

Teaching Human Rights in Elementary Classrooms: A Literary Approach

Linda Farr Darling

University of British Columbia

[Return to Articles](#)

Abstract

This article presents elementary social studies teachers with examples of children's literature that can be used to teach about children's rights as they were declared at the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Five books are summarized for younger audiences, and four are reviewed for older readers. The author also describes a recent informational book on fifteen children's rights appropriate for all elementary classrooms.

This article joins the ongoing, but often muted conversation about teaching human rights that has taken place in schools and classrooms almost since the Universal Declaration was signed. The question, "Why teach human rights to elementary students?" has been answered by educators with compelling rationales for the subject's inclusion in classes. Much of contemporary social studies curriculum would seem almost incomprehensible to us if it were not silhouetted against the backdrop of human rights, including multicultural and antiracist education, law-related education and aspects of First Nations Studies. The question classroom teachers find more important to answer is, not why, but, "*How* can we teach human rights to elementary students?"

Many teachers are committed to bringing the subject into social studies through community, societal or global issues, and strive to match good resources with sound pedagogy. Their focus is often on teaching about children's rights, based on the belief that these will best engage young children's imaginations and their growing sense of empathy and connection with others. I agree. These teachers also want to find the right balance between realism and hope in teaching a subject that can overwhelm young audiences. In this article, I present ten examples of children's literature that may be unfamiliar to teachers as vehicles for teaching about rights. I also provide a few ideas for using these books to enrich students' understandings of what rights mean, and, importantly, what their absence means to the daily lives of children across the globe.

Introducing the Rights of Children

The book I would recommend for all elementary classrooms is, *For Every Child: The rights of the child in words and pictures*, published in association with UNICEF, with a foreword by Desmond Tutu. It addresses fifteen of the rights articulated at the first UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It's a stunning example of the way rights can be powerfully described and illustrated with children and youths in mind. Each right is simply, yet poetically expressed in text by Caroline Castle. Each is interpreted in a double page illustration by an artist whose brief biography and photograph appears at the end of the book. The fifteen artists are from several continents and many artistic traditions, and are all award winning children's book illustrators. I immediately recognized John Burningham, who delighted many of my own students with *Mr. Gumpy's Outing*. The right he pictures is from Article 13, freedom of expression, interpreted here as, "Allow us to tell you what we are thinking or feeling. Whether our voices are big or small; whether we whisper or shout it, or paint draw, mime or sign it- listen to us and hear what we say." The watercolour sketch shows a boy leaning toward his father's ear while off to the side an alligator calmly chomps on the boy's bicycle.

The illustrations are themselves lessons on diversity's worth. Right No. 3, ensuring protection and care, is a dreamy, surreal painting of a child sailing through stormy skies and about to land in a woman's arms, household objects floating all around. It's rendered in muted shades by Henriette Sauvart from Germany. In contrast, Rights No. 28 and 29, the rights to education and to its aims, are depicted by Satoshi Kitamura in a collage of cartoon-like characters engaged in games, telescope gazing, reading or making music. Young students will discover children involved in ten or more activities. The text reads in part: "Teach us all to read and write and teach us well so we grow up to be the best we can at whatever we wish to do." Right No.30, freedom of minority and indigenous peoples to enjoy their culture, is illustrated by Rabindra and Amrit K.D. Kaur Singh. Their tapestry echoes traditional Indian motifs and styles, but replaces classic figures with a colorful variety of international ones, each singing and dancing, "in the ways of our own people."

One way to approach the book might be to take several related rights at a time and compare the various ways these are interpreted verbally and visually. Because the relevant convention articles appear at the back in their original form, teachers have the opportunity to examine rights in more depth and detail with their students. Illustrating their own versions of selected rights using different mediums and styles, could also engage students. A classroom mural would allow for collaborative and independent artistic endeavors. Older students might be asked to distill each right to its most elemental imperative, for example, Right No. 24, "Wrap us up against the cold and rain, and give us shade from the hot sun. Make sure we have enough to eat and drink and if we are sick, nurse and comfort us." Or upper elementary students could expand on the narrative that's presented, for example, what could the right to, "a land to call our own," mean for the three boys who are building a small sand village on a deserted beach? *For Every Child* is a treasure on its own, and as a general introduction to literature devoted to specific rights, such as the examples highlighted here.

Books for Younger Readers

Marianthe's Story One: Spoken Memories and *Marianthe's Story Two: Painted Words* by Alike are two tales in the same book. The first is the story of Mari starting a new school in North America after her family immigrates. The second is her description of life in the village where she was born. Not only are the two cleverly presented, but Mari's first story is a touching account of a frightened yet eager newcomer trying to understand an unfamiliar culture. Her second story gives insight into the closeness of family and community as well as the power of tradition that exists in the unidentified country she has left. This is a wonderful

book for enhancing empathy in young children. It also beautifully illustrates several rights of the child, including the right to education, opportunity, and a homeland. Its double format would serve as a lovely model for students to replicate with their own stories and illustrations about family and school experiences, including immigration.

Galimoto is a delightful read-aloud story about a creative and determined boy who wants to make a special and quite complicated toy from wires he finds. The setting is a small village in West Africa, and the people and daily activity there are wonderfully portrayed in gentle watercolors. Elementary students may be surprised to know that several children's rights relate to play and movement, and Kondi's travels through a day collecting scrap materials to construct his galimoto introduce readers to an imaginative and resourceful young boy, as well as the sights and sounds of his village on the sea.

The Name Jar by Yangsook Choi is the story of a young Korean immigrant arriving in a new school where she is worried no one will be able to pronounce or remember her name. She decides to pick a new one, though her decision is soon complicated by a number of factors. The story is a lovely introduction to the right of every child to have a name. As well, it is a fine example of children's rights to express their particular cultural beliefs and traditions. For Unhei, the sensitive protagonist who wants desperately to fit into her new surroundings, bringing two worlds together is not always easy. Young students could investigate the meanings behind their own given names or nicknames and explain to classmates how they were chosen for them.

A Days Work, by veteran storyteller, Eve Bunting, introduces students in a compassionate and realistic way, to the experience of many Mexican Americans in Southern California. Francisco is told to help his Grandfather (who can't speak English) find work. As in many immigrant situations, it is the child in the family who helps the adults to cope with new surroundings. But Francisco, in his eagerness, lies about his Grandfather's abilities as a gardener and it gets them both into trouble. This is a poignant story of integrity and the wisdom of elders. It underscores the importance of family ties and promise keeping. The rights of children to love, belonging, and to learning, especially related to important values, are addressed with simplicity and warmth.

Be Good to Eddie Lee, is a story of a gentle boy with Down's syndrome and the ignorant attitudes and prejudices he endures from local children, and sometimes members of his own family. The elements that stand out are the evocative details of the rural setting including woods and ponds as painted by Floyd Cooper, and author Virginia Fleming's ear for the authentic sound and rhythm of children's conversation. Eddie Lee himself is endearing, and in the end teaches everyone a powerful lesson in acceptance and understanding. The right of every child to be treated with dignity and to be given the resources to flourish, even when he has limited mental capacity, is treated seriously but not didactically. Passages could be turned into wonderful role plays in the classroom, especially since the dialogue between the children rings so true.

Books for Older Readers

Many teachers are familiar with Deborah Ellis' contemporary portraits of an adolescent girl in Afghanistan named Parvana. Both her novels about life in a war-torn and desperately poor country, have won awards and both are compelling if emotionally difficult reading. *The Breadwinner* chronicles Parvana's life before her family is lost to her. *Parvana's Journey* is the story of her brave search for her mother and siblings across the northern tip of

Afghanistan. Seen through the lens of children's rights, *Parvana's Journey* and *The Breadwinner* take on particular poignancy. Mature upper elementary and middle school students will be able to see Parvana's plight and her courageous response as more than an individual struggle against the odds. *Parvana's Journey* highlights the absence of a number of human rights, and especially rights of children, that most Canadian adolescents are fortunate enough to take for granted. Among the most salient are the right to education (as a girl under Taliban rule, Parvana is forbidden any opportunity for schooling) the right to special care during crises, and the right to be protected from conscription (she is dressed as a boy who could easily be seized for military duty). Instances of rights denied assert themselves throughout both stories. Early in her journey, Parvana comes across a stricken woman who is wailing incessantly. "Stop that noise!" Parvana screams. "You're a grown-up! You have to take care of me!" (p. 28) Later, upon "adopting" an abandoned infant, Parvana decides to call him Hassan, (p. 36) "because everybody has to have a name." Students could be asked to identify passages in both novels in which human rights are alluded to, and match incidents in the stories to rights described in the articles drafted at the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

A different sort of story is *Yolanda's Genius* by Carol Fenner. Set in modern day Chicago and later suburban Michigan, the novel looks at diversity in a uniquely appealing way. It dramatically illustrates the right of all children to express themselves as individuals and to be loved and respected for who they are. It also illustrates the right of disabled children to receive the care and education that will allow them to flourish in life. Yolanda's little brother hardly ever speaks, even at home, and at six he is already enrolled in special classes. Learning to communicate with others through language is proving to be a difficult task, and learning to read, an impossible one. But Yolanda believes that James is a gifted musician with talent that should not go unrecognized by the world. Her faith in what's possible carries the story. Students could rewrite passages from the novel in order to highlight special rights of children with disabilities. They could also write essays deliberating about the meaning of genius. (Yolanda finds a dictionary definition she believes perfectly describes her brother.) Was there really a genius in the story? Who was it? Was it Yolanda? Was it James? Students could also write plot synopses for sequels. Now that James' gift has been recognized by a famous blues musician at the festival, what will happen to him?

The Whispering Cloth: A Refugee's Story may at first look like a picture book for young children, but as a heartbreaking representation of refugee experience, it belongs with books for older readers. Its setting is a camp in Thailand, where Hmong were housed between 1976 and 1995 (after which those who had not been able to flee were dispersed to other camps or repatriated to Laos). Mai and her grandmother work together on "pa'ndau", traditional embroidered tapestries that earn them a meager profit from traders. Mai creates her own "pa'ndau" that tells her personal and frightening story of loss and violence. The end of the story, Mai's dream for the future, is a hopeful one. Many human rights can be fruitfully discussed in light of this refugee story: the right to religious and cultural expression, the right of children not to be exploited as laborers (Mai has to work at many hard jobs in the camp) and the right of human beings to move and live freely without persecution. Students could contrast the Hmong tapestries with other folk arts that tell political stories, particularly stories of rights denied. South American "arpilleras," the colorfully stitched banners whose images have vividly depicted the lack of social justice for Chilean citizens, would be powerful examples for comparison. Students could create their own felt or burlap tapestries to illustrate children's rights by using scraps of fabric and simple cross-stitches.

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Linda Farr Darling is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of British Columbia, where she teaches social studies and philosophy of education courses to pre-service teachers.

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