

UNDERSTANDING CIVIL RIGHTS THROUGH THEATRE PEDAGOGY IN SCHOOLS

Abstract:	<i>Nowadays we face a struggle between the perceptions of civil rights. Whether it is generation-related, gender or cultural-motivated, or others, we face the fact that although rights and freedoms are being mediatized and accessible for anyone, people understand these rights differently. Therefore, it is important to find a way to help children understand these rights.</i> <i>The article develops an argument for recognizing the importance of children's rights for citizenship education. It also outlines a perspective on how children's rights can be taught as civil rights using theater pedagogy methods.</i>
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Introduction

Security, peace, and human safety are usually discussed as political problems. However, these issues are not only political, but also educational: this becomes very clear, for example, in the case of homicidal violence in schools in the USA, and now, unfortunately, in Europe as well. In this article, however, we do not want to deal with this problem, but with a more fundamental question: We start from the premise that security, peace, and human safety can only be achieved if people consciously identify with these goals. Even in democratic states, this no longer seems to be a matter of course³³⁰. Not only is only part of the population aware of their civil rights, but others are denied these rights. This process can lead to an erosion of democratic constitutions and processes.

We argue that a stronger focus on civil rights must go hand in hand with a strengthening of educational processes from childhood onwards, that aims not only to accumulate knowledge about civil rights and children's rights but also to the development of the ability to stand up for and defend them as a primary goal of education.

In this article, we would first like to argue for a stronger connection between children's rights and civil rights. Secondly, we would like to present established methods from extracurricular theater pedagogy that can also be used in school education about children's rights. So, in the first step, we will discuss children's rights according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the context of civil rights. We will also briefly discuss theoretical and historical aspects of the development of children's rights. In the second part of the article, we will then present and discuss exemplary theater pedagogical methods to support children's rights education. In conclusion, the need for further research is outlined.

³³⁰ Dominique Reynié (Ed.), *Freedoms at Risk: The Challenge of the Century. A Global Survey on Democracy in 55 Countries*, "Fondation pour l'Innovation Politique", 2022, [https://community-democracies.org/app/uploads/2022/01/fondapol-IRI-CoD-KAS-Genron-FNG-Rda-survey-freedoms-at-risk-the-challenge-of-the-century-01-2022.pdf_\(21.11.2023\)](https://community-democracies.org/app/uploads/2022/01/fondapol-IRI-CoD-KAS-Genron-FNG-Rda-survey-freedoms-at-risk-the-challenge-of-the-century-01-2022.pdf_(21.11.2023))

Civil Rights and Children's Rights

Children's rights are usually discussed as a specific form of human rights. However, the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child³³¹ also formulates specific civil rights for children. Civil Rights are defined as “guarantees of equal social opportunities and equal protection under the law, regardless of race, religion, or other personal characteristics”³³². As we will show later, these aspects, among others, are also addressed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

However, the history of children's rights does not start with the UN Convention. It goes back to the beginning of the 20th century and is associated with names such as the Polish doctor Janusz Korczak³³³ (1878/79-1942) or the British social reformer Eglantyne Jebb³³⁴ (1876-1928).

In his 1919 published book “How to Love a Child” Korczak formulated three rights of a child: “1. The child's right to die. 2. The child's right to today. 3. The child's right to be as it is”³³⁵. This is not the place to discuss these three rights in detail. It is much more important that through this “Magna Charta Libertatis” for children, Korczak became a pioneer of children's rights. And more than that: He put these rights into practice in the Warsaw orphanage he ran, giving children a voice in matters that affected them and creating democratic institutions for the children in the home. This was a prototype for the implementation of civil rights for and with children. Korczak's work came to an end during the Second World War. He was murdered by the Nazis in 1942 at the Treblinka extermination camp, where he accompanied the children from his orphanage who were taken to their deaths by the SS³³⁶. Eglantyne Jebb on the other side successfully campaigned for children's rights on the political stage. She was shocked by the situation of many children in the Balkans after the First World War. Her experience led her to draft the Children's Charter, which aimed to guarantee children certain rights. Her text became the basis for the League of Nations Geneva Declaration of 1924, the first international statement about children's rights. However, the Declaration was not legally binding³³⁷.

In 1989, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the first globally binding rights for children. 196 States have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child since 1989. The Convention consists of 54 articles and is also accessible in an easily understandable version for children³³⁸.

To illustrate the proximity of children's rights to civil rights, we quote short extracts from three articles of the official Convention. In general, Articles 12-15 can be read as children's civil rights. Article 12(1): “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight under the age and maturity of the child”³³⁹. Article 13(1): “The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice”³⁴⁰. Article 15(1):

³³¹ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted and opened for signature, ratification, and accession by General Assembly, Resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989, entry into force 2 September 1990, under article 49*, <https://www.unicef.org.au/united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child> (21.11.2013)

³³² Rebecca Hamlin, *Civil Rights*, Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/civil-rights> (21.11.2023)

³³³ Irit Wyrobnik, *Korczak-Pädagogik*, Socialnet Lexikon, Bonn, 2022, <https://www.socialnet.de/lexikon/29139> (21.11.2023)

³³⁴ Clare Mulley, *The Woman Who Saved the Children: a Biography of Eglantyne Jebb Founder of Save the Children*, Oneworld, Oxford, 2009, p. 316

³³⁵ Janusz Korczak, *Wie man ein Kind lieben soll*, Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1967, p. 40

³³⁶ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Janusz Korczak*, “Holocaust Encyclopedia”, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/janusz-korczak-1> (21.11.2023)

³³⁷ UNICEF, *Eine kurze Geschichte der Kinderrechte*, <https://www.unicef.de/informieren/ueber-uns/fuer-kinderrechte/kurze-geschichte-der-kinderrechte> (21.11.2023)

³³⁸ UNICEF, *The Convention on the Rights of the Child: The children's version*, <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text-childrens-version> (21.11.2023)

³³⁹ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted and opened for signature, ratification, and accession by General Assembly, Resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989, entry into force 2 September 1990, by Article 49*, <https://www.unicef.org.au/united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child> (21.11.2013)

³⁴⁰ *Idem*

“States Parties recognize the rights of the child to freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly”³⁴¹.

It is a common misconception that children's rights are only about empowering children; this is *one* of the aims. But it is also true that these rights *imply obligations* to others. This is important to know because the quality of rights arises mostly from this social perspective, which is linked to the individual perspective. In the same way that civil rights are shared rights, so should children's rights create a shared and safe public space for which everyone has a responsibility. You see this, for example, in Article 28(2): “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and conformity with the present Convention”³⁴².

It should be clear now that children's rights should be seen as a part of fundamental civil rights. Unfortunately, they are still not implemented strongly enough in schools. Many teachers (and parents) are critical of them. However, there is now extensive research on the political and psychological importance of respecting children's rights in schools and other educational institutions³⁴³.

But how do we teach children's rights? There is evidence that Civil Rights education and the teaching of Children's Rights cannot be successful if it is done only from a cognitive perspective: Thinking, feeling and (physical) action must also be considered. Teachers need to create an integral learning experience for their students. A lot of teaching concepts have been developed in the last few years as well as professional concepts for an education that is rooted in the spirit of Children's Rights³⁴⁴. A wide range of methods has been developed, particularly in the context of drama education, to provide holistic education for children's rights.

Theater Pedagogy and Children's Rights

Children's Rights and Pedagogy

Civil rights are the legal protections and liberties granted to citizens, while human rights are universal and apply to all individuals just because they are human. But what about Children's rights? Are they a “practical expression of children's citizenship”? Are children “full members and citizens, who are rights holders” or “objects” of legal protection?³⁴⁵ However we will answer these questions, the main question is how teachers need to approach the process of transmitting knowledge, skills, and attitudes regarding these civil rights to provide meaningful education. Gollob and Krapf suggest that the students must “learn to understand the rights of the child [...] to actively implement children's rights’ and after that, to develop personal values and attitudes”³⁴⁶.

Talking through a concept may not be enough, so teachers need to create opportunities for students to engage to relate to the implications of every right. Through interactive learning, children may know their rights and responsibilities, and respect the rights of others.

³⁴¹ *Idem*

³⁴² *Idem*

³⁴³ Michael Freeman, *The Human Rights of Children*, Brill, Nijhoff, Sevi Kent Kükürtcü, Nefise Semra Erkan, *The Effects of Children's Rights and Democracy Education on Children's Democratic Behaviors*, “International Journal of Progressive Education”, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2022, pp. 174-193; Michael Wyness, *The Uneven Distribution of Children's Rights. Schooling, Caring and “Living” Rights*, “The International Journal of Children's Rights”, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2022, pp. 89-113, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-30040009> (21.11.2023)

³⁴⁴ *Reckahner Reflexionen zur Ethik pädagogischer Beziehungen*, Rochow-Edition, Reckahn, 2017, https://paedagogische-beziehungen.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ReckahnerReflexionenBroschuere_2021.pdf (21.11.2023)

³⁴⁵ Usang Maria Assim, *Civil Rights and Freedoms of the Child*, Ursula Kilkelly, Ton Liefaard (Eds), “International Human Rights of Children. International Human Rights”, Springer, Singapore, 2019, p. 1-19, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3182-3_7-1 (21.11.2023)

³⁴⁶ Ralf Gollob, Peter Krapf, *Exploring children's rights. Lesson sequences for primary schools*. Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, 2007, p. 60, <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016802f727c> (21.11.2023)

Theater Pedagogy

The *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education* encourages article 6 arts to be “as a means of training and raising awareness in the field of human rights”³⁴⁷. There are many references describing theater pedagogy methods as usable options in programs regarding raising awareness and understanding democratic matters, rights, and freedoms.

Studies like the one led by Lenakakis regarding theater pedagogy and gender stereotypes³⁴⁸, the one led by Desai using theater of the oppressed techniques within teacher education³⁴⁹, or the one led by Choleva, Lenakakis, and Pigkou-Repousi regarding drama and human rights education, revealed theater techniques as useful regarding their educational purpose³⁵⁰.

Theater pedagogy is situated between pedagogy and theater³⁵¹. Theatre involves multiple learning processes³⁵² brings life to learning and aims to “develop a sense of social responsibility”³⁵³ and it is proving itself increasingly useful in educational approaches³⁵⁴. When we refer to theater pedagogy, it is understood as combining three main aspects ”education towards, for, and through theatre”³⁵⁵.

When it comes to children, it is about exploring, but it is also about guiding the experience. This can be related even if it is only about viewing a performance. A theater performance can take the role of a messenger for moral and ethical values. Children as spectators may have, for example, the opportunity to discover civil rights through the presented content. To ensure the understanding of the main subject and the concepts, it would be opportune to provide the children with some key information before going to the theater to see a play. In this way, children will pay more attention to that fact, they will focus on the main message and the terms could be decoded within actions, comprehended by observing, and analyzed afterward.

Theater Pedagogy Methods for Children's Rights Education

The stage can be a platform for democracy, where everyone can relate to its essence and where anyone can be an agent of change. It is that safe territory that gives people the opportunity to discover, to relate or even to deal with real problems concerning the limits, freedoms, and rights in a society.

Through theater, using methods and techniques from theater for educational purposes, participants can exercise, develop, and learn skills, abilities, and values for life, like communication skills, critical thinking, empathy, knowledge, awareness of self, self-confidence, and social behavior³⁵⁶.

³⁴⁷ United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training*, 2011, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/resources/educators/human-rights-education-training/11-united-nations-declaration-human-rights-education-and-training-2011> (21.11.2023)

³⁴⁸ Antonis Lenakakis, Dimitra Kousi, Ioannes Panges, ‘Do women know how to drive?’ *Research on how theatre pedagogy contributes to dealing with gender stereotypes*, “Preschool&Primary Education”, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2019, pp. 19-36, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12681/ppej.19347> (21.11.2023)

³⁴⁹ Shiv R. Desai, *Utilizing theatre of the oppressed within teacher education to create emancipatory teachers*, “Multicultural Perspectives”, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2017, pp. 229-233, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2017.1347875> (21.11.2023)

³⁵⁰ Nassia Choleva, Antonis Lenakakis, Myrto Pigkou-Repousi, *Communicating vessels: drama and human rights education in in-service teacher training* “Human Rights Education Review”, October 2021, p. 68, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355755559_Communicating_vessels_drama_and_human_rights_education_in_in-service_teacher_training (21.11.2023)

³⁵¹ Ömer Adigüzel, Romi Domkowsky, Ute Handwerg, Klaus Hoffmann, Gerd Koch, Sinah Marx, Inci San, *Internationales Übereinkommen über das Verhalten und zur Ethik von Theaterpädagoginnen und Theaterpädagogen*, 2011, p. 2, <https://bag-online.de/files/bag/inhalte/uevet/uevet-deutsch.pdf> (21.11.2023)

³⁵² Doris Eberhardt, *Theaterpädagogik in der Pflege: Pflegekompetenz durch Theaterarbeit entwickeln*, Georg Thieme, Stuttgart, 2005, p. 12

³⁵³ Board of Governors of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, *The Outcomes Assessment Guidelines for Theatre Programs in Higher Education*, <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.athe.org/resource/resmgr/imported/OutcomesAssessment.pdf> (21.11.2023)

³⁵⁴ Anja Seifert, *Theaterpädagogik als Methode der Gewaltprävention in der Schule*, in: Werner Helsper, Christian Hillbrandt, Thomas Schwarz (Ed.), *Schule und Bildung im Wandel: Anthologie historischer und aktueller Perspektiven*, VS Publishing, Wiesbaden, 2009, p. 209

³⁵⁵ Lars Göhmann, *Theatrale Wirklichkeiten*, Verlag Mainz, Mainz, 2004, pp. 57-58

³⁵⁶ Eckart Liebau, Leopold Klepacki, Jörg Zirfas, *Theatrale Bildung: Theaterpädagogische Grundlagen und kulturpädagogische Perspektiven für die Schule*, Juventa, Weinheim und München, 2009, p. 118

Theater pedagogy is about opportunities, answering questions, and finding answers through experience, through theater activities/games/exercises/plays, etc. It is about exploring, understanding, reflecting, expressing we, and developing. Teachers may therefore try to raise awareness about the main issues regarding children's rights within the three steps strategy mentioned before:

- transmitting knowledge,
- actively implementing and
- developing personal values, skills, and attitudes.

The first step may be for example inspired by the volume "Tasks for Democracy. 60 activities to learn and assess transversal attitudes, skills, and knowledge". Here, readers will find a debriefing activity that aims to raise learners' awareness regarding their "feelings about and attitudes towards specific issues"³⁵⁷ and it develops "their knowledge of important concepts related to intercultural competence such as identity, discrimination, otherness, empathy, diversity, co-operation, and interdependence"³⁵⁸.

Therefore, teachers will invite students to make a circle and close their eyes. The teacher will go to everyone in the room and put stickers of four colors on the forehead of each participant. The stickers would be distributed in the group so that for example the blue colored stickers build a first majority, the green stickers a second majority, the yellow stickers a first minority, the red stickers a second minority, and one participant should remain without any sticker. During this activity, the participants are not allowed to talk. After the stickers are put in place, the participants should open their eyes and must group themselves, without talking to each other. When they/are done building groups, they will be asked why they've done it by following the colors on their foreheads and will be led to realize the psychosocial dynamics of inclusion/exclusion, in this case by colors. By talking about the feelings and the experience, participants will gain knowledge about the principles of non-discrimination³⁵⁹.

From this point begging, teachers could try something like an exercise inspired by Boal's Image Theater. Due to this technique "body images constitute the Freirean 'word' and provide procedures of theatrical decodifications; interpretations; non-verbal communications; and collective creations; in a life rehearsal procedure"³⁶⁰ Starting from the image created by the first activity, participants will use their bodies, facial expressions to portray that reality of discrimination. After that, the participants need to imagine and create an ideal portrayal of that situation, reconfiguring that image using their bodies like sculptures. In the end, the participants are challenged to shape the transitional portrayal, a challenge that will give them the possibility to find the causes and the solutions for this transition to be possible³⁶¹.

This second step is an alternative way of raising awareness regarding everyone's right to expression and a good way to visualize and analyze actions and reactions. By seeing what kind of an impact some attitudes or even stickers can have, participants may feel empathy, understand civil rights embrace the opportunities they offer and actively implement the knowledge.

Augusto Boal's participatory theater is about raising awareness, promoting knowledge, and democratic forms of interaction. Through his techniques, participants get the chance to discover and explore perspectives regarding power and oppression. They observe, discuss, experience, and reflect upon situations and develop personal values and attitudes. Boal's Forum Theatre is focused on the *spect-actor*. This technique actively involves audience members by inviting them onstage to take part in the action. At the performance, the spectators become spectators and are invited to be part of the action, commenting, or playing roles to find a feasible solution to the presented situation³⁶².

³⁵⁷ Pascale Mompoin-Gaillard (Ed.), *Tasks for democracy. 60 activities to learn and assess transversal attitudes, skills and knowledge*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, 2015, pp. 43-44, <http://www.learntochange.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/tasks-for-democracy.pdf> (21.11.2023)

³⁵⁸ *Idem*

³⁵⁹ *Idem*

³⁶⁰ Choleva Lenakakis, Pigkou-Repousi, *Op. cit.*, p. 68

³⁶¹ Arvind Singhal, *Empowering the oppressed through participatory theater*, "Investigación&Desarrollo", January 2004, p. 148, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26446901_Empowering_the_oppressed_through_participatory_theater (21.11.2023)

³⁶² Ken Gewertz, *Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed'*, "Harvard Gazette", December 2003, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2003/12/augusto-boals-theatre-of-the-oppressed/> (21.11.2023)

“Forum Theatre: perhaps the most democratic form of the Theatre of the Oppressed and certainly the best known and most practiced throughout the world, uses or can use all the resources of all known theatrical forms. Those we call spect-actors are invited to come on stage and reveal using theater – rather than by just using words – the thoughts, desires, and strategies that can suggest, to the group to which they belong, a palette of possible alternatives of their invention. This theater should be a rehearsal for action in real life, rather than an end in itself”³⁶³.

Therefore, in the last step, teachers may focus on the specific problem, like discrimination, and write with the students a script or choose a text to work on. For example, in the same volume mentioned before in this paper, “Tasks for Democracy” is a text called “Friendly School”, which is about preconception, acceptance of equal human rights, about “the willingness to act and encourage others to act against discrimination, prejudices, stereotypes, and injustice [and the] capacity to prevent the marginalization of any individual or group”³⁶⁴. The text can be used as a script for practicing the technique of Forum Theater.

When it is about how to teach civil rights, it is about understanding human beings and behaviors, about empathy. Educating and helping children to explore and understand the essence of concepts like dignity, equality, and freedom through play, visualization, through experience, will lead children to understand rights correctly, and avoid misleading the senses or taking them for granted.

To prevent, to act, and to encourage people to act against discrimination and injustice and to encourage respecting human, civil, and children’s rights, we need to ensure that they understand the essence of these concepts. This can happen through holistic, experiential educational strategies, like theater pedagogy.

Playing and learning through theater experience can make a difference, and that could be worth trying!

Conclusions

In this article, we have argued in favor of understanding children's rights education as part of civil rights education. In addition, we have shown how the goals of children's rights education can be implemented in schools using theater pedagogical methods.

However, the issue of implementing non-formal methods such as drama education or other specific games inspired by theater practice in schools poses challenges for these formal learning spaces. Not only does the time structure of lessons need to be modified, but curricular considerations also need to be considered.

It is also important to remember that schools are characterized by power relations. The methods of Augusto Boal, who was inspired by the liberation pedagogue Paulo Freire, may well come into conflict with this. How do schools, teachers, and students deal with these conflicts? How can schools become more democratic places where theater education can take place beyond the “safe space”?

These and many other questions need to be discussed in further transdisciplinary research projects. They are important questions not only for democratic and therefore more peaceful schools but also for more democratic and hopefully more peaceful and safer societies.

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