

Research Note/Note de recherche

Human Rights Education: A Legal and Moral Imperative

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canadian human rights foundation

"... That every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms"

"Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."

These excerpts from the preamble and article 26(2) of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) reveal the rationale underlying the teaching of human rights. In 1966, these principles were elaborated in two basic international documents, *The International Covenant on Civic and Political Rights* and *The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, to which Canada, as a signatory, now has an obligation under international law. Political and moral reasons argue separately that Canada has a special responsibility to promote tolerance and respect for human rights among its citizenry. In fact, apart from the legal and moral responsibilities to teach the democratic, humanitarian, and human rights principles upon which this nation was founded, Canadian educational leaders have identified a third basic argument for urging that human rights be taught early in the schools: that future social harmony may well depend upon the success of imbuing Canadian youth with a sense of tolerance and a recognition that racism is everyone's responsibility. For various combinations of these reasons, educators and teachers have recommended that an educational program for use within the basic curriculum, provincially adapted as required, be developed to strengthen

the knowledge of and respect for human rights. The Canadian Human Rights Foundation¹ as a national, non-government, non-partisan organization, is committed to increasing the teaching of human rights in Canadian schools.

NATIONAL INITIATIVE

In seeking to enhance this convergence of law, tradition, and public interest affecting education, the Canadian Human Rights Foundation undertook to increase awareness and knowledge of human rights among education officials, school administrators, teachers, parents and students and to broaden the consensus among those involved about the need to teach human rights in Canadian schools.

The Foundation initiated a process of consultation to discuss with educational practitioners why, when, and how to promote human rights education in Canada. By the end of 1985, interviews had been conducted with over 85 representatives of national education organizations, ministries of education, associations of school boards, trustees, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, and students, in Quebec, Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, Nova Scotia, and the Northwest Territories. These meetings were intended to determine the present state of human rights education, the effectiveness of existing educational materials on human rights, and priority needs in human rights education and teacher training.

A questionnaire was used to seek the views of individuals and groups in other provinces whom the foundation could not meet. The conclusions of this national survey, which are most revealing but not surprising, are reported here in summary form. They reflect the opinions of those consulted and do not necessarily represent the views of the Foundation.

FINDINGS

Policy

The vast majority of groups surveyed did not have a policy on human rights education. Human rights instruction has not yet generated enough interest or controversy to prompt the enunciation of a specific policy.

Existing Human Rights Education

Most respondents noted that many courses now contain elements concerning law and human rights. In different provinces, courses on

social studies, history, civics, literature, family life education, and so on touch on aspects of human rights; however, there are no courses on human rights per se. Many thought that these elements should be developed much more fully but should remain integrated within existing courses.

The overwhelming view is that the teaching of human rights is currently dependent upon teacher initiative. A variety of factors (e.g., time constraints and lack of adequate training) hinder many teachers from taking that initiative. As a result, human rights teaching is sporadic and insufficient.

Use of Educational Resource Materials

There is no shortage of educational material on subjects which are related to certain aspects of human rights – for example, multiculturalism, race relations, ethics, values, and civics. There is a serious lack of educational material specifically on human rights, particularly at the elementary school level.

Teacher Training

There is a need to provide educators with the skills and knowledge they require to deal more effectively with the demands of multicultural and multiracial classes and to promote tolerance for diversity, respect for law, and human rights.

Pre-service Training

Existing courses in teacher training programs treat subjects such as race relations, social studies, values, and multiculturalism. The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that specific instruction on the teaching of human rights is desirable. Unfortunately, this is not now available through faculties of education at Canadian universities.

In-service Training

Various organizations do schedule in-service training programs on such topics as social studies, morals, values, multiculturalism, and racism. However, there are no professional in-service training programs specifically on human rights subjects.

Most of those surveyed admitted to a lack of awareness and knowledge of basic human rights principles. Teachers who feel unqualified to teach human rights are unlikely to discuss these issues in their classes.

Impediments to the Teaching of Human Rights

There are three principal impediments to the teaching of human rights: the lack of time due to extensive curriculum requirements, the lack of good teaching materials on human rights, and the controversial nature of some human rights issues and the potential ramifications of trying to broach these subjects in the classroom.

Needs and Priorities

As a first step, respondents urged the identification and promotion of what little human rights teaching material does exist.

The majority of those surveyed recommended integration of human rights into existing required curricula. The priority should be the development of teaching units or activities for elementary school children. Recent research demonstrates that by the age of four, children have a fairly well developed conception of race and racial differences (Torney-Purta, 1982). Therefore, human rights instruction in elementary schools has been defended as timely, to sensitize children before biases and prejudices are formed and hardened. Specifically, respondents suggested that the Foundation analyze provincial curricula for elementary schools to determine where existing courses could accommodate specific human rights content and develop model teaching units on human rights that conform to provincial guidelines and fit into the curricula required of all students.

The material should address not only the rights enjoyed by Canadians but also the responsibilities incumbent upon all citizens. The teaching units should focus on basic human rights as enunciated, for example, in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and appropriate provincial legislation. The primary objective would be to stress basic concepts such as: the meaning of *right*, the rights of others, the concomittant responsibilities and duties, and basic notions of equality, justice, and freedom.

FURTHER STEPS

As a result of this survey, the Foundation recruited a committee of educational experts to develop a model human rights teaching unit for elementary schools. The unit was forwarded in draft form to educators across Canada for comment and has been reviewed at regional educational conferences in Alberta, Nova Scotia, Québec, and Ontario. After

revisions, there will be in-class testing in five provinces. It is hoped that the final version of the teaching unit will be available for use in elementary schools in September, 1987.²

The availability of such material is not sufficient, however. Local individuals and groups must regularly advocate the inclusion of human rights teaching materials in the required curriculum. Regional and community support is necessary to promote human rights education effectively and, ultimately, to heighten respect for human rights in this country.

The Foundation's initiative has provided a momentum and raised expectations concerning human rights instruction in elementary schools across Canada. This emphasis on teaching and education is deliberate, as the Foundation believes that only a concerned and educated population can provide the true guarantee of liberty.

NOTES

- ¹ The Canadian Human Rights Foundation is a private, non-profit organization existing since 1967. The objectives of the foundation include the education of public opinion with a view to promoting respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms through national programs of research, education, discussion, and publication.
- ² For more information on the Human Rights Model Teaching Unit, please contact: The Canadian Human Rights Foundation, 1980 Sherbrooke Street West, Suite 340, Montreal, Quebec H3H 1E8, (514) 932-7826.

REFERENCE

- Torney-Purta, J. (1982). Socialization and human rights research: Implications for teachers. In Margaret Stimmann Branson & Judith Torney-Purta (Eds.), *International human rights, society and the schools* (pp. 35-48). Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies.

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