

Human Rights-based Values Education Programs:

Can Australian schools learn from those of Canada and the UK?

Isabelle Macgregor

The importance of human rights education in schools is made all too apparent in the following letter from a Boston principal to her new teachers:

Dear teacher,

I'm a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness, gas chambers built by learned engineers, children poisoned by educated physicians, infants killed by trained nurses, women and babies shot and burnt by high school college graduates. So I'm suspicious of education. My request is to help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated morons. Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.

(from Geoffrey Robertson's address to the National Public Education Forum, *The public good and the education of children*, 28 March, 2009)

According to QC and human rights campaigner, Geoffrey Robertson, it is time to listen to this letter's plea and implement human rights education in the public school curriculum. He urges that, "we need to understand, our children need to understand, where these [human] rights come from and the capacity for their use in everyday discourse and in everyday life. Disciplines of maths, science, geography and history may themselves be value-free, but education is not" (from Geoffrey Robertson's address to the National Public Education Forum, "The public good and the education of children", 28 March, 2009).

As John Clarke, the deputy director of Children's Services in Hampshire, UK states, "children are the living message we send to a future we'll never see. It's our responsibility to determine what that message is and it seems to me that a rights-based one is about the best place to start" (New Zealand Human Rights Commission).

This paper examines the need for human rights education, problems with the current system of human rights education in schools, the successful programs being conducted in Canada and the UK, and the possibility of an Australian model.

The Need for Human Rights Education

As Amnesty International Australia (AIA) points out, "human rights enhance a nation's understanding of, and aspirations about, social cohesion and the common good". Human rights education is a priority of AIA. It believes that there is a need to promote the importance and universality of human rights in schools. The organisation describes human rights education as "integral to our work to build a culture of respect for human rights and help prevent rights violations". The AIA supports the proposal for a national curriculum in Australia and believes that, within this, there needs to be a "strong rationale including human rights...it should say what we, as a community, aspire to for our young people in the 21st century, talking as much about values, beliefs and dispositions as about skills and understandings" (AIA Submission to the National Curriculum Board, 2008).

Human Rights in Education (HRIE) has developed ten arguments for human rights-based education. They believe it:

1. Promotes effective teaching and learning practices;
2. Provides an integrating framework for meeting National Education Goals (they are a New Zealand organisation and are writing from their nation's perspective);

3. Meets legal obligations to respect, protect and fulfill human rights'
4. Helps address many of the pressing educational performance issues faced by schools, including levels of participation, classroom management and academic achievement;
5. Creates an inclusive school culture that generates enthusiasm, engagement and respect for self and others;
6. Improves student behaviour and relationships, reducing bullying;
7. Contributes to development of higher order thinking and literacy;
8. Provides a useful lens and "critical toolkit" to view core concepts and explore contentious issues;
9. Creates active citizenship, helping to build students' identity as global citizens; and
10. Increases teacher satisfaction, improves morale and reduces burnout.

The promotion of human rights in schools would be for both the national and international good. Human rights "represent the conditions that people need to flourish. This is demonstrated in accumulating evidence about the rights-related factors that influence the developmental health of children and their levels of educational achievement, as well as the health, well-being and social and economic participation of adults" (AIA 2008).

Problems with Current Human Rights Education in Schools

Teaching good citizenship and socially responsible behaviour has always been a central part of schooling. Children are taught essential values and the expectations that will be placed on them when they become adult citizens. So far, however, the results of this teaching have been mixed and are sometimes disappointing: "there have been programmes on social and moral issues, which have taken place in a kind of valueless vacuum and resulted in moral relativism. There have been behaviourist techniques which reward students for the adoption of certain prescribed values but contain a limited cognitive component and no critical thinking" (HRiE, *Rights, respect and responsibilities – Children's rights education in Hampshire*).

One problem is that "content tends to emphasise issue related information. Skills such as problem solving and reasoning feature to promote certain values but there are no underlying concepts and principles which can be linked to wider expectations, children's lives and rights". Students may find it hard to motivate themselves to become more socially responsible because the situation "may be distant from pupils and seem so awful that they feel powerless to change things for the better" (HRiE, *Rights, respect and responsibilities – Children's rights education in Hampshire*).

Human rights education is currently not as consistent, coherent or rigorous as it should be. There is also a lack of concern over its effectiveness. It is not enough simply to read stories which illustrate qualities such as honesty, kindness, courage, etc. There is no evidence to suggest that children will automatically absorb the intended moral lesson. The current system ignores the need for whole school approaches; age appropriateness; the ways in which the promotion of democratic values and behaviours may need to link to the process of identity formation; wider national and international values; the fact that children need a context in which to coordinate and reconcile their values, behaviours and knowledge; and the existing citizenship status of the child, with a focus on citizenship preparation (HRiE, *Rights, respect and responsibilities – Children's rights education in Hampshire*).

Human Rights Education in Canada and the United Kingdom

Ground breaking research regarding human rights education has been conducted in Cape Breton, Canada, and Hampshire, UK. For several years, schools in these areas have been teaching a course entitled "Citizenship through Human Rights" to children between 12 and 14 years of age. Teachers are trained to "bring human rights to life" during 12 weeks of teaching.

The class explores concrete issues such as poverty and discrimination and conducts challenging debates about identity, diversity and rights and responsibility.

The course begins with a study of the school rules – are they fair or not? The children are then given a new set of rules. These are: “teachers may hit students at any time; students must convert to the head teachers’ religion; teachers can go through students’ bags at any time and examine their property; anyone who criticises the new rules will be punished – they will not be entitled to argue or appeal the decision; teachers can take any trainers or mobiles from students and keep them for their own use”.

Students are required to think about why these new rules are unfair. This exercise is important because these rules mirror the kinds of rules condemned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The students learn through examples to which they can relate (Robertson 2009).

- **Canada**

Under the directorship of Dr. Katherine Covell and Dr. Brian Howe, a “resourced curriculum” for human rights education has been developed at the Children’s Rights Centre, based at the University College of Cape Breton. This model is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and promotes critical thinking skills, positive peer interaction and the technique of the teacher modeling the rights being taught (HRiE, *Rights, respect and responsibilities – Children’s rights education in Hampshire*).

Those who developed the Cape Breton model did so because they saw that the general “dos and don’ts” taught to children rarely had any connection to “wider national or international codes of social and moral responsibility” and were taught in connection with rewards and punishments. They believe that “codes based on globally agreed values such as the UN Convention developed with pupils into a ‘Rights and Responsibilities’ class charter have a more positive effect” (HRiE, *Rights, respect and responsibilities – Children’s rights education in Hampshire*).

The Centre has found that students who received the “rights curriculum”:

- showed higher self-esteem and felt valued;
- demonstrated the “contagion” effect – “learning about one’s own rights results in support for the rights of others, including adults’ and teachers’ right to teach...Student support for the rights of adults, ethnic minorities and those with disabilities, were significantly related to their teacher’s support for children’s rights”;
- saw their classmates as being more accepting of ethnic minority children and perceived greater levels of peer support (psychological well-being) and teacher support (achievement and expectations);
- were more optimistic about their future; and
- had improved behaviour and a better understanding of the importance of rights for all (HRiE, *Rights, respect and responsibilities – Children’s rights education in Hampshire*).

The Centre also found that “teaching children’s rights necessitated more democratic, egalitarian styles of teaching”. When the teacher modelled the rights being taught, the atmosphere in the classroom was perceived by the students as being more supportive (HRiE, *Rights, respect and responsibilities – Children’s rights education in Hampshire*).

- **The United Kingdom**

In 2003, Hampshire, UK, launched its *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* (RRR) program, based on the similar program in Cape Breton. Children are taught about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which becomes the framework for the way both children and adults operate in the school. John Clarke, deputy director of Children’s Services in Hampshire has said of the

program, "it's a new way of thinking and it's designed to develop effective citizens who make a positive contribution to their community". He believes that, in an increasingly diverse society, the RRR program is an effective solution to the "moral relativism" that has existed within English schools for years (New Zealand Human Rights Commission). It was first implemented only in primary schools but has now been introduced county-wide in all schools. Hampshire has done this through its participation in Unicef UK's accreditation scheme, the Rights Respecting School Award (HRiE, *The Evidence – The Hampshire Case Study*)

A review of the Hampshire model has found that a progression through four steps occurs:

1. Children and young people are taught about their rights as described in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in a rights-consistent democratic classroom and school.
2. The "Contagion effect" occurs: development of self-esteem and greater respect for the rights of others.
3. More harmonious classrooms develop, with more socially responsible behaviour and a more positive school culture.
4. There is higher attendance, fewer exclusions and higher student academic achievement (HRiE, *The Evidence – The Hampshire Case Study*).

By the age of ten, most children in rights-respecting primary schools can:

- give examples of how their own actions have consequences – both positive and negative – for the rights of others globally;
- have a close-working familiarity with the articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC);
- Give a range of examples of rights abuses from the immediate context of the school to the global context;
- Use the UNCRC as a framework for making moral judgements across a range of issues concerning justice and sustainability;
- Understand that their own rights are linked with a wide range of personal responsibilities; and
- Critically evaluate the actions of those with power, including governments, through reference to human rights (HRiE, *The Evidence – The Hampshire Case Study*).

School principals and inspectors in Hampshire believe that the program works because:

1. *It emphasises the fact that student's rights are present NOW.* Rights are not something which are to be earned some time in the future. It appeals to children's self-interest. It "puts children at the centre of a world that cares about them". Students can also see that it provides a guide which can be used all through life.
2. *It is characterised by acceptance and universality.* "Students understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities and find it an acceptable basis for class and school charters". The children like the fact that it derives from a "higher authority" which is not school-based. The values of the Convention are also acceptable to the parents and teachers and by those of all religious faiths.
3. *It is effective and efficient.* It is preventative in nature, a fact which "creates the conditions where good behaviour becomes the norm". This is far superior to a program which involves intervention where bad behaviour is already occurring. It is also a low-maintenance program and easily integrated into the rest of the curriculum. It "gives coherence to school policies, enhancing school leadership" (HRiE, *The Evidence – The Hampshire Case Study*).

According to Clarke, the program results in the children's language becoming more sophisticated. Their attendance also improves and they find ways to solve their differences which are less confrontational. As he has pointed out, all but two countries have signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and this universality of human rights means that it is an

effective way to mediate the tension that can arise from multiculturalism (New Zealand Human Rights Commission).

An Australian Response

With this program producing such positive results in Canada and the UK, it is important to now consider its implementation in Australian schools.

To implement effective human rights education, schools must:

- focus on the right of every student to an education that respects and helps realise their human rights and those of others. In line with human rights principles, teaching and learning deliberately builds on the experiences students bring to school and expands the possibilities that students see for themselves.
- Ensure that the values and key competencies move to share centre stage with the learning areas with *respect for self, others and human rights* underpinning all of them.
- Ensure students know what they are learning and how it contributes to the fulfillment of their human rights and those of others. They can apply a rights and responsibilities framework to new learning and unfamiliar contexts.
- Promote effective pedagogy and inquiry into teaching and learning practice to identify those students for whom the right to education is not being satisfactorily realised, actively investigating alternative practice that could be more effective (HRiE, *Developing a human rights-based school curriculum*).

There are already a number of organisations and departments within Australia working towards better human rights education in schools.

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) is currently running a program entitled Civics and Citizenship Education. This program “promotes students’ participation in Australia’s democracy by equipping them with the knowledge, skills, values and dispositions of active and informed citizenship. It entails knowledge and understanding of Australia’s democratic heritage and traditions, its political and legal institutions and the shared values of freedom, tolerance, respect, responsibility and inclusion” (DEEWR, *Civics and Citizenship Education*).

The Australian Human Rights Commission runs a program which “aims to help students develop a critical understanding of human rights and responsibilities, as well as developing the attitudes, behaviours and skills to apply them in everyday life”. Its approach is influenced by the goals and direction of the World Programme for Human Rights Education. The Commission works in cooperation with Australia’s state and territory education departments, schools, organisations and facilitators “to promote an understanding of and commitment to human rights education”. It produces a range of human rights education resources for teachers and offers professional development programs to support teachers and provide them with inspiration in their approach to teaching human rights and responsibilities (Australian Human Rights Commission, *Human Rights Education Overview*)

Australia already possesses the resources to implement a successful program of human rights education in all schools. Canada and the UK are benefiting from such a program. Will Australia follow their example and take this crucial step for the sake of future generations?

Bibliography

Amnesty International Australia, submissions to the National Curriculum Board (2008), *The Shape of the National Curriculum: a proposal for discussion*.
http://www.amnesty.org.au/images/uploads/hre/NGS_subDec08.pdf

Australian Human Rights Commission
Human Rights Education Overview
http://www.hreoc.gov.au/education/about_education.html

DEEWR (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations)
Civics and Citizenship Education
http://www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/about_civics_and_citizenship_education,9625.html

HRiE (Human Rights in Education)
Rights, respect and responsibilities – Children's rights education in Hampshire
<http://www.rightsined.org.nz/index.php/hrie/what-were-about/human-rights-based-education/the-evidence-hampshire-case-study.html>

HRiE (Human Rights in Education)
The Evidence – The Hampshire Case Study
<http://www.rightsined.org.nz/index.php/hrie/what-were-about/human-rights-based-education/the-evidence-hampshire-case-study.html>

HRiE (Human Rights in Education)
Developing a human rights-based school curriculum
http://www.rightsined.org.nz/hrie/resources/curriculum_and_classroom/curriculum/srk4001_developing_curric_w2003.doc

New Zealand Human Rights Commission
Advocate Urges NZ to adopt human rights based education
<http://www.hrc.co.nz/home/hrc/newsandissues/advocateurgesnztoadopthumanrightsbasededucation.php>

Robertson, Geoffrey, from his keynote address to the National Public Education Forum, *The Public Good and the Education of Children*, 28 March, 2009.
<http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/2009/NPEF/GRobertson.pdf>