



THE RIGHTS WAY TO EDUCATE CHILDREN

Teaching children about their rights under the Convention does not lead to anarchy or disrespect. On the contrary... they become more socially responsible.

I RECENTLY ASKED a group of 10- and 11-year-old school children what they would like to change about their school. Surprisingly they had to think long and hard. And then one child answered:

I would like it if we had a hospital at the school. Then there would be no more eternity leaves – the teacher could have the baby at lunchtime if there was a hospital and then come back to class. Too many teachers are on eternity leave and we miss them.

The others nodded their agreement. This was not the usual response – more holidays, free time, lunchtime, and so forth. What was going on in this school?

This was one of a group of 18 schools in the county of Hampshire, England, with a program of children's rights education called *Rights, Respect and Responsibility* (or RRR). We at the Cape Breton University Children's Rights Centre have been assessing this initiative over the past four years. It is so successful that the senior education administrator of Hampshire described it as a "tide that we couldn't stop if we wanted to." And they don't want to for good reason. But first, a little background.

Teachers in the county of Hampshire, like those in many parts of the industrialized world, have been coping with disengaged students. Disengagement is associated with a wide range of behaviour problems – absenteeism, tardiness, vandalism, inattentiveness, disrespect for teachers, bullying of peers, harassment, and apathy rather than participation in the classroom. And of course, disengaged students do not achieve to their potential. Student disengagement is also associated with teacher burnout. When teachers suffer

EN BREF L'éducation sur les droits des enfants favorise une participation sérieuse des élèves dans la prise de décision et l'engagement à l'école. Par conséquent, les enfants se comportent de façon plus responsable sur le plan social et sont plus susceptibles de réaliser leur potentiel, alors que les enseignants aiment mieux enseigner. Traiter les jeunes comme des citoyens contemporains et leur enseigner leurs droits semble les aider à se voir comme des personnes morales qui ont des droits et des responsabilités, qui sont en mesure de changer leur environnement scolaire et de faire des choix, qui ont des conséquences favorables pour eux et pour les autres. La crainte qu'enseigner aux enfants quels sont leurs droits engendrerait l'anarchie ou l'irrespect ne semble pas fondée. Au contraire, de plus en plus de preuves démontrent que lorsqu'on enseigne leurs droits aux enfants dans un environnement où ils sont respectés, leur sens des responsabilités sociales augmente.



burnout, their health, their relationships, and their teaching efficacy suffer.

In many educational jurisdictions, the responses to student disengagement and behaviour problems have been restrictive or punitive; they include on-site police officers, locker searches, metal detectors, and zero tolerance policies. There is little evidence that such strategies are effective in changing behaviour, attitudes, or achievement. Hampshire took a radically different approach. They decided to work toward promoting school engagement and improving the school ethos through whole school reform based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Canada (and the United Kingdom) in 1991, describes a global consensus on the fundamental rights of children up to age 18. The Convention prescribes rights of protection (e.g., from abuse), rights of provision (e.g., to health care), and participation rights (the right to be heard). It also prescribes the appropriate pedagogy, content, and aims of education.

Under the Convention, schools are to be inclusive and respect the rights and dignity of every child. Teaching and school practices are to be participatory and respect the child's voice in an age-appropriate manner. Children are to be taught in ways that develop all children to their maximum potential and create respect for the rights of all others and the environment.

Based on our early work in children's rights education in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the Hampshire educators launched the RRR in 2003-2004, implementing children's

rights education into elementary schools. They made a major leap forward by incorporating children's rights not only into part of the curriculum, as done in Nova Scotia, but across the whole school.

With the Hampshire RRR, children are taught about their rights through their specific inclusion across the curriculum, and through their modeling in the hidden curriculum. With rights as the framework for all school policies and practices, children are provided many opportunities for meaningful participation in school and classroom functioning. For example, each class critically discusses and democratically agrees upon a class charter of rights and responsibilities with regard to learning and behaviour. Teachers then use the charter as their behaviour management tool.

In the classroom, cooperative and group learning are the norm, and children have a voice in what they study. The children make democratic decisions about class projects, fundraising, recreational facilities, lunchtime clubs, and field trips. In all cases, teachers and administrators listen to the decisions made by the children. When they cannot meet the children's requests, like an effective democratic parent, they explain why to the students, using the issue as an opportunity for promoting critical thinking.

School council members are democratically elected and councils are fully run by the students (with teachers providing help and support only as needed). Likewise, students maintain control over the content and production of school newspapers. In addition, in some schools, students conduct their own parent interviews, present school information to their boards of governors, and participate in the hiring of

new staff. In fact in one school, a five-year-old was part of a hiring committee for lunchtime staff. Her questions included: Are you a good cook? Do you like children? Do you shout? Very cogent.

The principals and teachers in Hampshire were provided considerable flexibility in how they implemented the RRR. As a result, not all schools had completed the whole school reform over the time span of the study. This provided us with a means of identifying the effects of the initiative. We compared experiences and outcomes of those in schools that had fully implemented the RRR (FI schools) with those that had partially implemented it (PI schools).

Our four years of evaluation show that, where the initiative has been fully incorporated into curricula, policies, and practices, there are positive effects on the ethos of the school, on children's behaviour and learning, and on teacher burnout.

Over time, teachers in FI schools reported that RRR had positive effects on their teaching, and they reported less burnout. They experienced increasingly fewer feelings of exhaustion as a direct result of their work and less frustration with teaching. They also reported feeling more energized when dealing with students and better able to deal with them on a more personal level, connect with them more effectively, and deal more effectively with their problems. Teachers also reported being more confident in their ability to create a positive classroom atmosphere. Not surprisingly, these same teachers reported an increase in personal achievement, believing that they are having a positive effect on their students. Teachers in FI schools also described improved interactions with colleagues and greater overall job satisfaction.

It is likely that these changed attitudes among teachers were a result of the changes they perceived in the students as their classes and schools became increasingly rights-based. Reported changes reflected improvements in social, behavioural, and cognitive domains.

In the social domain, the children treated other students, staff, and teachers with greater respect, and relationships generally improved. In the behavioural domain, children were generally less aggressive and less disruptive in class, instead displaying more cooperative and helping behaviours. They also participated in a wider range of class and school activities, displayed a greater tendency to discuss classroom issues, engaged in group activities in the classroom, and participated in extra-curricular activities such as clubs and school councils. In addition, respect for the school environment increased; students were more careful with books, desks, and school equipment, as well as with the property of other pupils. In the cognitive domain, students' achievement scores showed steady improvements, their confidence to tackle new cognitive tasks increased

markedly, and their critical thinking capacity was enhanced.

What about the children themselves? We measured their understanding of rights and responsibilities through interviews, and we assessed their level of school engagement through surveys. Compared with their peers in the partially implemented schools, those in the fully implemented schools were more likely to understand what rights are, albeit in the concrete terms expected from younger children: "They keep you safe"; "We should be treated properly."

The better the children's understanding of rights, the more likely they were to understand responsibilities in terms of respecting the rights of others: "The most important responsibility is making sure others have their rights." And as one child so eloquently stated, responsibilities mean always doing the right thing, however unpleasant: "If there's a dead rat, don't leave it."

These children were also able to articulate a number of ways in which the lives of children are improved through respect of their rights:

"It will help make the world a better place, more equal."

"Allows them (children) to have a good life, not being hurt or bullied."

"It's good for children to have rights otherwise they would not have clean water and food."; "Yes, because if they don't have water, they will dehydrate."

"There's quite a lot of children who don't do the right thing. My friend was very badly behaved before we learned about rights, respect, and responsibilities, but now he behaves."

Many of the children also noted the importance of respecting the rights of all children: "Quite a few rights aren't working properly – for example, not everyone has clean water and government is not supporting them properly."

As well as demonstrating a more adult-like understanding of rights and responsibilities, the children in the FI schools reported more school engagement than those in PI schools. There were three components to the measure of school engagement: (1) interpersonal relationships (e.g., bullying, helping, listening); (2) rights-respecting school climate (e.g., fair rules, feeling safe, caring teachers); and (3) academic orientation (e.g., trying hard, feeling bored, enjoying learning). On each of these three measures, the students in the FI schools scored significantly higher than those in the PI schools.

These very positive findings are consistent with those found in other countries and in previous studies looking at how a rights-based school contributes to successful student outcomes. They are found in schools of varying socio-demographic circumstances, with the most pronounced differences in the most disadvantaged schools. They are found in schools that have what I think of as 3C principals, who are committed to enhancing student experiences and outcomes, who feel competent to engage in whole school reform to rights-based schooling, and who feel confident not only in their capacity to do so, but also in the capacity and commitment of teachers.

I have been asked frequently over the past year, given the successes of RRR, why more schools are not following the example of the FI schools in Hampshire county. The answer seems to be some combination of lingering myths about



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the nature of children's rights and hesitation to allow for student participation.

Teaching children about their rights under the Convention does not lead to anarchy or disrespect. On the contrary, there is growing evidence that when children are taught about their rights in an environment that respects those rights, they become more socially responsible. When they learn that all children around the world are entitled to the same rights, they learn the importance of respecting rights. When they identify with children in developing countries, they ask why so many of their rights are being violated. They begin to realize that many children in their own neighbourhoods do not enjoy basic rights.

There are numerous examples of children initiating efforts to increase the provision of rights for others – for example, starting breakfast programs in their schools, teaching other children about how to avoid clothing made by child labour, and writing letters to children in refugee camps. Perhaps most importantly, the children engage in these efforts based on their understanding of the importance of human rights rather than from the less powerful charitable perspective.

Allowing students' to participate in school decisions has similar positive outcomes. In fact, teachers in the FI schools in Hampshire found that the more they allowed their students to participate in the classroom, the more they were respected. Rather than losing authority as some had feared, they gained it. Although John Dewey brought the importance of participation to the attention of educators a century ago, efforts at democratic schooling have not always

been successful. But with children's rights as the basis for school functioning, participation is made meaningful because children are provided a commonly agreed upon values framework which they can and do use to assess the legitimacy of rules and practices. And it is a values framework of direct relevance and interest to the children.

In summary, children's rights education, such as that of the Hampshire RRR initiative, allows meaningful student participation and promotes engagement in school. As a consequence, children behave in a more socially responsible manner and are more likely to achieve to their potential, and teachers enjoy their classes more. Treating students as contemporaneous citizens and teaching them their rights appears to help them see themselves as moral persons, with rights and responsibilities, who are able to shape their school environments and make choices that positively affect themselves and others.

When provided this opportunity, most accept it responsibly. As one principal said, "When we give the children ownership of issues, they handle them well and have never let us down." And in the words of the children:

"Rights improve our behaviour because we have to respect others' rights," and "If you have a right to education, you have a responsibility to put the effort in." |

How true is that!

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