

Lesson 3: Human Dignity

PURPOSE

To understand that human dignity is the special value of human persons.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand the difference between the internal and external qualities of a person and how we learn about them.
2. Understand human dignity as the universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of human persons.
3. To distinguish between subjective use of the word dignity with the most fundamental meaning of human dignity.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Internal vs External Qualities worksheet
- Dignity Quiz
- Dignity Word Usage worksheet

VOCABULARY

Human dignity: the universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of every human person

- » Universal: every person has dignity
- » Intrinsic: dignity is within us, we have it just by being humans
- » Inalienable: dignity cannot be given to us or taken away from us

PROCEDURE

Step 1: Review the previous lesson. Recall the three powers which all living beings share (eat, grow, reproduce), three which only humans and animals share (move, use senses, feel emotions) and two which distinguish humans from all other beings: the powers to think and to choose. Highlight that the powers to think and to choose are what distinguish humans from all other beings and that we should use these powers in an excellent way.

Step 2: Recall the difference between the internal and external qualities of a person. The external qualities are those which can be seen from the outside, and the internal ones are those inside a person and are not always visible to the eye. Even if we do not see internal qualities directly, we can learn about them by building a relationship with another person. By being a friend and spending time with another person, one can learn about their internal qualities.

Have the class name some examples of external qualities: hair color and length, height, age, size, clothing style, etc. Have the class name some internal qualities: kindness, generosity, intelligence, being a good friend, humor, courage, trustworthiness, etc.

To reinforce the difference between internal and external qualities and the different ways we learn about them, give each student a [Internal vs External Qualities](#) worksheet and ask them to fill it in. Each student should think about a person whom they admire. This can be a good friend, a relative or someone else.

Explain that they should write the qualities of that person by starting from the external qualities that are most visible, to the deepest internal qualities which are harder to recognize at first. They should briefly write how they learned about that quality in another person in a corresponding bracket in the table. For example, at the top, one could write “he has blue eyes” and I learned about it “immediately when I saw him”. Lower down in the pyramid, one could put something like “he’s brave”, and I learned about it “after spending time with him and seeing how he acts in difficult situations”. Share some examples from the Teacher’s Sample Answers provided. After the students finish their work, ask them to share some of their answers.

Highlight that outside qualities, such as hair color, height, or size are most easily visible and we usually recognize them immediately when we see another person. But even though they are more easily recognizable, they are the least important qualities of the person and least decisive for a person’s overall character. There are qualities that we learn about someone after spending a short amount of time with someone. These qualities can be charm, humor or an easy-going personality. Finally, the most important qualities of a person, such as trustworthiness, goodness, courage, honesty, or generosity, we can learn about someone only after spending time with the person and getting to know them well. Often, true friendship is the best way to truly get to know the other person. The deepest characteristics of the person are usually the most decisive for their overall character, even though they are sometimes less visible on the outside.

Step 3: Explain that human dignity is the deepest quality a person possesses. We can't see and rarely experience human dignity in others, as it is not like a personality trait, but it is nevertheless there. But since it often evades our understanding, many people think that they or some other people do not have it, or that some people have less than others.

This is why it is important to learn about human dignity and to truly understand what it is.

We can start by writing the definition of human dignity on the board:

Human dignity: the universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of human persons

Human dignity is the special value that every human person possesses regardless of their age, sex, race, religion, nationality, wealth, health, education or any other internal or external characteristic. We call it "human dignity" since all humans have it and they have it simply by being human. This also means that no one gives a person this dignity (society, a political group, parents, status, etc.) but one has it simply by being human. It also means that no one can take it away from a person.

Also, human dignity does not exist in degrees – one cannot say that some people have more or less than others – every person is equal in dignity. People with disabilities, people who are financially struggling, those who are less educated or those who are not good looking all have the same human dignity as every other human being in the world.

We can now define the three characteristics of human dignity:

Universal: every person has dignity

Intrinsic: it is within us, we have it just by being humans

Inalienable: dignity cannot be given to us or taken away from us

To reinforce the correct understanding of human dignity, have students complete the [Dignity Quiz](#). After the students finish their quiz, ask them to share their answers and write them on the board. Then, lead the class discussion using the Answer Key to help students understand the answers. Help students to understand the more complicated vocabulary by explaining that intrinsic means it is with us our entire life and inalienable means that it's not something we can "lose" or "gain" as it's not dependent on any factor (ability, choice, loss or gain, etc.)

Step 4: Ask students if they have ever heard dignity spoken of in a different way. For example, people that hold a high rank or office are often called “dignitaries”. This meaning implies that some people have higher esteem and social status than others. Even though the use of the word to describe this sort of “dignity” does convey a special sort of professional status that some people do have, this word does not refer to human dignity in the most fundamental sense.

In another example, someone could say that poor or homeless people are not living in dignified conditions or living a life with dignity. Others may talk about a dignified salary or wage. People may use the word “dignity” to convey the idea that society has the obligation to ensure a certain level of material security so that people can live a good life. This connects dignity to the material comforts a person enjoys. But in these examples, the use of the word dignity strays from its most fundamental meaning.

Therefore, one should use the power to think critically, so as not to confuse things like circumstance or honors with the most fundamental value of human dignity that every person possesses.

To help students recognize when the word “dignity” is used in a way that does not actually affirm the universal, intrinsic and inalienable value of the person, have students form groups and work on the [Dignity Word Use](#) worksheet. When the groups are ready, ask them to share their answers and lead the class discussion using the Answer Key provided with the worksheet.

Step 5: If time permits, review the Dignity Word Use worksheet explaining some of the most common ways that the word dignity is used, and how these differ from the universal, intrinsic and inalienable value of human persons that is the subject of this curriculum.

1. Dignity as honor

Sometimes people will use the word dignity to refer to high social status or those with certain privileges. The distinguishing factor of this use of the word dignity is that it is given to a person by society, and is therefore dependent on how much a certain group of people respect and admire us. However, since this idea and use of the word “dignity” is given, it can also be removed or taken away. For instance, a person is an honorary dignitary at a club. But when they get fired from their job due to corruption, the club takes away their membership. Someone may say, “he’s lost the dignity he once had!” What they are really saying is that he has lost the esteem and privilege his position gave him.

2. Dignity as well-being

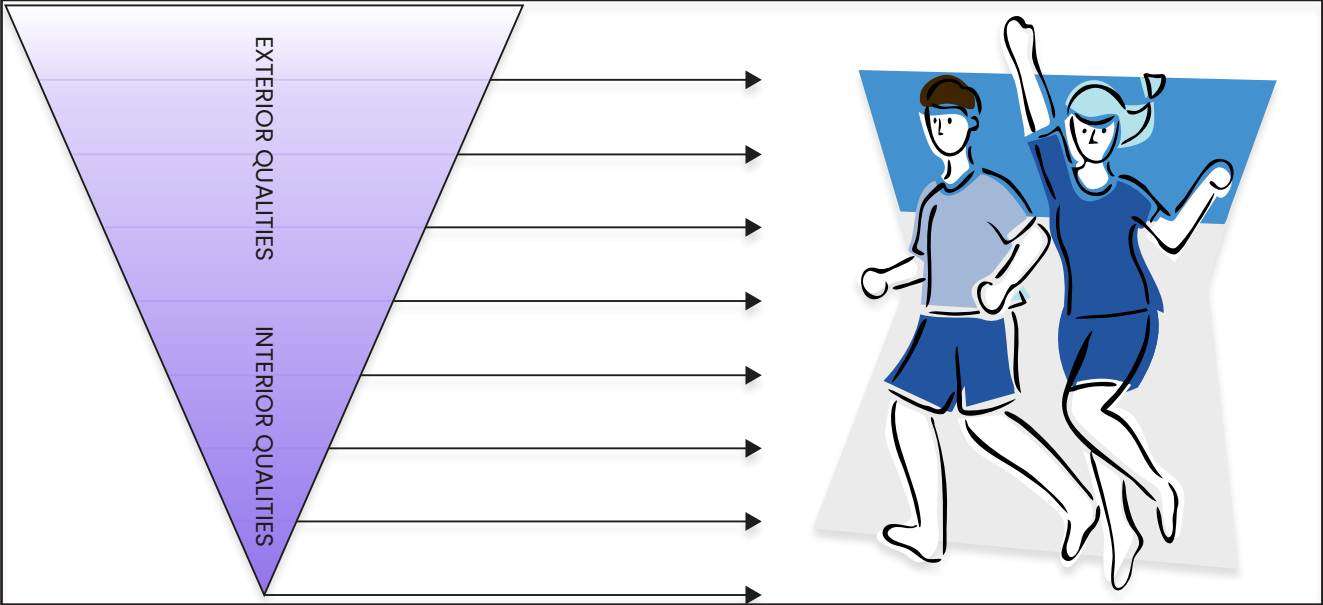
Sometimes the word dignity is used in reference to material or psychological ease. For instance, some people acquire material wealth either by personal effort or with the help of others (inheritance, etc) and are said to “live a good and dignified life”. Whereas, a person who is homeless is looked down upon as they are living an “undignified existence.” The problem is that this also means that a loss of money or sudden illness means that they are no longer living a dignified quality life. Therefore, the use of the word dignity as well-being is problematic as it values a person’s life according to accumulation of material goods or state of psychological ease.

Explain that whenever we talk about human dignity in the context of this curriculum, we will refer to it in the most fundamental meaning of the term.

Step 6: Summarize. Recall the difference between internal and external qualities and how we learn about them. Highlight that the deepest and the most important quality that distinguishes humans from all other living and non-living beings is human dignity. Recall the three characteristics of human dignity (universal, intrinsic and inalienable) and the definitions of each. Conclude that the word dignity is sometimes used to convey a different meaning, but one should always remember the most fundamental definition of human dignity: the special value of every human person.

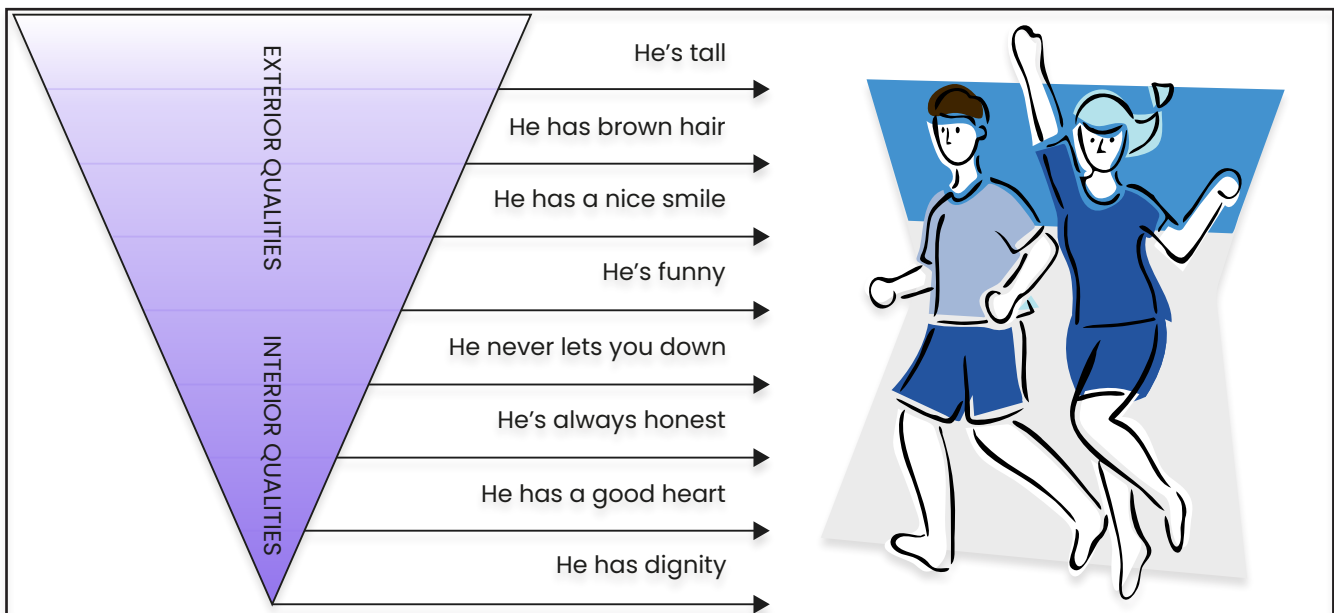
INTERNAL VS EXTERNAL QUALITIES

Person's name:	
Person's qualities:	How did I learn about them?:



Internal vs External Qualities – example

Person's name: Jack	
Person's qualities:	How did I learn about them?:
	Immediately when I saw him
	Immediately when I saw him
	The first time I saw him smiling
	When I was around him and he started telling jokes
	When we started spending time together and I had problems
	When we became friends and started talking regularly
	When I really got to know him well and saw how good he is
	When I really got to know him well and learned how unique he is in his personality, talents, etc.



DIGNITY QUIZ

Mark the sentences as True or False, by circling T or F.

1. T / F Teachers have more human dignity than students.
2. T / F When others hurt us, they diminish our human dignity.
3. T / F All of our actions should respect human dignity.
4. T / F If we live in difficult circumstances with a lot of distress, we still have human dignity.
5. T / F Society gives us human dignity.
6. T / F Criminals have human dignity.
7. T / F People in a coma and people with disabilities have less human dignity than others.
8. T / F People can have more or less human dignity.
9. T / F Human dignity is intrinsic to people.
10. T / F Human dignity increases as we mature.
11. T / F Every human person has a special value, regardless of circumstances.
12. T / F It is wrong to violate human dignity to achieve material well-being or gain honor.
13. T / F In a social hierarchy, the person with authority has more dignity than those with less authority.

Dignity Quiz - Answer Key for the Teacher

1. T / F Teachers have more human dignity than students.

False. Every human being, regardless of age, education or social status is equal in human dignity.

2. T / F When others hurt us, they diminish our human dignity.

False. Human dignity is inalienable, which means that it can't be given or taken away (diminished). Regardless of circumstance, human dignity is the special value of every human person.

3. T / F All of our actions should respect human dignity.

True. It is important to use our powers to think and to choose what is excellent. What is most excellent is to choose to act in a way that respects our human dignity and the human dignity of others.

4. T / F If we live in difficult circumstances with a lot of distress, we still have human dignity.

True. Human dignity is intrinsic, which means that we have it, just by being human. Regardless of our circumstance or situation, our human dignity is equal to that of every other person.

5. T / F Society gives us human dignity.

False. Human dignity is intrinsic and inalienable. Society does not give us human dignity. Every human being has dignity, whether society recognizes it or not.

6. T / F Criminals have human dignity.

True. Every human being is equal in human dignity. A person who has done something bad, still possesses human dignity.

7. T / F People in a coma and people with disabilities have less human dignity than others.

False. Every human being is equal in human dignity. A person in a coma or a person with a disability is a human person and therefore possesses the same intrinsic and inalienable human dignity. Human dignity is not based on ability or a quality, but is intrinsic to each human person.

8. T / F People can have more or less human dignity.

False. Human dignity is inalienable, which means that it can't be given (have more dignity) or taken away (have less dignity). Human dignity is the special value of every human person.

9. T / F Human dignity is intrinsic to people.

True. Intrinsic means: it is within us, we have it just by being human.

10. T / F Human dignity increases as we mature.

False. Lots of things change as we mature, but our human dignity does not change (increase or decrease). Every human being has human dignity, simply by being human, at every stage of human life.

11. T / F Every human person has a special value, regardless of circumstances.

True. Human dignity is the special value of every human person, regardless of their circumstance.

12. T / F It is wrong to violate human dignity to achieve material well-being or gain honor.

True. It is always wrong to violate human dignity. In violating human dignity, we treat a human being as a "something" rather than a "someone" who can be used or discarded like an object.

13. T / F In a social hierarchy, the person with authority has more dignity than those with less authority.

False. Social hierarchies are systems of organization that may reflect responsibility or authority. No matter what the social hierarchy, every human person is equal in dignity and worth, regardless of their title, position or status.

DIGNITY WORD USAGE WORKSHEET

Instructions: For each sentence, **circle the letter A if the sentence uses the word dignity in its most fundamental meaning:** to refer to the universal, intrinsic and inviolable value of every human person.

Circle the letter B if the sentence uses the word *dignity* in a secondary meaning, to describe well being, ability, admiration or material comfort.

1. "I visited the orphanage the other day. I felt so sorry for the children there who have to live without dignity!"

A / B

2. "You do not have the right to treat the student with special needs in such a way. He has the same dignity as you."

A / B

3. "It is almost impossible to live a dignified life if you are disabled."

A / B

4. "Every person has dignity, regardless of their circumstances."

A / B

5. "After losing all his property, he lived a life without dignity."

A / B

6. "Every person deserves dignifying living conditions, including housing, education and health services."

A / B

7. "Even though they made fun of him and were violent towards him, they could not take away his dignity."

A / B

8. "Every person is equal in human dignity and rights."

A / B

9. "No one should be forced to live without dignity at the end of life."

A / B

10. "Whatever you do, you should always respect the dignity of yourself and others."

A / B

Dignity Word Usage – Answer Key for the Teacher

1. **B** – The children at the orphanage have the same human dignity and value as every person. Even if their surroundings are not as comfortable or fashionable as another, it does not mean that they live “without dignity”. Human dignity is intrinsic (within us). This sentence uses the word dignity to withhold admiration based on a perceived lack of material comfort. This is not the fundamental meaning of human dignity.
2. **A** – Every person, regardless of physical or mental ability, is equal in dignity and value. Therefore, we should always choose to act in an excellent way to respect human dignity. This sentence refers to the fundamental meaning of human dignity.
3. **B** – Human dignity does not change, depending on our circumstances. Every person has human dignity simply by being human. We cannot lose our dignity, even if we lose an ability. This sentence does not describe the fundamental meaning of human dignity.
4. **A** – This sentence describes the fundamental meaning of human dignity. In particular, the universal characteristic of human dignity: everyone has it, regardless of their circumstance.
5. **B** – Just as we cannot lose our dignity if we lose an ability, neither can we lose our dignity if we lose material things. Dignity cannot be given or taken away. It is the special value of every human being. This sentence says that if we don’t have property, we don’t have dignity. This statement tries to tie our human value to how much we own. This is not the fundamental meaning of human dignity.
6. **B** – This sentence is tricky. While well-being and adequate living conditions are vital, it is important to highlight that this statement still uses the word dignity in a way that describes a state of well-being and material need, rather than an innate human value.
7. **A** – This sentence describes the fundamental meaning of human dignity, in particular, the inalienable characteristic of human dignity: it cannot be given or taken away.
8. **A** – This sentence describes the fundamental meaning of human dignity.

9. **B** - This statement indicates that we can lose our dignity or it can be taken away from us at the end of our life, depending on the circumstance (loss of physical or mental abilities, where a person lives, etc.) This is not the fundamental meaning of human dignity which states that dignity is intrinsic (within us) and inalienable (cannot be given or taken away and does not increase or decrease).

10. **A** - This sentence describes the fundamental meaning of human dignity. Because human dignity is universal (everyone has it) and it is within each person, we should live in a way that respects our dignity and the dignity of others.