

Children's Rights Education: A New Reality for

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AMONG THE MANY NEW INITIATIVES OF THE PAST FEW YEARS HAS BEEN THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW CURRICULA IN CHILDREN'S RIGHTS EDUCATION. AT THE PRIMARY LEVEL, CHILDREN'S RIGHTS EDUCATION IS BEING TAUGHT IN VARIOUS SCHOOLS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA AND IN ALBERTA. AT THE ELEMENTARY AND JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL LEVELS, IT HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED THROUGHOUT THE CAPE BRETON-VICTORIA REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT AND IS SOON TO BE IMPLEMENTED ACROSS THE PROVINCE OF NOVA SCOTIA. IT IS ANTICIPATED THAT OVER THE NEXT FEW YEARS THERE MAY BE PAN-CANADIAN IMPLEMENTATION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS EDUCATION. WHAT ARE CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, WHY IS CHILDREN'S RIGHTS EDUCATION IMPORTANT, AND WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION?

What are Children's Rights?

In 1991, the Canadian government signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention), an international document which recognizes fundamental rights for all children (under the age of 18 years). The Convention was subsequently ratified by Parliament and the provinces. In fact, it has, to date, been ratified by all countries of the world except the United States and Somalia, making it the most widely ratified Convention in world history. In ratifying the Convention, Canada has agreed not only to recognize the rights of children, but also to work towards their implementation in law, policy and practice.

Children's rights, as described in the Convention, fall within three categories: *rights of provision*, which recognize the right of all children to basic social and economic needs such as health care and education; *rights of protection*, which describe the right of children to protection

from harmful practices such as abuse, neglect, and exploitation; and finally, *rights of participation*, which describe children's right to be heard in all matters that affect them.

Among the 54 articles of the Convention is one that calls for children's rights education. Article 42 states that signatories are "to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike." Systematic teaching of the Convention in schools is the best means of ensuring such widespread knowledge. In fact, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (to which Canada must report its progress in implementing the Convention every five years) recommended in 1995 that Canada incorporate children's rights education into school curricula.

Following that recommendation, we, at the University Children's Rights Centre, developed, pilot tested, and evaluated a grade 6 curriculum in children's rights between 1996 and 1998. This curriculum is now widely used and has been incorporated into the new Nova Scotia health and social studies core curricula. Building on that success, in 1999 we developed and evaluated a grade 8 curriculum designed to fit into the existing Personal Development and Relationships curriculum. This is now being used across the Cape Breton-Victoria regional school district as well as in other boards in the province.

Why is Children's Rights Education Important?

One obvious reason for the importance of children's rights education, then, is to comply with the Convention and the recommendations of the UN Committee. Pan-Canadian children's



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rights education in schools as part of core curriculum would fulfill Canada's obligations. But this reason alone may be a tough sell. A more compelling and arguably more important reason for teaching children's rights education in schools is its positive impact on both students and teachers.

Both anecdotal evidence and empirical studies report a positive impact of children's rights education on students. When children learn about their rights as described in the Convention, they show increases in self-esteem, in perceived peer and teacher support, and in rights-respecting attitudes and behaviors.¹ These increases have been attributed in part to the content of what the students are learning — as one of the children said, knowing you have rights “makes you feel special.” As important as the content, however, is the process by which the rights education is taught. The children's rights curricula that have been associated with the most positive outcomes are those that require democratic teaching and classroom management styles.² Teachers must *model* the rights that children are being taught are theirs.

Among other rights, the curricula teach children that they have the right to be heard on matters that affect them, to choose friends, and to be treated with dignity and respect. For these rights to have meaning for the children, the teacher should use a democratic, non-punitive teaching style with opportunities for debate, self-selected small group exercises, and some self-direction in activities. The curricula are designed to promote positive peer interaction and mutual respect through a variety of activities including role-play, debate over social issues, consideration of rights in conflict, and the impact of rights violations. When teachers model and teach about rights in democratic



ways, they are transmitting attitudes and values about the importance of respecting others' rights — in Dewey's words, the hidden curriculum. It is this modeling of rights respect that is of pivotal importance in the success of the curriculum.

But what about teachers? How do they feel about being asked to teach an issue for which they have little or no information? How do they feel about the democratic teaching style needed? In a word — unprepared.

Implications for Teacher Education

Any new responsibility for teachers may cause problems. Considerable concern has been expressed over the past few years about the increasing responsibilities of teachers, responsibilities that have grown in the context of cutbacks

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in resources and increased class sizes. Teacher education has not kept pace with the new demands; few teachers feel adequately prepared to both teach and manage a classroom comprising students of widely differing abilities. In addition, new technologies have imposed new requirements on teachers.

Teaching children's rights may be a particularly difficult undertaking for some teachers. First, as noted above, rights education requires a particular style of teaching and classroom management. Not all teachers are trained to use democratic teaching styles. Second, it has been our experience that some teachers believe rights to be an unsuitable topic for schools to be teaching, most frequently because they fear that a loss of authority in the classroom will result from children's rights education. In addition, not being familiar with the provisions of the Convention, many teachers have expressed a belief that a focus on responsibilities would be more appropriate than a focus on rights. These difficulties underscore the importance of integrating rights education into teacher training. Teachers are the key individuals in helping Canada fulfill its rights education obligations under the Convention, and in so doing, teach-

ers have an unusual opportunity to contribute to the development of a rights-respecting society.

For teachers to be comfortable teaching children's rights, they need to be familiar with the Convention and they need to be familiar with democratic teaching and management styles. To some extent, we have been successful in meeting these needs through the provision of workshops. We have introduced teachers to the Convention and to the rights curriculum by simulating the classroom and having them role-play their students and engage in the activities. However, although they are helpful, workshops cannot be expected to provide as effective training as the integration of rights curriculum into teacher education.

We really cannot expect teachers to embrace rights education unless they, themselves, have a basic knowledge of

the Convention. This is best accomplished through more prolonged experience than can be gained during a workshop. A basic understanding of the Convention would provide teachers with the necessary knowledge base to teach children about their rights. In addition, experience with the Convention has been shown to affect teachers' attitudes both toward children's rights and toward teaching them. In an assessment of Grade 8 teachers' responses to being asked to teach our rights curriculum, we found that the more teachers actually used the curriculum in their classes, the greater their support for children's rights and the greater their belief in the importance of children's rights education.³ Similarly, in a recent study at the university, we found that when students (some of whom are teachers) learn about children's rights under the Convention, they also

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become more supportive of the implementation of children's rights.⁴ A personal belief in the goal of any curriculum facilitates teaching it.⁵ Being educated about the Convention, then, should produce a psychological preparedness to teach it. Some of the teachers with whom we worked shifted over the course of the year from an initial reluctance to enthusiasm for teaching children's rights.

There may also be another benefit to incorporating children's rights education into teacher education. Familiarity with children's rights should help teachers identify where or when a child's rights are violated. Given all the roles that teachers currently must fill, we do not suggest that they should be held responsible for rights violations. Nevertheless, it is often the child's teacher who first learns about difficulties the child is experiencing, either through disclosure by the child or through observation of behavioral change.⁶

Teachers need more than knowledge of the content of the Convention; however, they also need to be trained in democratic teaching styles. Democratic teaching practices have benefits that encompass much more than children's rights education. Democratic teaching and classroom management styles, with age-appropriate participation opportunities, have a facilitative effect on raising students' self-perception, self-esteem, sense of personal efficacy, social responsibility, and decision making skills.⁷ In light of current trends toward large classes, which tend to elicit more controlling strategies than opportunities for participation, it may be particularly

important to educate student teachers on democratic styles.

In a high risk area of Seattle, Washington, teachers were trained to use democratic practices to promote students' sense of bonding with their school.⁸ Teachers were trained to provide significant opportunity for involvement in decision making, in particular in expectations for conduct and classroom rules. Additionally, teachers were taught how to provide opportunities for group learning, and for participating in the skills development of peers. Each of these practices is consistent with the requirements for teaching the children's rights curriculum. The evaluation of the Seattle project showed that the democratic practices resulted in increased student involvement in the classroom, commitment to school and education, and academic achievement.

In summary, the incorporation into teacher education of children's rights and strategies for teaching children's rights is likely to have positive outcomes for both teacher and student. The Nova Scotia teachers who have used the rights curricula have consistently reported improved classroom environments and improved student behaviors. The comments from students support the teacher observations. Students have described what they have learned in terms that suggest rights education is an effective agent of moral education. Moreover they have enjoyed it. As one particularly enthusiastic grade 8 recipient of rights education said "[Rights education] makes children happy to get up in the morning and go to school knowing that they have people that care about them." This, surely, is a worthy goal for teacher education. 

1 K. Covell & R.B. Howe., "The Impact of children's rights education: A Canadian study," *International Journal of Children's Rights* 7 (1999): 171-183; K. Covell, & R.B. Howe, "Moral education through the 3 Rs: Rights, respect and responsibility," *Journal of Moral Education* 30, no.1 (2001): 31-42; J. DeCoene, & R. De Cock, "The children's rights project in the primary school 'De Vrijdagmarkt.' in Bruges" in E. Verhellen (ed) *Monitoring Children's Rights* (The Hague: Martinus Hijhoff, 1996): 627-636

EN BREF

Presque tous les futurologues reconnaissent le rôle central que joue l'éducation en tant que détonateur et tremplin d'un changement global positif. Dans leurs rapports, ces derniers font le survol des tendances générales en matière de changement éducatif et formulent des recommandations précises pour susciter de nouveaux changements. Dans une synthèse des études de prospective en éducation, la société FuturEd conclut que les systèmes d'éducation et de formation changent, sous l'impulsion de forces internes et externes, afin de devenir plus ouverts, plus compétitifs, plus individualisés, plus sensibles, plus cycliques, plus centrés sur la réussite de l'apprenant, plus axés sur l'éducation en tant que droit et responsabilité, plus conformes au modèle industriel, plus gourmands en capitaux et plus orientés vers le national et le mondial.

2 <http://faculty.uccb.ns.ca/childrensrights>

3 K. Covell, J.O'Leary & R.B Howe, *Introducing a new curriculum in children's rights education*. Manuscript currently under review.

4 K. Campbell & K. Covell, *Children's Rights Centre: Effects of children's rights education on adults' rights knowledge, rights support, and views of children as parental property*. Manuscript under preparation.

5 L. Mabry & L. Ettinger, "Supporting community-oriented educational change," *Educational Policy Analysis Archives* 7: 14 (1999): 1-17.

6 W.B. Crenshaw, L.M. Crenshaw & J.W. Lichtenberg, "When educators confront child abuse: an analysis of the decision to report," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 19, no.9 (1995): 1095-1113.

7 K. Covell & R. Brian Howe, *The Challenge of Children's Rights for Canada*. (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001). See Chapter 5.

8 R.A.Abbott, J. O'Donnell, J.D.Hawkins et al, "Changing teaching practices to promote achievement and bonding to school," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 68: 4 (1998): 542-552.

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