

# RETHINKING THE PLACE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Children are entitled to all the rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the various treaties that have developed from it. Children are also guaranteed additional rights, notably under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – the most widely ratified human rights treaty – because they need special protection and care. They must be able to depend on the adult world to look after them, to defend their rights and to help them develop and realize their potential.<sup>1</sup>

The Human Development Index (HDI) is a comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education, and standard of living for countries worldwide. It is a standard means of measuring well-being, especially child welfare. It is used to distinguish between developed, developing, or underdeveloped countries and to measure the impact of economic policies on quality of life. According to annual United Nations declarations based on the HDI, Canada remains one of the best places in the world in which to live. Ironically, this declaration of socio-economic superiority does not extend to the young people in our society. Although post-industrial societies like Canada and the United States may be outstanding in terms of human development, they may also be violating the human rights of their children and youth by neglecting their basic needs. Canada ranks second only to the United States among first world countries in terms of child poverty. There are more millionaires in Canada today than at any other time, yet one in three urban children lives in poverty.<sup>2</sup>

## **DISTORTED IMAGE, DISTORTED JUSTICE**

How do we react to the plight of children in our midst? Unfortunately, we often blame the children themselves. Instead of working to solve the sources of child and youth suffering, we often single out and accept highly sensationalized news accounts of criminal children as evidence that there are no longer 'innocents' among us – despite the fact that violent crimes among youth are on the decline. With respect to public policy, we allow governments at all jurisdictional levels to engage in increasingly harsh law and order policies that we know create criminals rather than healthy citizens.





**EN BREF** Si les sociétés post-industrielles comme le Canada se distinguent sur le plan du développement humain, il se peut qu'elles portent atteinte, simultanément, aux droits humains de leurs enfants et de leurs jeunes en négligeant leurs besoins fondamentaux. Les médias et les politiques publiques transmettent en général un sombre point de vue politique et culturel sur les jeunes, la défense des intérêts des jeunes est ignorée, et les enfants n'ont pas de voix ni de place dans des sociétés qui affirment pourtant que les enfants sont leur avenir. Nos écoles accueillent un nombre croissant d'élèves à risque en les « entreposant » dans des situations qui les laissent à l'abandon, exposés à des risques permanents de victimisation et d'offense, d'abus de drogues et d'alcool, et d'exploitation par des adultes. D'après les recherches, les systèmes scolaires privilégiant le mentorat des élèves réussissent très bien, non seulement en préparant les jeunes pour le civisme, mais aussi en prévenant les comportements autodestructeurs et antisociaux. Nous devons formuler des politiques d'éducation qui s'engagent pour les droits humains des enfants.

### **THE DIM POLITICAL/CULTURAL VIEW OF YOUTH, REFLECTED GENERALLY**

### **IN THE MEDIA AND IN PUBLIC POLICY, HAS MULTIPLE SPECIFIC**

### **CONSEQUENCES.**

Why are we so out of touch with our moral and ethical inner voices, with our better judgment of what a just world for kids would look like? It is, in part, because we allow our mass media to create and filter information in ways that absolve business and government from responsibility for social ills. Chomsky and others have taught us that powerful people frame images of good and evil in order to indict the marginalized.<sup>3</sup> The generalized distrust of youth that we see in contemporary media is evidence that public opinion is a just such a condemning fiction.<sup>4</sup> Depictions of children and youth are fraught with images

of kids out of control, kids from poor families (especially headed by single mothers) and from visible minority groups (especially Aboriginal, Black, Hispanic or recent immigrant youth), and most recently, with images of girls. The demise of the nuclear family is equated with youth misbehaviour in accounts that make an apparently complementary assumption that families are to blame for the criminogenesis of their children.<sup>5</sup> The media equate badness/evil with poverty and marginality because these equations sell, with the net result that most of us dismiss 'bad kids' as those with individual and socio-cultural pathologies.

Public policy responses to what constitutes bad or criminal behaviour and what constitutes appropriate reaction change depending on the socio-economic and political context. Those in positions of economic and political power can affect public opinion through their control of the media and their ability to marginalize dissent, and thereby exert their influence on legislation and law enforcement. With a few terrible exceptions, most child and youth crimes are either inconsequential and capricious, or logical and instrumental approaches to survival in an untenable world. Clearly, decisions to increase incarceration rates or to get tough on youth crime and misconduct are responses to voter demand rather than to a reality of increased dangerousness and licentiousness.<sup>6</sup> In this new millennium, we see more political will to appease voters than to address social problems – and children do not vote.

The dim political/cultural view of youth, reflected generally in the media and in public policy, has multiple specific consequences. First, it results in calls for increased policing and control of children at all levels of jurisdiction. We have seen this in recent political campaigns that have



been framed around a law and order agenda. The ongoing tinkering, since 1983, with Canada's Young Offenders Act has made it progressively more punitive. The federal government is now tinkering with the Youth Criminal Justice Act of 2002 with the same end in mind. Recent government crime bill amendments are an example of how we condemn children, contrary to evidence that such policies are both instrumentally and morally destructive. For example, in an official attempt to "hold youth accountable," the Canadian government, in November of 2007, introduced proposed changes to the Youth Criminal Justice Act that would allow more youth to be tried as adults (Bill C-25), impose tougher sentences for convicted youth, increase the use of pre-trial detention, set tougher bail conditions for repeat offenders, and allow the courts to consider deterrence and denunciation as primary objectives of youth sentences.

Simply put, when governments choose to increase sentences for young people, or when they choose to condemn them to adult corrections, they are engaged in moral and judicial apathy. The condemnatory rhetoric of public opinion that supports such public policy hides our failure as a society to provide opportunity and healing for our most disadvantaged and vulnerable young members.

A second consequence of our collective negative view of children and youth is that advocacy for increased investment in children falls on deaf ears, especially when fiscal considerations take precedence over social policy. For example, recent policy changes, including the reduction of monies spent on health, education, and social programs, have eroded the ability of the youth criminal justice system to provide healing for young offenders. Policies based on fiscal restraint are marketplace placebos, which often benefit politicians and administrators, but rarely the children under their care. Nor will such legislation ameliorate the conditions of over-crowded classrooms, where educators not only teach, but also try to provide social services that are unavailable elsewhere. Unlike Canada, Scandinavian countries have a less fiscally-driven notion of social policy. They consider money spent on education and children's services as a social and economic investment in the future rather than a drain on public revenue.

The third – and by far the most important – consequence of this dim view of youth is that children are disallowed voice and place in societies that talk of children being the focus of the future. Despite such platitudes, when young people gather in public places outside schools, without adult supervision, we watch them with suspicion. Some too-new child advocacy endeavors aside, Western societies remain punishing and parochial in their objectives for and care of children.

#### **SCHOOLS: PROTECTORS OR VIOLATORS OF RIGHTS?**

While the current moral panic about children and youth may be partly the result of their volatility in an increasingly alienating world, it is important to consider that the world is largely constructed by and for adults, and too many children have too little at their disposal to enrich their lives or to prepare them for the future. Schools are the one place that adults have identified as the arena for child development, and if schools do not work for a growing proportion of children, those children are adrift in society. Research shows quite clearly that failure in school often contributes to young people's involvement in the justice system.<sup>7</sup>

And yet, our reaction to a growing population of children and youth at risk is to 'warehouse' them in schools without demanding the right kind of accountability. We demand inordinate efficiency from teachers, but prohibit them mentoring children. In classrooms that all good research tells us are too large, the vast majority of teachers are required to teach to set curricula and school policies rather than to individual students who could benefit from one-on-one time. Nor do we provide teachers with the additional resources and training they need to support the parts of their roles that extend beyond teaching.

In the United States, the No Child Left Behind federal law set what remains a popular public standard of 100 percent of American children reaching grade level in reading and math by 2014 – an unreachable goal. But the law utterly fails to take into account the inherent differences between schools whose populations are primarily white and middle class and inner city schools serving poor children and children at risk. Schools have not been given more resources, nor have teachers been given extra training or smaller classes. Instead, when a school fails to meet incremental goals of improvement toward the 2014 goal, it is subjected to fiscal restraints or the threat of takeover. The hidden agenda in this law is the Bush administration's reaction to the costs of education and the public dismay at America's failure to keep up with educational standards of other nations.

Canada has no official No Child Left Behind political policy, but in opting for fiscal restraint and efficiency in education, while ignoring geographical, pedagogical, and human realities, we are different only in degree from our American neighbours.

Despite our failure to provide appropriate supports to children at risk, we continue to see schools as the only places where children can be socialized successfully. Perhaps this is not surprising, given the origins of schooling as we know it. Critics of the present education system argue that it is essentially a holdover from the Industrial Revolution and nineteenth-century Europe, and that its primary hidden function is to discipline and control students and to

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socialize them in ways that will make the workplace run smoothly.<sup>8</sup> From this critical perspective, the formal curriculum is less important than the hidden curriculum, for it is conformity with the workplace norms of time, success, examination, and advancement that produces a competent worker. These critics argue that, because schools are administered like instrumental, efficiency-based organizations designed to respond to labour market demands, they violate the rights of children by failing to accommodate cultural and intellectual differences.

As a result, we see an alarming number of children at risk from victimization and offending, from drug and alcohol abuse, and from exploitation by adults. In order for schools to become places where children from diverse demographic and experiential backgrounds can feel safe and welcome, education reform must focus on a diverse, flexible, and non-authoritarian model that respects the rights of children and youth. Such schools do exist, but they are often hidden from public view, and often identified as 'special' or 'remedial'. Most children remain in public systems that are constantly under scrutiny for cost-efficiency when the real cost is in disaffiliated children from all classes of our supposedly classless society.

#### THE MENTORSHIP ALTERNATIVE

Research shows that innovative and reform-minded school systems – those that respond to children at risk and to those already involved in the justice system – are highly successful not only in preparing young people for citizenship, but also in preventing self-destructive and anti-social behaviour.

**THE LIFE SKILLS – INCLUDING EMOTIONAL, SOCIAL, AND PRACTICAL – THAT PREPARE STUDENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL CITIZENSHIP, AND CAREER ATTAINMENT AND DEVELOPMENT, ARE PERHAPS MORE EFFECTIVELY ACQUIRED OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM.**

Such schools have proven, too, that money spent on education, especially on mentoring, saves in the long term.<sup>9</sup>

When young people at extreme risk turn their lives around, they often do so as a result of one person who cares for them and takes the time to get involved in their lives. Irwin Waller has recently documented the effectiveness of alternative education programs that incorporate mentoring as a guiding principle. He points out that if we invest in mentoring programs for preschool, primary and secondary school youth, the long-term savings generated by creating healthy citizens are tremendous.<sup>10</sup> Since ethically we should be caring for and mentoring children without qualification, the monetary argument is the least important one. Still, sadly, it is the one that sits well with policy makers.

Given that conventional education systems are preoccupied with providing standardized education to large numbers of students, it is unlikely that they can provide the type of mentorship that young people require. The life skills – including emotional, social, and practical – that prepare students for successful citizenship, and career attainment and development, are perhaps more effectively acquired outside of the classroom.

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Nevertheless, some schools have begun to break the cycle of poverty and other disadvantages by melding the intellectual and personal development of children with occupational development and by providing for diverse personal, social and cultural needs. This paradigm shift is based on the assumption that the people most knowledgeable about the needs of youth are those who work with them, people who allow youth to voice their concerns. These may, or may not, include teachers, social workers, ministers, parents, and elders. Won Ska Cultural School in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan is an example of a school that successfully turns around the lives of students at-risk by incorporating one-to-one mentorship, life-skills training, and consensus-based decision making as the framework for education.<sup>11</sup>

The apprenticeship model is an extension of mentorship that – with few (and notably successful) exceptions – has all but disappeared from the business and cultural landscape of post-industrial society.<sup>12</sup> In its place are exploitative hiring and employment practices that misuse youth. Some of our biggest employers of youth are some of their least likely and least desirable mentors, depending on temporary, on-call employees for their economic efficiency.<sup>13</sup> The fast food industry is most notable for its dependence on young people. Employers rarely spend much time and money training employees; extensive apprenticeship is expensive and regarded as futile when the employee turnover is deliberately high; and the jobs themselves can be hazardous to young people's health.<sup>14</sup>

As Ken Dryden noted several years ago, little has changed

in schools over several generations. We seem only to recycle waves of anxiety about education instead of addressing ways to create the educational process as one of citizenship training and mentoring. Claims that middle class kids are 'dumbing down'<sup>15</sup> are met with 'back to the basics' propaganda; too few children get the opportunity for the supplemental and alternative education they need.

#### TOWARD A PARADIGM OF RIGHTS

A new paradigm of education that is committed to enfranchising children and youth needs to situate itself at the heart of all advocacy for children – one that teaches children the value of their voices by respecting those voices rather than attempting to silence them. To play their proper role as defenders of social justice for youth, schools must become arenas of justice, personal development, collective action, and individual achievement – because there are no other sanctioned places in which children can learn these things in our post-industrial North American societies, and because schools are often the only safe houses children and youth have.

Education policy developed around a commitment to human rights for children would be committed to making children's lives better in a context of emotional and physical safety; achievable day-to-day tasks; democratic education; forums for personal and collective justice, including children's rights as employees; a comfortable physical environment; and access to one-to-one mentorship with a responsible and caring adult. The earlier such policies apply to children, the more effective they are, especially for children at risk. That is why early childhood education and national daycare programs are an essential part of the solution for dispossessed children.

Specific elements of this policy in support of human rights for children would include more fully integrating community resources into the space that children and youth inhabit; providing life education outside of the school grounds and classrooms; incorporating anti-racist and anti-sexist education into the curriculum; creating real work apprenticeships; extending the open hours of schools beyond 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.; and recognizing the role of education in promoting social justice.

Our faith in children and *their* faith in us can only be restored when we as a society act in responsible and reciprocal ways with our youth. We seem, collectively, to have lost belief in the innocence of children or in the ability of the child to lead us. How can children become the responsible adults of tomorrow we want and expect them to be when we view them with so much suspicion today, or when they are marginalized to the point where they cease to care about the future? When children are finally welcomed into public spaces without suspicion, when we acknowledge that every acting out in dress or behaviour is not a public threat, when we actually want to share our time with children rather than ferrying them off to a host of activities or retreating behind barricades (actual or figurative) of adult-only communities, we will have earned the right to their respect and love.

Aboriginal communities believe that healthy communities are ones in which children's voices are heard, not silenced. In the interest of the world's children, we must listen to them and learn. |

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Notes

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as volunteers came  
in acknowledging  
that, yes, we may  
have skills, but  
we're also going  
to learn a lot.

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