

### **Module 3: Know your rights and respect the rights of others**

Thematic Areas: *Education on Democracy, Human Rights, Tolerance, and Youth.*

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#### **Introduction**

*How do young people learn about democracy and human rights?*

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#### **Inter-American Democratic Charter Corner:**

Article 7: Democracy is indispensable for the effective exercise of fundamental freedoms and human rights in their universality, indivisibility, and interdependence, embodied in the respective constitutions of states and in inter-American and international human rights instruments.

One of the objectives maintained throughout the various processes of strengthening democracy in the Americas has been to enhance youth democratic participation, beginning within educational institutions and extending to their respective communities. Having informed, critical, and socially engaged citizens positions young people as a fundamental element for sustainable change and impact in the region. Knowledge and the practice of democratic principles, freedoms, and fundamental rights become central and essential components.

The consolidation and strengthening of educational training mechanisms allow for the development of a solid civic consciousness, active participation in democratic life, and the defense of one's rights. Young people are a vital group for the development of a democratic society due to their capacity to foster new forms of participation and generate positive change.

#### **a. Learn about democracy, freedoms, and fundamental rights.**

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There are multiple reasons cited as arguments for promoting education on democracy, freedom, and fundamental rights. These range from the need to teach young people to value informed and critical participation in the social and political life of their communities, to the idea that human rights and their respect serve as a means to protect and empower individuals to face adverse situations in their environment.

Several international organizations including the OAS<sup>1</sup> recognize the importance of young people in democracy and their role in civic participation, the defense of human rights, and the building of more just societies. They emphasize the need to actively involve them in

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<sup>1</sup> OAS, OAS Youth Agenda at:

[https://www.oas.org/es/youth/agenda\\_de\\_la\\_oea\\_sobre\\_juventud.asp#:~:text=OEA%20Juventud&text=La%20agenda%20de%20juventud%20de%20la%20OEA%20se%20basa%20en,cuenta%20cuestiones%20de%20la%20juventud.](https://www.oas.org/es/youth/agenda_de_la_oea_sobre_juventud.asp#:~:text=OEA%20Juventud&text=La%20agenda%20de%20juventud%20de%20la%20OEA%20se%20basa%20en,cuenta%20cuestiones%20de%20la%20juventud.)

political processes, considering their concerns and proposals. There are numerous experiences across the Americas where youth participation in democratic processes is promoted, strengthening their commitment to freedom and respect for others<sup>2</sup>.

Preserving the sustainability of training and democratic practices initiatives for young people in areas such as civic engagement, democracy, and human rights remains more relevant today than ever.

## b. Human Rights in the Americas

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights outlines the rights of every individual and, since 1945, has been considered a key document to which 192 nations are now committed<sup>3</sup>.

Despite multiple efforts, human rights in the Americas continue to face a series of challenges, such as violence, corruption, impunity, inequality, and environmental degradation—issues that result in frequent violations of these rights for thousands of people.

The Inter-American Democratic Charter (IADC) also recognizes that the promotion and observance of rights are inseparable from comprehensive development, equitable growth, the consolidation of democracy, and the rule of law in the Americas. In particular, Chapter 3, Article 16 states that every person has the right to education without discrimination, through access to quality education at all levels and in all modalities. This is therefore vital for achieving greater equality, improving living standards, promoting sustainable development, developing human capital, reducing poverty, strengthening democratic institutions, transmitting civic and social values, forming responsible and engaged citizens, and fostering social inclusion (OAS, 2001).

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) is the body responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights in the Americas and is part of the OAS<sup>4</sup>. The IACHR's role is to ensure the protection of the most fundamental rights of all people in the Americas. As part of its work, the Commission promotes and defends the rights of children and

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<sup>2</sup> For example: **Costa Rica**: Student Government Program; **Jamaica**: National Youth Parliament of Jamaica; **Belize**: The National Student Union of Belize; **Colombia**: Educational Leadership Program; **Dominican Republic**: Educational Leadership Program; **Argentina**: Program of Democratic Practices and Participation in Student Centers; **Guatemala**: Violence Prevention CUIDA (2025), promoting respectful coexistence and human rights.

<sup>3</sup> See: Universal Declaration of Human Rights at: <https://www.un.org/es/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

<sup>4</sup> There are also other international organizations responsible for human rights in the Americas, such as: The Inter-American Human Rights System (IHR): Based on the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR), the IHR is a regional system for the promotion and protection of human rights: The Inter-American Court of Human Rights: The Court is the judicial body of the IHR, which rules on cases of human rights violations.

adolescents in the region. In 2023, the resolution — Res-5-23-NNA<sup>5</sup>- I highlight the relevance of this topic for strengthening their work in this regard, understanding that the capacity of young people to express their opinions, be heard, and participate in decision-making is not only important: it is a right.

This resolution seeks to facilitate the exercise of the right to participation for children and adolescents, creating spaces and opportunities for them to express themselves safely and genuinely. Furthermore, it aims to progressively promote the participation of young people in the mechanisms of the IACHR, ensuring full respect for the rights established.

### **c. Education and human rights: a fundamental relationship.**

The relationship between human rights and education may seem obvious, but it is also quite complex and can be considered from several perspectives: 1) education is a human right in itself; 2) education is a fundamental tool for achieving the implementation and respect of human rights; 3) educating in human rights involves incorporating knowledge and developing the skills necessary to make these rights a common practice in society.

1) **Education as a human right** is enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

- Elementary and fundamental education must be free.
- Elementary education must be compulsory.
- Technical and professional education should be made generally available.
- Access to higher education should be equal for all, based on individual merit.

In this regard, the second paragraph of Article 26 is important, as it outlines the objectives of education: the full development of the human person and the strengthening of respect for human rights will promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations and ethnic groups.

Similarly, the Inter-American Charter of Human Rights considers “that education is an effective means to raise citizens’ awareness of their own countries and, in this way, achieve meaningful participation in the decision-making process, while reaffirming the importance of developing human resources to establish a strong and democratic system” (OAS, 2003).

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<sup>5</sup> See the document approved in 2023 at <https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/decisiones/2023/Res-5-23.pdf>

- 2) Considering **education as a mechanism for the strengthening democratic institutions, promoting the development of human potential, and alleviating poverty and fostering greater understanding among our peoples**<sup>6</sup> highlighting educational institutions as a primary place of learning and a key space for the protection of human rights and individual freedoms. Through education, students acquire knowledge about their rights, learn to exercise them, and respect the rights of others, thereby promoting a fairer and more democratic coexistence.

A population facing challenges in terms of staying within educational pathways has fewer opportunities to know and exercise their rights in daily life. Citizens have a set of rights that they should know, claim, and use responsibly. From this perspective, schools “protect” human rights when they:

- Incorporates human rights education into the curriculum, teaching fundamental principles such as equality, dignity, freedom, and justice.
- Encourages active student participation in school life, allowing them to express their opinions, engage in debates, and take part in decision-making.
- Creates a safe environment free from violence, discrimination, and harassment, where all students can feel protected and respected.
- Ensures equal opportunities for all students, treating them with dignity.
- Defends individual freedoms, such as freedom of expression, thought, and association, promoting the responsible exercise of these rights.

At the same time, in school, students develop and learn to respect individual freedoms when:

- Students are empowered to defend their rights and actively participate in society.
- Autonomy and responsibility are encouraged, allowing them to make decisions and assume accountability.
- Critical thinking and analytical skills are promoted, enabling students to evaluate information and make informed decisions.
- Tolerance and respect are fostered, encouraging peaceful coexistence and constructive conflict resolution.
- Students are prepared to actively participate in a democratic society, promoting civic engagement and social responsibility.

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<sup>6</sup> Inter-American Democratic Charter (2001). Available at: [http://www.oas.org/charter/docs/resolution1\\_en\\_p4.htm](http://www.oas.org/charter/docs/resolution1_en_p4.htm)

- 3) **Educating is about developing competencies to transform human rights into frequent practice within society**, involves much more than the intellectual act of transmitting concepts; it also means promoting and conveying attitudes and actions of and for human rights—this is: knowing, knowing how to act, and being.

The being aspect is the most important part of human rights, and in schools, it should be applied in daily life to create habits that extend beyond the classroom.

#### **d. Learning Tolerance and Respect for Others: The Role of Schools.**

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A holistic approach to the learning process is essential to equip young people with a deep understanding of their responsibilities and the capacity to take action to improve their societies. School systems can serve as powerful promoters of this process, both through curricula and extracurricular activities, as well as by training teachers to support it<sup>7</sup>.

Article 9 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter emphasizes that the elimination of all forms of discrimination as well as diverse forms of intolerance, the promotion and protection of human rights and respect for ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity in the Americas contribute to strengthening democracy and citizen participation. Tolerance is fostered through knowledge, an open attitude, communication, and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It consists of harmony in difference.

Likewise, the IADC reaffirms that the promotion and protection of human rights is a basic prerequisite for the existence of a democratic society and recognizing the importance of the continuous development and strengthening of the inter-American human rights system for the consolidation of democracy. Therefore, it is necessary to promote systematic methods of teaching tolerance that address the cultural, social, economic, political, and religious motives behind intolerance as part of the root causes of violence and exclusion.

By learning the principles of human rights, conflict resolution methods, understanding biases and perspectives, and strategies to promote peace, justice, and tolerance, students develop essential skills needed for coexistence in today's world. In this regard, educational policies and programs should contribute to the development of understanding, solidarity, and tolerance among individuals as well as among nations.

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<sup>7</sup> See: **Colombia**: School Embracing Peace; **Guatemala**: National Strategy for Civic Education; **Mexico**: Promotion of a Culture of Peace.

In school, young people “experience” tolerance by respecting different opinions, religions, backgrounds, and learning abilities. The development of attitudes and habits is exemplified in actions such as:

<b>Respecting others’ ideas and beliefs</b>	It is possible to discuss respectfully and with understanding the beliefs of classmates.
<b>Accepting differences in learning abilities</b>	Additional help can be offered to students who have other learning processes
<b>Participate in activities</b>	Students can be encouraged to participate in sports or extracurricular activities, regardless of their skills or abilities.
<b>Listen attentively to others</b>	One can listen patiently to the arguments or points of view of different members of the class.
<b>Help a classmate in need</b>	Help and support can be offered if a student is having difficulties, without judging their situation.
<b>Promote empathy</b>	Talk about demanding situations that students are experiencing and try to understand their feelings.

Source: Own elaboration

Tolerance is a value that entails full respect for another human being, including their ideas, practices, or beliefs, regardless of whether they differ from one’s own.

#### **e. Addressing current human rights challenges where young people can have influence.**

*How are young people connected to human rights issues?* Contemporary youth are characterized by their heterogeneity. Within the category commonly referred to as “youth,” there exists a wide range of situations and differences that have received little attention: changes in the way they engage with politics, interpersonal relationships, and social life in general; their relationship with new technologies and cultural consumption; the ways in which they understand citizenship and human rights; and the manner in which they redefine these concepts based on their own practices.<sup>8</sup>

The IACHR (2023) acknowledges that “...the right to participation of children is recognized in multiple international instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Articles 19 and 20) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 12, 13, 14, 15, 17 and 31), and has been reaffirmed by the jurisprudence of the Inter-American Human Rights System”

<sup>8</sup> La escuela media que queremos. Cuadernillo para estudiantes. Disponible en: <https://parlamentojuvenil.educ.ar/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Cuadernillo-Estudiante.pdf>

Young people can help address current human rights challenges in multiple ways. The first and most important of these is through formal education processes that recognize the importance of human rights for successful development within each community. Some of the ways this can be achieved include:

<b>Mobilizing public opinion</b>	Use their social media and digital platforms to inform others and demand accountability from governments.
<b>Participating in social movements</b>	Have historically been a driving force in social movements, advocating for the rights of everyone.
<b>Defending the rights of all</b>	Be agents of change in defending the rights of individuals in their various contexts.
<b>Contributing through education and awareness-raising</b>	Participate in workshops, talks, and awareness campaigns on human rights, promoting respect and understanding within their communities.
<b>Shaping a new generation of advocates</b>	Inspire others to engage in the defense of human rights, creating a network of support and leadership.
<b>Driving innovation and change</b>	Generate innovative ideas and approaches to address and promote a more comprehensive and sustainable future for everyone.

To achieve effective integration of young people into processes of human rights defense, the strengthening of democracy, and the protection of freedom, the IACHR (2017) underscores that “it should not be about just any kind of role for them but involve meaningful and protagonist participation. That includes the possibility to express themselves freely and to be heard by those who take decisions that will affect their rights, their development, and the course of their lives.” In the same vein, the Committee on the Rights of the Child has pointed out that participation processes must be genuine, respectful, sustained, and taken seriously. The concept of participation emphasizes that involving children should not be limited to a one-off action but should constitute the beginning of a deep and ongoing dialogue between children and adults on the design of policies, programs, and measures in all relevant areas.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, the Inter-American Democratic Charter (OAS, 2003), in its Article 27, emphasizes giving special attention to the development of programs and activities for the education of children and youth as a way to ensure the continuity of democratic values, including freedom and social justice.

<sup>9</sup> IACR (2017). Towards the Effective Fulfillment of Children’s Rights: National Protection Systems. Available in: <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/FulfillmentRights-Children.pdf>

Ultimately, ensuring that young people are knowledgeable about democracy, freedoms, and fundamental rights is both a right and a priority for achieving a better society. Educating in tolerance and human rights is the challenge of the school; practicing and respecting these rights is everyone's obligation.

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**Case for Discussion:**

**KNOW YOUR RIGHTS AND RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS**

***How do young people learn about democracy and human rights?***

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In a high school in a small Caribbean town, History teacher Mr. John Miller decides to conduct a class on the History of Human Rights. His goal is for students to understand that these rights are not just distant or abstract concepts but are lived and experienced daily in their own communities and homes.

Mr. Miller begins the class by showing a video that includes the following statement: “Universal human rights begin in small places, close to home; so small and close that they cannot always be seen.”

He then presents a brief overview of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and how these rights were established at the end of World War II.

The teacher asks students to reflect on everyday examples where human rights are either upheld or violated in their daily lives.

After a few minutes of discussion, a student named Ann shares her experience of being treated by her peers when expressing her opinions on a controversial topic during a school meeting. Ann explains that some classmates disagreed with her, but she felt supported by her teacher, who fostered a safe environment for open discussion.

Alexander mentions how he has noticed disparities among his peers due to stigma associated with certain economic backgrounds; some friends cannot participate in extracurricular activities because they lack the resources to pay the required fees.

Mary recounts that during student council meetings, they have tried to include different voices, but proposals from less popular groups are often ignored, even if they are innovative.

Finally, Fredy shares his concern about increased noise and pollution from a recent construction near his home, feeling that it directly affects his quality of life and his right to breathe clean air uninterrupted.

By the end of the class, many students feel renewed motivation and a desire to actively promote respect and human rights within their community. The lesson goes beyond historical theory; they begin to understand the connection between everyday experiences and the importance of defending these fundamental principles. As a result, they propose creating a group project to identify concrete actions to improve local situations related to what was discussed, such as awareness campaigns on respect among students or community clean-up activities to collectively improve the environment.



**Guiding Questions:**

1. What does it mean that human rights “begin in small places, close to home”? Do you agree with this statement?
2. Why is it important to know the historical origins of human rights, as Professor Miller explained?
3. Are human rights respected every day in your environment? Can you give some examples?
4. How should a group act when there are disagreements on sensitive or controversial topics?
5. What obstacles do less popular students face in being heard? How can it be ensured that all voices are considered?
6. What types of projects could be carried out in your school community to promote human rights?