

Human Rights and Education: Conference Report

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OF MALAYSIA

Malaysia's active participation in the United Nations Commission for Human Rights (UNCHR) in 1993–1995 triggered the establishment of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM). Malaysia was honored in 1995 when it was elected chair of the 52nd session of UNCHR.

SUHAKAM was established by Parliament under the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia Act, gazetted on 9 September 1999. It held its inaugural meeting on 24 April 2000.

SUHAKAM has four major functions:

- Promote awareness of and provide education on human rights.
- Advise and help the government formulate legislation, administrative directives, and procedures on human rights and recommend the necessary measures to take.
- Recommend to the government actions to take on the subscription or accession of treaties and other international instruments in the field of human rights.
- Inquire into complaints about infringement of human rights.

To discharge its functions, SUHAKAM established five working groups: education, law reform, treaties and international instruments, complaints and inquiries, and information and public affairs.

Each working group was comprised of 3–4 commissioners. Since its formation in 2000, the Education Working Group (EWG) had been promoting awareness of and providing education on human rights. An early initiative was the introduction of a human rights curriculum for schools and the police. Follow-up recom-

mendations were also made during the Forum on the Rights of Disadvantaged, held on 9–10 September 2001. EWG had selected four vulnerable groups for follow up: indigenous people and children in 2002, and persons with disabilities and women in 2003. Other activities of EWG included organizing a conference on Malaysian Human Rights Day, a forum-seminar on world human rights day, road shows, exhibitions, web sites, talks, and publication of a report.

Conference on Human Rights and Education

SUHAKAM had declared 9 September as Malaysian Human Rights Day. The first celebration was held in 2001, with a two-day forum on Human Rights of the Disadvantaged.

The celebration in 2002 featured a two-day conference on Human Rights and Education organized for the public. It was held at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur. Y.B. Dato' Seri Utama Rais Yatim of the Prime Minister's Department officiated the conference on behalf of Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad. The conference objectives were to:

- Enhance human rights awareness.
- Increase understanding of human rights and education.
- Source materials for human rights and education in schools.

The conference included four symposiums, three keynote addresses, and a plenary session. Three foreign speakers delivered the keynote addresses, and 24 speakers delivered papers on various topics, including human rights practices in the workplace, promotion of a caring society, access to education, and human rights education in schools.

Attending the conference were 319 participants from 88 organizations, including NGOs, institutions of higher learning, ministries and government agencies, foreign missions, and other national human rights institutions. Various organizations and individuals representing the cross-section of society were invited, but most participants were from the education field.

Five main themes were identified and divided into sub-themes. Speakers presented their papers on the sub-themes. The five main themes were:

- human rights and a caring society,
- role of education in promoting human rights,
- human rights issues in society and education,
- human rights curriculum in schools, and
- children's rights to education.

Themes and topics were selected to encompass the range of human rights. A frequent misconception was that human rights education referred to teaching human rights in school. In general, however, Malaysians have to know as well their rights outside the formal education system.

Keynotes were delivered by Anna Wu Hungyuk, chair of the Equal Opportunity Commission, Hong Kong, on "Equalizing Education Opportunities for Human Development"; Jefferson Plantilla, chief researcher of HURIGHTS OSAKA, on "Promoting Human Rights Through Schools"; and Nicholas Howen, regional representative, Asia-Pacific Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, on "Human Rights Education in Asia: An Agenda for the 21st Century."

A plenary session with three panelists discussed the question, "Is an exam-oriented system a violation of children's right to education?"

The main issues and recommendations are summarized below.

Issues involving teachers

- Teachers sometimes see the teaching of human rights as a threat to their authority. They fear that their students will become "rebellious."
- Many teachers do not understand the concept of human rights, therefore, they fail to impart it to their students.
- Human rights teaching materials are not relevant to teaching practices and are not focused on the learning needs of students.
- Teachers may not be fully committed to human rights education in schools because they fear that it might increase their already heavy teaching loads.

Education for children with disabilities

- Schools for children with disabilities are limited. Children with disabilities have difficulty making progress through the education system due to lack of resources and support for their special learning needs.
- In accordance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, every disabled person is entitled to social facilities, including education, which is essential to maximize his or her potential.
- For children with special needs, the normal curriculum, being exam-oriented and academic, might not be suitable. With too many students in a classroom, teachers may not be able to give sufficient attention to the disabled child.

Discrimination

- In many schools, an academically weak or problematic child usually suffers discrimi-

nation, despite the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibits academic discrimination against children on ground of social status. The practice of human rights in schools is just as important as teaching them.

- Children of sex workers normally face discrimination by unofficially denying them access to education. If they are in school, they are sidelined, verbally insulted, or isolated. Their parents often do not enroll their children in school for fear of exposure to the authorities.

Other issues

- Inadequate infrastructure facilities, such as hostels, at the secondary level in the interiors of Sarawak and Sabah play a major part in the failure-success rates of students from indigenous groups.
- An exam-oriented education structure increases parental pressure on children to succeed. Children, in turn, evaluate their classmates and others solely on their academic qualification, disregarding other aspects of dignity and self-worth.
- The government harbors a residual fear that human rights education is threatening, even though evidence shows that it strengthens democracy and social cohesion.

Recommendations

- Any assessment of boys' and girls' abilities must be gender neutral, and content and method should not be weighted against one's sex.
- Public resources must be equitably shared between boys and girls.
- Education must cater to diverse needs, styles, and rates of learning. For example, dyslexic children should be allocated extra time to do their examinations. The key words must be "education for all," with or without disabilities.

- The school curriculum, education policies and rules, and teaching materials such as textbooks must be reviewed to find ways of infusing human rights into the system and of weeding out ideas that do not respect human rights.
- Teachers need to be trained to familiarize themselves with the concepts and methods of human rights education.
- Teachers should have substantial participation in conceptualizing and developing curriculums, materials, and teacher training programs.
- Human rights education for vulnerable groups should be culturally appropriate and would be effective if delivered through community-based organizations and NGOs.
- Human rights training should be given to those in careers where human rights plays a central or especially sensitive role, such as those in the justice system. Training should include judges, lawyers and other members of the legal community, the police, prison officials, immigration officials, and social workers.
- A national strategy for human rights education should be developed, either as part of an overall national human rights action plan, or separately through a participatory process of consultation with all actors. Such a plan needs resources to be put together, implemented, monitored, evaluated, and reviewed.
- SUHAKAM can play a leading role in developing human rights education programs and national plans.
- Children should not be segregated or judged by categorizing them as educable or non-educable.
- Extra incentives should be given to teachers in remote areas. Rewards should not only be monetary, but should include preferential consideration for further studies or specialized training.
- Curriculum reform should be flexible and should provide options for students. For

example, traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples may be incorporated in science classes. Knowledgeable members of the parents teachers association may be encouraged to support the school curriculum committee to design appropriate courses and to help teach practical aspects of the courses.

- Dialogue with educators and curriculum developers should continue across the country.
- Teaching materials should be made engaging and contextualized, discursive, skills oriented, cross-curricular, and inclusive.
- The teaching of moral education and human values needs to be enhanced and made effective through practical and example-oriented activities. All students must be exposed to this subject.
- Teachers should be convinced of the importance of human rights education in schools. To make the task less burdensome, more examples of lesson plans incorporating human rights education across the curriculum should be made readily available to them.
- Teachers need to be taught human rights education in their pre-service or in-service training. Teacher training institutions should incorporate this subject into their curriculum.
- The school environment should demonstrate care and ensure justice for all. Teach-

ers must be willing to listen, should be concerned with the well-being of their students, and be role models. Pupils should not be led to perceive the school merely as a place to obtain good grades but as a place where they grow and develop.

- Teachers should explain human rights simply and explain and clarify abstract concepts such as “freedom,” “equality,” and “fundamental rights.” They should put them in language that students can comprehend.
- National history has to be reinterpreted and refocused from time to time so that the link between the past, present, and future can be established. This must be done since the core concerns of human rights in the past cannot be identical to those in the present and the future.

Postconference activities

In January 2003, SUHAKAM set up a committee to look into the various ways of incorporating human rights into school education. Aside from the SUHAKAM representative, the committee consists of representatives of NGOs, Ministry of Education, academe, and the teachers union.

Research on human rights awareness, as well as activities that promote human rights, among school students, teachers, and administrators, will be conducted beginning May 2003.