Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion

Lesson Ideas
December 2019
Introduction

The overall aim of this lesson idea is to raise awareness of human rights and to be an educational resource for use in a post primary setting in Northern Ireland. Use of the lesson ideas is at the discretion of the education provider.

It is important at the outset to prepare students to discuss sensitive or controversial issues. A safe and positive learning environment which enables students to participate with confidence can be empowering. Agree strategies to use to ensure respectful yet challenging discussions:

See [www.sheffield.ac.uk/lets/toolkit/teaching/sensitive](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/lets/toolkit/teaching/sensitive) for more ideas and guidance on creating good learning environments for teaching about sensitive and controversial issues when dealing with mental health issues provide guidance on safety, confidentiality and where to get additional and professional help whilst following your schools guidance and policies relating to child protection.

NI Curriculum Links:

**LLW Strands**
Human rights and social responsibility, Equality and Social justice

**Local and Global Citizenship**
Identify and exercise their rights and social responsibilities in relation to local issues

Develop their understanding of the role of society and government in safeguarding individual and collective rights

**Religion**
Be able to discuss, evaluate and empathise with how religious beliefs and teachings can inform answers to questions about the meaning and purpose of life as well as moral and ethical issues;

Reflect on and evaluate their own and others’ thoughts, feelings, experiences and beliefs on religious, spiritual and moral issues, using reasoned and balanced arguments, and consider how these might be applied to their lifestyle.

Some of your students may have personal experience of the issue under discussion and may find participation in these discussions difficult. Create a safe and positive environment. Agree strategies in advance. See notes on teaching sensitive issues.
The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion

This section gives you a breakdown of the relevant human rights, and any laws associated with this particular human rights issue. It also provides background information you may find useful.

Relevant Rights:

Universal Declaration of Human Rights
(Article 18 - Freedom of thought, conscience and religion)

European Convention on Human Rights
(Article 9 – Freedom of thought, conscience and religion)

What the law says:

• Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching practice and observance.

• Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

Teachers’ Notes and Background Information

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is the freedom of an individual to hold or consider a fact, viewpoint, or thought independent of others’ viewpoints. This means you have the right to put your thoughts, beliefs and religion into action. This includes the right to talk about your beliefs or to take part in religious worship. It also protects those who choose not to hold a religion.

UK human rights law protects your right to believe in what you want whether you are Christian, Bahá’í, Muslim, Jewish, Humanist or Atheist.

Freedom to practice your religion and beliefs can be subject to limits required by the law. It’s also okay to change your beliefs.

As a society it is important we respect the freedom to hold different religious beliefs and the different ways these are expressed.

Watch this short animation. It explains how human rights laws mean that the government and public authorities are required to respect and protect the diversity of religions and beliefs in Northern Ireland. It also highlights how freedom to practice your religion can be subject to limits required by the law and that this issue is a global one as well as a local one.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsjhqqCubfw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsjhqqCubfw)

Across the world through there are examples of intolerance and government restrictions on matters of thought, conscience and religion. Indeed, Northern Ireland has itself experienced cases of sectarianism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.
The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission’s job is to make sure government and public authorities protect the human rights of everyone in Northern Ireland. We advocate that Northern Ireland should maintain the highest standard of human rights.

We also consider the policies and plans that government and other organisations develop and tell them if we think there could be a problem and we try to help them improve it. We are experts in human rights law, we monitor international treaties and listen to discussions in places like the United Nations.

We promote awareness of human rights through education, training and research.

In its Annual Statement to Government each year the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) may raise issues relating to the protection of the right to Freedom of Thought Conscience and Religion. We also report on this issue to the United Nations including to the United Nations Human Rights Committee in relation to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
Activities

Learning Intentions: to know and understand

- Human rights laws mean that the government and public authorities are required to respect and protect the diversity of religions and beliefs in Northern Ireland
- How freedom to practice your religion can be subject to limits required by the law
- The role of NIHRC in promoting and safeguarding our human rights

Activity One - Connects or Divides?

Aim: to explore religious tolerance and intolerance in the UK and NI

What's needed: Display photographs of the following celebrities: Stephen Fry, Rory McIlroy, Malala, Queen Elizabeth, Zayn Malik, Pope Francis, Ricky Gervais, Dalia Lama and Daniel Radcliffe.

Invite students to suggest what connects or divides everyone.

The people are all well known for being passionate about their beliefs or religion and speak openly about it.

Discuss: Why might some well-known people decide to keep their beliefs private? In Northern Ireland people may not feel comfortable talking about their religion or beliefs but is this the same in other parts of the world? Suggest reasons why or why not?

Activity Two - Identifying Religious and belief issues at home and around the world.

What's needed: selection of newspapers/magazines local and national; online access

- Divide participants into small groups for research
- Assign each group the task to find examples of affirmation or violations of Article 9/18. They may also bring in examples derived from other media (e.g., radio, television, online) if they can extract the basic information: country, situation, right denied, defended, or enjoyed.

Remind students that many times the exercise of a right is not obvious. For example, freedom of religion or belief might not be expressed in a news story but in an obituary, a wedding announcement, a cultural event, or a political meeting.
Activities (continued)

Activity Three - Conscience or Law

What's needed: Internet access for research

One of the most difficult dilemmas facing someone is if they find they are required to obey a law which their thoughts, conscience, beliefs or religion find unacceptable.

Take for example the following cases where the Courts have had to step in to make a ruling on these issues.

**Eweida v the United Kingdom (January 2013)**

British Airways' decision to prevent Nadia Eweida, a Christian employee, from wearing a visible crucifix in a customer service role was disproportionate and unjustifiably breached her Article 9 right to manifest her beliefs at work. Although there was no religious requirement for her to wear a visible crucifix and she could have found another job which allowed her to do so, the European Court of Human Rights concluded too much weight had been given to the employer's corporate image in this case and not enough to Ms Eweida's right to wear a visible crucifix.

(Equality and Human Rights Commission)

**R (Surayanda) v Welsh Ministers (2007)**

The decision to slaughter a sacred bullock (belonging to a Hindu temple) that suffered from bovine tuberculosis (bTB), at a time when measures were being taken to control the spread of this disease in the locality, was held to be justified under Article 9 by the Court of Appeal. The grave and serious interference with the particular community's Article 9 right to manifest their belief in the need to protect life was outweighed by other relevant competing considerations. In particular, the legitimate aims of reducing the economic impact of bTB, maintaining public health protection and protecting animal health welfare, outweighed the community's Article 9 rights. That, together with the fact the action was prescribed by law, meant the decision to slaughter the bullock was justified under Article 9.

(Equality and Human Rights Commission)

Discuss: Which human rights clash in these situation? Are certain human rights more important than others? What might be the consequences of ignoring the views of one of these groups of people? Is it fair to ask people to compromise their religious beliefs? Should people be allowed to practice religious beliefs that may conflict with the laws of their country?

Rights that may clash in the case examples above include:

- **Article 2**
  The right to life

- **Article 3**
  The prohibition on inhuman and degrading treatment

- **Article 8**
  The right to respect for family & private life

- **Article 9**
  The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion

- **Article 10**
  The right to freedom of expression

- **Article 14**
  The prohibition on discrimination

In small groups invite students to conduct some research online to give at least two examples of where freedom of thought, conscience and religion and law might clash. Encourage them to provide a local and a global example.