drawing attention to the five-pointed star on her poster, held by the boy supporting her. Perhaps this symbol corresponds to the surface they are standing on. Their expressions are friendly, there is no sign of hostility. Adults and children are taking part in politics. They are making use of their right to demonstrate peacefully in public. Both sides are mixed in gender, therefore no gender issue is at stake. The two groups are competing – for attention and support by the majority. They are in direct confrontation, so no media, political parties or interest groups are involved.

The four people are standing on a surface resembling an irregularly pointed star. This symbol may be read in different ways. It may stand for the community that gives its citizens a sense of belonging together and that also provides a framework for rights, responsibilities and duties. The star could also resemble "the floor" that a citizen takes when speaking in public. Whoever chooses to stay off this floor will not be heard and must accept the decisions that are finally made. Citizens can take part in politics in many ways. EDC/HRE focuses on ways of active, direct participation. Taking part in politics is a right of children, not only of adults. To do so requires an understanding of the issue and careful judgment. Political participation in democracy needs to be taught in schools, which in turn requires schools to function as micro-societies that give students the opportunity to participate in managing their school affairs.

Both in democratic schools and democratic society, argument and controversy, even quarrel and conflict, are nothing to be feared but should be seen as something normal, even useful in democratic decision making. Settling clashes of ideas and interests are the basic method of solving problems and making decisions. If interests and objections are not articulated, they cannot be taken into account. In an open society, harmony – the "common good" – cannot be imposed, but needs to be negotiated. Controversy and conflict are not harmful if set in and supported by a culture of argument, conflict resolution and compromise.

The exercises focus on framework conditions and modes of political participation. This helps the students to appreciate their opportunities to participate in their community.

Exercise 7.1. – The wall of silence

Educational objective	The students become aware of their concepts of democracy.
Resources	Pieces of flipchart paper fixed to the wall and markers (for groups of five).

Procedure

1. The students form groups of five. Each group is seated in a semi-circle facing a flipchart fixed to the wall. They are asked to write, in silence and within a time limit, a sentence of the type: "Democracy is ..."
2. The students respond to sentences or words already written down.
3. After the time limit for writing on the poster has been reached, each student chooses and reads out a sentence he/she has not written him/herself. The students share their results in class.
4. Thoughts are shared:
   - "I have learnt ..."
   - "I have discovered ..."
   - "I would like to discuss ..."

Variation

Instead of using posters on the wall, the students sit round a table writing on a large sheet of paper.

General information

"The wall of silence" is a brainstorming method that may be used at the beginning of a lesson sequence on key concepts such as democracy, dictatorship, justice, peace, education, equality, liberty, etc.

The method supports students who are less extrovert or wish to take some time to think carefully before saying something. Often these students are at a disadvantage in standard, that is oral and frontal class settings.

Exercise 7.2. – My feelings about dictatorship

Educational objectives	The students can define and judge elements of democracy and dictatorship. The students can make a deliberate choice of values and argue for them.
Resources	Poster and markers or blackboard and chalk.

Procedure

1. The students are asked to define the characteristic traits of dictatorship.

   The list might contain points such as the following:

– anti-Semitism	– the role of women as reproducers
– ethnic cleansing	– repression of sexual minorities
– torture	– submission to authority
– conditioning	– pressure from peers to conform
– the cult of power, individuals or the military	– the demand to be led
– view of criticism as destructive	– rejection of minorities

2. Referring to the list, the students try to answer the question, "To what extent does this situation affect me?"
3. The students are asked to place these items on a scale, starting with the trait they feel strongest about.

Extension and variation

The features of dictatorship can be related to examples from news reports, films or textbooks.

The same exercise could be done on democracy.

Exercise 7.3. – Questionnaire on attitudes to change

Educational objectives	The students can reflect their personal attitudes and express them freely. The students can listen to other students, regardless of whether they agree with each other or not.
Resources	Set of student handouts: "Questionnaire on attitudes to change".

Note for the teacher

Information on basic political attitudes

An *attitude* is a tendency to express an opinion or adopt a certain form of behaviour. It results from social integration and personal history and is therefore less conscious than ideology. Attitudes guide our perceptions, our judgments and our actions.

The purpose of the exercise is to see, on the basis of the expression of opinions, to what extent a person is, or is not, in favour of social change. Change in itself is neither a good nor a bad thing, and the purpose is not to pass judgment on the students, much less to evaluate them. It should also be borne in mind that the results of such a "political litmus test" should not be taken too seriously, particularly if the students are not fully aware of the implications involved in a statement in the questionnaire.

The real question is: why, what, when and how to change. The models of political thought serving as guidelines for political attitudes have developed since the era of the French and American revolutions. The following sketch can serve as a rough guideline but cannot replace the reading of the original sources.

A *progressive* attitude leads to a belief that changes are desirable. It may be revolutionary or *reformist*, depending on the perceived urgency and on the means employed. For the *revolutionary*, if necessary, even violence is not ruled out. For a reformist too, change is desirable, but without radical rupture with the past.

A *conservative* attitude, on the other hand, values tradition and prefers experience to theory. It may favour the status quo or be reactionary. To favour the status quo means to hold that although it is imperfect, the present state is acceptable. Organic growth may be advocated as the mode of change (Edmund Burke). A fundamental concern is to keep the state strong and agile lest it be overburdened by partial interests and excessive participation. The reactionary, however, refuses the present state of things: he/she holds that it was a mistake to carry out changes in the first place and wishes to return to an earlier state.

The *revolutionary* and the *reactionary* tend to be doctrinaire, that is, fundamentalist, which means that they defend a position on an ideological basis, without taking present reality into account.

The others are more pragmatic and define their positions by an analysis of immediate consequences.

This exercise may serve as a rough guideline to make students realise the existence of different models of political thinking and to become aware of their personal preferences and leanings. In political life, political attitudes will often be found to resemble a policy mix between different basic models of political thinking, for example when arguing along neo-liberal, ecologist, or technocrat lines.

Procedure

1. The students answer the questions. Before each statement they write a number to indicate their attitude. The code they use is as follows:
   5 – They are fully in favour of the statement.
   4 – They are more or less in favour of the opinion stated.
   3 – They are more or less neutral regarding the opinion stated.
   2 – They are more or less against the opinion.
   1 – They are fully against the statement.
2. Students draw up their total, which indicates their political attitude.
   100-80: revolutionary
   80-60: reformist
   60-40: in favour of the status quo
   40-20: reactionary.

Are there any revealing divergences between students, notably between boys and girls?

Extension

Working with texts: depending on how this exercise is used – as an introduction or a transfer exercise – text work is recommended to precede or follow this exercise. For advanced classes, excerpts from writers such as Locke, Burke or Marx might be selected. In addition, or as an alternative for younger students, statements by politicians or party representatives on a specific issue may be appropriate.

Also see the following exercise.

Variation

These questions may be formulated on the basis of more local concerns.

Any of the questions may serve as a starting point for debate.

Materials

(see next page)

Student handout

Questionnaire on attitudes to change

1. A woman should be able to get sterilisation without the permission of her husband.
2. Information on birth control should be available on request to all young girls of fourteen or over.
3. Soft drugs should be legalised.
4. In democracies referenda should be possible on popular demand.
5. Criminals need medical care rather than punishment.
6. The death sentence should be completely abolished.
7. Big companies should be nationalised.
8. Marriages between people of the same sex should be legal.
9. There should be no specification of sex in job offers.
10. Charitable institutions should be banned. It is the duty of the state to help the underprivileged.
11. The average individual does not need to be managed or controlled.
12. Students should take part in the running of their school.
13. Grades and certificates should be abolished.
14. Everyone should be guaranteed a minimum income, regardless of sex, age and profession, and even if they decide to do nothing.
15. Children should be brought up in several faiths simultaneously; they can make their choice when they are adults.
16. Political leaders should follow the advice of scientists on the use of scientific discoveries.
17. Human beings are all born with the same potential.
18. Private property should be banned and state property brought in.
19. Nobody has the right to impose their opinions on others.
20. All production of polluting products has to be prevented, whatever the immediate economic impact.

Exercise 7.4. – The planning project[6]

Educational objectives	The students understand the structures of mutual dependence in a community during a period of change. The students understand that every decision concerns all members in the community. If a decision is therefore to be accepted and supported, all members of a community must understand it and have the chance to participate in the decision-making process.
Resources	A description of a real or fictional planning project of an urban neighbourhood. It has to take into account social, economic, demographic, transportation and other problems. The teacher needs to prepare a set of cards for the actors in the role-play. The following examples may serve to give the reader an idea of how a real planning project could be simulated in a role-play.

Note for the teacher

There are many goals hidden inside this exercise. It is up to the teacher to decide which of these elements should be explicitly discussed and which should just help the teacher to understand and explain to others what the potential learning effect could be.

1. The students develop the willingness to listen to, and understand, different points of view and interests, whether they agree with them or not.
2. The students learn to anticipate the consequences and implications of options in the decision-making process.
3. The students experience decision making in a democratic framework. This needs to find a balance between participation and efficiency (e.g. everyone should have a say, but there needs to be a time limit for each contribution and the process as a whole).
4. Basic insight: in an open, i.e. learning community, the common good (the *volonté générale*) is not defined by any authority but is agreed on in a temporary decision which is open for revision if new problems occur.

Procedure

1. The students divide into pairs. Each pair receives a copy of the project and one of the cards. One pair of students presides over the debate to follow.
2. The pairs establish a list of all the benefits and problems relating to the project.
3. They do so from the point of view of the person whose role they are playing.
4. They take a common decision for or against the project (15 minutes).
5. In turn, each pair presents its position to the group and explains its reasons.
6. In a debate, each pair has to say what it would like to see carried out. A time limit should be set for each student and the whole debate.
7. The students vote so as to decide whether the project will be implemented or not.

Follow-up work

8. Are there other groups whose opinions should be consulted?
9. To what extent was your opinion influenced by that of others?

6. Adapted from S. Fountain, *Education pour le développement humain*, De Boeck, 1996.

10. Do the particular interests defended by one of the groups have an effect on the other groups?
11. Are there groups whose opinions and interests deserve more weight?
12. Are there groups whose opinions are rarely or never heard?
13. Does the solution which the majority has voted for represent the best solution for the whole of the society?

Extension

1. Individual students act a certain role without the support of a partner.
2. The role-play includes the hearing of experts who can refer to specific aspects of the project.
3. Part of the class acts as a jury or local parliament who make the final decision, without the advocates for certain interest groups participating (representative democracy).
4. Two or three students act as reporters and observers. They feed back on the process of decision making and the roles played by the students.
5. If a real decision-making process is simulated in a role-play, local politicians or journalists can be invited to a follow-up discussion with the students.
6. This model may be used to organise a real decision-making process in school.

Material for the teachers

Questions for designing role-play cards

1. You are a teacher:
   - Do you see reasons why the project would be a good idea?
   - Do you think it could present any problems?
2. You are the owner of a small business:
   - Do you see reasons why the project would be a good idea?
   - Do you think it could present any problems?
3. You work in a medical centre.
4. You work as a refuse collector.
5. You are a bus driver.
6. You are a recent arrival from another region or another country and are seeking work.
7. You are young people working in the neighbourhood.
8. You are the manager of a small company.
9. You are a political representative.
10. Etc.

Exercise 7.5. – We and the world

Educational objectives	The students examine how other countries and remote events affect their community. The students understand better the structure of interdependence in the world. The unequal distribution of power and the unequal process of development call for worldwide understanding and co-operation in the spirit of human rights.
Resources	Current local newspapers, a map of the world, tape and coloured markers, thread, needles.

Procedure

1. The students form groups of four. They cut out articles which show that another part of the world has an effect on their local community and that their country and other countries mutually affect one another.
2. The issues:
   - economic problems
   - political problems
   - problems of migration
   - pollution
   - cultural exchange
   - tourism
   - military action, etc.
3. The students classify articles according to keywords which they choose to indicate certain types of influence and attribute colours to the keywords.
4. The students choose the most significant articles and tape them onto the map of the world on the wall. They trace lines linking each article with thread and needles to their country.
5. Plenary session.
   - What part of the world have you established most links with?
   - What kinds of links are most common? Why?
   - Is there a part of the world with which you find no links? Why?

Extension

The students find information about the political and/or economic systems in force in the countries with which there are links.

They can see whether other links existed in the past.

In foreign language teaching, materials from foreign newspapers or the Internet can be used.

This exercise may serve as an introduction to the problem of unequal development and power distribution in the world.

Our perception of the world we live in is fed by information we receive second-hand – from the media. Just think how far you would get if you only knew those parts of the world around you that you've seen yourself. So what do the media tell us and what information don't they pass on to us? Should anyone control the media? A censor? Or is competition between different newspapers

enough? How powerful are the media? Could we live without them? Other similar questions can also be raised but the students should raise them, not the teacher. If the students realise how limited their scope of direct perception is, they may begin to ask questions on the role of the media by themselves.

Exercise 7.6. – Should we take part in politics?

Educational objectives	The students form their opinions as to whether it is important to participate in government. Participation can take place in many ways. We define participation as taking part in the public life of your community and society. Some people think it is important to participate, while others do not. The students should understand that political decisions affect them, regardless of whether they participate in decision making or not.
Resources	Role cards for the role-play.

Procedure

1. Four students role-play the conversation between some newly arrived citizens in a nation in the process of creation.
2. The students discuss, guided by the teacher if necessary, questions raised by the role-play such as the following:
   - What are the four main views expressed by the citizens about participation? Do you agree? Why or why not?
   - What will the four citizens lose by not participating? What benefits do you think individuals will gain from participating?
   - What benefits do you think the new country would gain from individuals participating?
   - What are the possible risks or losses involved if one chooses to participate?
   - Weighing benefits and risks, do you think it is worthwhile participating?
3. By discussion or lecture, the students could arrive at the following conclusion:

   Government affects people's lives in lot of ways. By participating in government people can have a voice in decisions made by the government. In every society someone is going to make the decisions. If people choose not to participate, they will not have a say in those decisions. These decisions can include such things as:
   - how much people will have to pay in taxes;
   - whether the society will get involved in a war;
   - who is going to own and control the country's natural resources.

   Depending on how the government is structured, decisions can be made at different levels, including national, regional and local. Some decisions, such as those about military power, are often made nationally, while others, such as those concerning transport and roads, are often made regionally. Still others, such as those about rubbish collection, are frequently made locally.

Materials

(see next page)

Role-play: four citizens arrive in a newly formed country

Assume you have just arrived in a newly formed country. You are eager to get started, to get to work building a new society. You have heard that there are all kinds of possibilities to create good government. Then you overhear the following conversation among a group of your fellow new arrivals:

Citizen 1:

"Where I came from, no one cared much about politics and government. We were always too busy with our daily lives. So here I probably won't want to bother about politics either."

Citizen 2:

"That's the way it is in our country ... and I never really understood what was going on among the leaders. They made it seem so complicated and made it very easy for us not to bother trying to understand."

Citizen 3:

"Well, it was different in our country. We tried but people who had power wouldn't let us get involved and we were threatened if we did try. So finally we gave up trying to participate."

Citizen 4:

"In my country we had elections and our leaders promised us good government. But it never turned out that way. The leaders used government to get rich. All leaders are corrupt."

Exercise 7.7. – How does government affect your life?

Educational objectives	The students understand that government affects our lives in almost every aspect imaginable (*tua res agitur*). The world we live in is man-made and it is up to us what we do with it. Deliberate political decision making is necessary because of our ever-increasing dependence on one another, from local to global level. Democracy can best take into account competing interests and integrate them into a satisfactory compromise – provided all groups have been given a hearing.
Resources	None.

Procedure

1. The students should realise to what extent their lives are affected by government. The following questions are suggested to help them; they could be answered in class or in small groups which would then present their results in the plenary setting.

2. – Tell the story of a recent day in your life – where you went, what you wore, saw, ate, said, learned and did. List whether each thing that you mentioned was affected by government, including national, regional and/or local government.

   – Assume that your government is a democracy where all citizens are given an equal opportunity to participate without their human rights being violated. Which of the items in your daily life that you listed as being affected by government do you think would have to change? Explain why you think they should change.

3. The students will probably raise the question as to how people can participate in democratic government. The teacher should offer some information, either through a lecture or based on a textbook or worksheets.

   The result could be as follows: many people believe that the greatest opportunity to participate in government is offered in a free and open democracy. This type of government means that the people themselves gain power and govern usually through the rule of the majority. Some countries are democracies in name only and people are not really allowed to participate. In a democratic system, citizens can choose between different ways of participating and some may even decide not to participate at all.

   Democracy can best take into account differing and competing interests and search for satisfactory solutions – provided all sides have articulated their points of view. Special attention must be paid to weaker groups, who are not in a position to exercise pressure and whose interests therefore tend to be ignored (problem of exclusion).

Exercise 7.8. – Ways of participating in democracy

Educational objective	The students relate different forms of political participation to human rights.
Resources	List of possible forms of political participation.

Procedure

1. Each student writes a list of all the ways and activities by which he or she thinks people can participate in democratic decision-making processes.
2. The students form groups of four. They compare their lists, discuss them and try to agree on one list of ways of participating.
3. The groups compare their list of ways of participation with the one on the handout.

Extension

The students could explore the following questions:

1. Do you believe that any or all of the above forms of political participation are human rights? Should all of them be protected by the law? Explain why or why not.
2. In what way can you participate in democracy in your country? Are there any ways of taking part that are not open to you? Explain.
3. Should laws also protect the right not to participate? Explain.

Materials

Student handout

Participation may take many forms including:
- reading about issues and leaders
- writing about issues and leaders
- debating issues
- working in the community in support of a particular cause or in protest against government action
- forming or joining political parties or other community or grass-roots organisations
- attending political or community meetings
- becoming a leader of a political party, a labour organisation or community organisation
- voting in elections
- campaigning for those standing for office
- standing for office and serving if elected
- paying taxes
- lobbying
- serving in the military
- using existing legal channels such as contacting government officials, taking cases to court, etc.
- protesting through demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, etc.

Exercise 7.9. – The policy cycle

Educational objectives	The students are able to apply the model of the policy cycle to examples of decision-making processes. The students become aware of their opportunities in intervening and participating in processes of decision making.
Resources	Set of student handouts: "The policy cycle model". Flipchart paper, markers, scissors, glue.

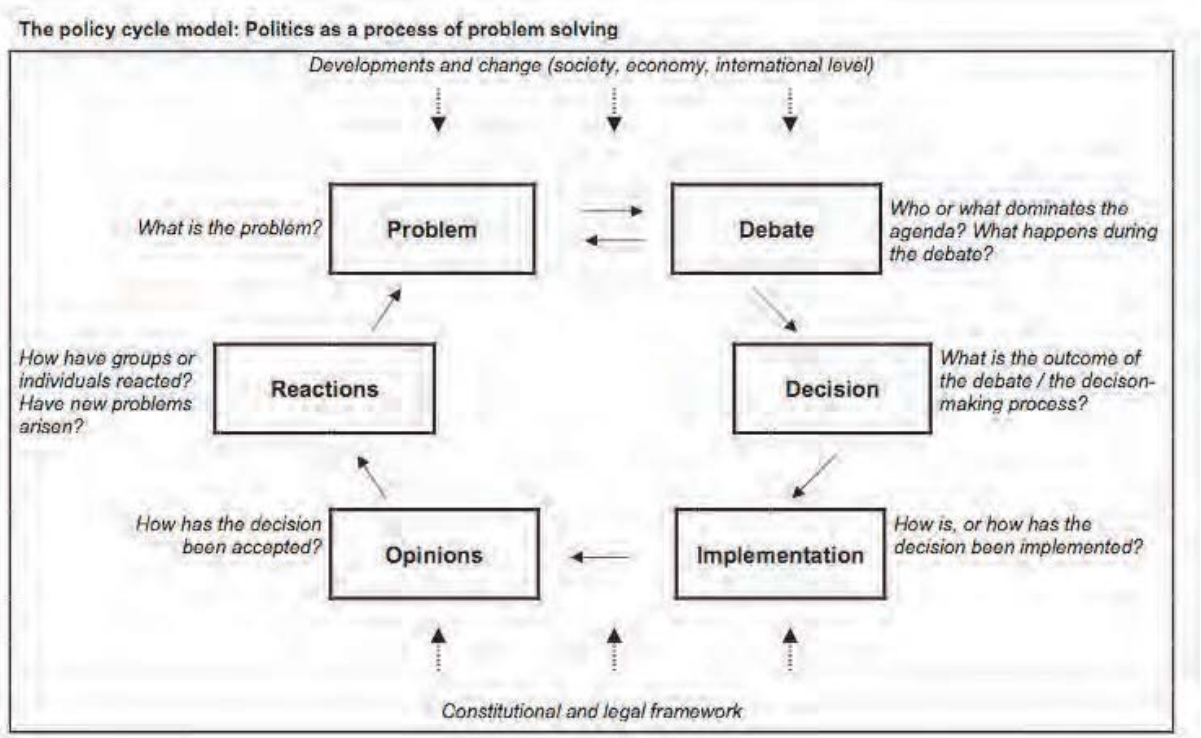
Procedure

1. The teacher introduces the model of the policy cycle, using one of the following approaches:
   - The teacher employs the deductive, systematic approach: he/she gives a lecture[7] and the students apply the tool that they have been given.
   - The teacher follows the inductive approach: the teacher begins with an example or refers to knowledge and experience that the students already have. This could be a current issue, a decision that they support or disagree with or a problem that they are worried about. A decision in school can also serve as a starting point. The teacher follows with a lecture, carefully referring to the context provided by the students.

   Whatever approach is used, the students receive a copy of the handout "The policy cycle model".
2. The students apply the model. Different tasks can be given:
   - The students use the model as a tool for active and structured reading of the newspaper. Working in groups of four to six, the students study the newspapers of the past few days and identify examples for each of the six stages. They paste the articles on their posters and present them in the plenary round.
   - The students follow a decision-making process on a particular issue. This may require material covering a longer period of time and therefore older newspapers can be useful too. Books and the Internet can become important sources. This exercise can be developed into a research project.
3. The model can serve as a starting point for discussion: in what stages of a decision-making process can we intervene? The teacher should explain that the two stages "decision" and "implementation" are confined to the political system (unless a decision is made by plebiscite). But citizens may intervene in any other stage.

7. See "background information for teachers" (in the material section of this exercise).

Materials



The policy cycle model: background information for teachers

The policy cycle is a model. It works like a map, which means it selects certain aspects from reality and ignores others. In this way the picture becomes clearer but the user should never confuse the model with reality. In this case, the policy cycle model focuses on politics as a process of decision making and solving of problems. Its focus is not on politics as a struggle for power, even though this aspect does appear. The six categories lead to key questions that help to analyse political decision making; the students are encouraged to develop further questions that are more context-specific.

The model gives an ideal type description of political decision-making processes. First, a political *problem* must reach the public agenda. The issue of agenda-setting has a lot to do with political power. Problems do not exist as such; they must be defined and accepted. Competing interests and values play an important part, as the definition of a problem strongly influences the outcome of decision making. For example, poverty can be defined as an attack on human rights or as an incentive to take one's fate into one's own hands. The first view implies that poor people need support, while the second view tacitly recommends not helping poor people too much, as this might make them lazy. The key issue of agenda-setting is indicated by the double arrows between the categories *problem* and *debate*.

The *debate* takes place under certain conditions. The frame of the model is important here: social, economic and international developments set the data. And the constitutional and legal framework defines the rules. Who may take part in the debate? Who decides what? These questions help to understand the outcome of the debate, the final decision. Who took part in the debate? What interests were at stake? What had to be negotiated? Was it possible to find a compromise?

Implementation: How is, or how has the decision been implemented? Did any difficulties or conflicts occur? Does the implementation meet the intentions of the decision makers?

Opinions: How did the decision "go down"? Whose interests are affected – favourably or unfavourably? What values are involved?

Reactions: Are there reactions by individuals and/or collective, organised reactions by groups? Do they support or oppose the decision? Examples could be protests, demonstrations, letters to the editor of a newspaper, decisions by a court, strikes, emigration, withdrawal of investors, breaking the law, etc.

Problem: At the end of the day, has the original problem been solved? Have any undesired or unforeseen effects been produced? Has a new problem arisen through the reactions to the decision and its implementation? The policy cycle is terminated if the problem has been solved. Very often, a new cycle begins with a new subsequent or unforeseen problem.

The students should understand that the policy cycle shows where and how citizens can take part in politics. We can give our definition of problems that need political attention and require public resources to solve them. We can take part in the debate, form our opinion on the decision and support or oppose the way in which it has been implemented. In doing so, we are making use of our human and civil rights. Democracy depends on active democrats.

Taking parts in politics

Illustration from Chapter 7

Democracy and Human Rights Education – Volume VI

Teaching democracy

A collection of models for democratic citizenship and human rights education