

Human Rights Education in Government Schools in Sri Lanka

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Sri Lanka is a multi-religious and multi-racial society like many other Asian countries. People in Sri Lanka, as in other countries, need to respect the rights, customs, and norms of others, which are related to human rights. Education should guide the youth, but its objective—development of knowledge, talents, and skills—is not being achieved under the present system.

Human rights education is the need of the hour. Sri Lanka's education reform does not include human rights education as a new subject although human rights are incorporated in various subjects such as social studies, political science, life competencies, and aesthetics. One objective of social studies for grades 6 to 11, for example, is the "development of respect for human rights."

In grades 6 to 8, the textbook *Society Around Us* emphasizes human rights education. In grades 7 and 8, a textbook chapter, "The Identity of People of Sri Lanka," discusses human rights education. In the grade-11 textbook, the chapter "Protection of Human Rights" covers civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights.

Life competencies is a new subject that pays attention to the "art of living, and guidance for the life of pupils." Taught in grades 7 to 9, it is popular among students, parents, and educationists. It incorporates the concepts of personal rights, rights of children and women, and other social, cultural, and political rights. The topic "Good and evil forces of society" discusses human rights.

Students in grades 12 and 13 may study political science, where they learn about the basic concepts of human rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United

Nations program on human rights, and rights and duties. Friendship between people of different nationalities, harmony, religious rights, and freedom of speech are taken up in grades 6 to 11.

In 1994, the Centre for the Study of Human Rights (CSHR) of the University of Colombo launched, through the Ministry of Education, a human rights education program in selected schools. It started with the establishment of Student Human Rights Centers in 25 schools in eight provinces. Now there are 65 centers. The program targets students who have sat for the government certificate examinations at ordinary and advanced levels. It is implemented as a nonformal educational activity during holidays and after school hours. There is a demand for this program in schools and the students are keen to be included in it as they learn about human rights through field exposure under the guidance of trainers. The students are also trained in field research, recording, and reporting. Personality enhancement and development of leadership skills are also part of the program.

An aspect of the recent education reform, Project Education, is a compulsory activity for grade 12, which is a major breakthrough in human rights education and popular with students and parents. Students carry out both

group and individual projects, and the CSHR and National Institute of Education use them to introduce “human rights projects for livelihood” in advanced-level classes. The two organizations have jointly trained teachers for this purpose since 1999.

I am the school coordinator under this program at Saranath Maha Vidyalaya in Kuliya, Sri Lanka, which started Project Education in 1994 with support from the CSHR. My colleagues and I selected committed and enthusiastic teachers, who trained at several provincial and national courses.

The objectives of the program are the following:

- Understand the importance of duties and rights, and their various aspects.
- Develop and improve skills in protecting rights while performing duties.
- Improve networking with various institutions and organizations.
- Provide knowledge about duties and rights necessary for everyday life.
- Expose students to democracy.

The program has several components:

- theoretical knowledge on human rights;
- field activities;
- preparation of project reports;
- project evaluation; and
- large-scale Human Rights Day celebrations.

Theoretical Knowledge on Human Rights

As the students require theoretical knowledge to carry out their field activities, they learn the following from resource persons:

- the concept of human rights;
- profile of human rights;
- history of the development of human rights;
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights and UN programs for human rights;
- human rights and fundamental rights;

- human rights protection under the Constitution;
- institutions that protect human rights in Sri Lanka;
- remedial measures for human rights violations; and
- rights of children, women, minorities, and consumers; environment-related rights; and freedom of expression.

Field Activities

Field work is conducted among street children and women, and at hospitals, marketplaces, police stations, and prisons.

Before students go to the field, they and the teacher-in-charge discuss how to carry out the activity. For example, if the activity is related to human rights violations by the police, the teacher instructs the students to obtain the necessary approvals and appointments from the police station. The activity focuses on the following areas:

- a person’s duty to maintain peace and harmony;
- rights of police officers and the general public;
- duties of the police;
- the different sections in the police station and their duties;
- how to make a complaint;
- the relationship between the police and the general public, and each party’s version of events; and
- conditions of jail cells, rights of prisoners, and arrest and detention.

The students can talk to the officer-in-charge and other police officers at the police station. They can also talk to prisoners and observe prison conditions. They may observe how police officers handle various matters brought before them. The students may use cassette recorders and cameras.

Preparation of Project Reports

The students record information, observations, and individual field experiences. Later they combine all their material into a group report, which also includes maps, charts, projections, photographs, and data sheets. The report has the following parts:

- Project topic
- Summary of the project
- Introduction
- Objectives
- Target group
- Resources used in the project
- Mode of implementation
- Time frame
- Results of objectives achieved
- Discussion
- Conclusions and suggestions
- Enclosures
- Resources
- Acknowledgements

Project Evaluation

The project report is first evaluated by the School Evaluation Board, including the master teachers, then by the Zonal Education Office Committee, which is composed of deputy directors and teacher instructors.

The following factors are considered during the evaluation process:

- selection of the project topic, objectives, and suitability;
- references and resources used;
- process;
- final achievements; and
- special remarks.

Finally, the students are awarded certificates by the CSHR.

Human Rights Day Celebrations

A big celebration on Human Rights Day marks the end of the school's annual human rights program. Poetry, drama, prose, song, and oratory contests, as well as exhibitions of paintings and posters are held, and outstanding students are awarded certificates and prizes. The parents of the students, distinguished guests, and the general public attend the activity. The outgoing trainees organize all the Human Rights Day celebration activities with the help of incoming trainees.

Our school has taken a further step and conducted the program with several other schools in the neighborhood. I believe that the program benefits the students. I witness how it helps them acquire leadership and organizing skills, and develop their personality, essential for their future role in society.