

Human Rights Education in Chinese Schools*

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As an educator I have been keen on human rights education in Chinese schools. Through visits to schools from the primary to higher levels, I have found that human rights education is fairly developed in the country and conducted in a comprehensive, scientific manner. A complete system of human rights education is in place.

Comprehensiveness

Human rights are the basic rights to which people are entitled. Full enjoyment of such rights has always been a human pursuit. Human rights education should cover not only the rights to subsistence and development but also political, economic, cultural, and environmental rights, and the right of nations to independence and sovereignty.

In schools I have visited, teachers have a clear understanding of the need for all-embracing human rights education. The tremendous efforts made by the People's Republic of China to ensure the right of its people to subsistence and development, and the economic and political reforms being carried out provide ample, convincing examples to help teachers and students understand human rights.

China has spared no effort to ensure that all youngsters enjoy the same right to education, whether they are of the Han ethnic majority or ethnic minority groups, boys or girls, from rich or poor families, physically and mentally normal or handicapped. Realizing full equality takes time, given that China remains a developing

country, with the world's largest population. But one thing is certain: education for all has become the unshakable guiding principle for China and it is making good progress in implementing it.

China has a floating population of more than 100 million—mostly immigrant workers from the countryside—who have temporary or permanent jobs in cities, and include about 3 million school-age children. Governments at various levels have a range of measures to ensure that they are in school. In 2002 the Beijing municipal government required children of immigrant workers to attend school, and since then has spent 180 million yuan to ensure that they do. There are 103,600 immigrant children in government schools. In Guang'anmen High School, there are students from a dozen provinces and municipalities outside Beijing, including some ethnic minorities.

Student loans are extended to families living below the poverty line. I have also visited several schools for mentally retarded children. As far back as 2,500 years ago, Confucius called for "education without discrimination." I believe the sage's idea is being translated into reality in China today.

* From *Human Rights*, volume 2, number 6, November 2003 (Beijing: China Society for Human Rights Studies, 2003).

Ubiquity

Human rights education has been incorporated into students' activities. High schools have courses on citizens' rights and obligations under the Constitution and laws, and lectures and talks on human rights are often given to college students.

Primary-school students are taught that they have the right to education and to sue any individual or organization, including their parents, for depriving them of the right. Teachers also help the students understand that boys and girls are equal and that discrimination against girls is not permitted. Chinese laws prohibit child labor and admission of minors to Internet cafes that offer sites for adults. Also forbidden is corporal punishment of children by parents and teachers. When wronged, children have the right to appeal to the authorities for help and protection. Schools are obliged to acquaint children with the Law on the Protection of Minors.

Respect for children is most important for human rights education in primary schools. Children are allowed to bring into full play their initiative and creativeness. The Experimental School of Beijing Normal University, for example, has a broadcast station and a blackboard bulletin independently run by the children. In this and many other primary schools, children take turns to work as class monitors. In secondary schools, leaders of students' union, and delegates to students' congresses are chosen through elections. At students' congresses, delegates are free to comment on the work of their teachers and schools.

Legal lessons for grade-2 students in junior high school include citizens' rights and obligations. Grade-3 students are taught China's socialist legal system and the characteristics of Chinese democracy. Grade-1 students in senior high school learn about protecting citizens' right to work and consumers' rights and interests. Grade-2 students in senior high school learn philosophy, including the dialectical rela-

tionship between democracy and law, and between rights and obligations. In-depth knowledge of constitutional rights and obligations is imparted to senior-high-school students, including the right to vote and stand for election, as well as China's people's congress system.

At schools of higher learning, human rights education is integrated into teaching and other activities. At Beijing Normal University, for example, human-rights-related questions are discussed in courses on teachers' ethics and education management, as well as on Chinese and world history. Human rights research centers are found in leading research universities, including Beijing University, Renmin University of China, Beijing Normal University, and Fudan University. Through these activities, students learn how to protect their own rights and the rights of vulnerable groups.

Dialectics

Students learn that rights and obligations are opposites in dialectical unity. Rights are inseparable from obligations, and vice versa. School authorities do not intervene in the students' exercise of their rightful freedoms. At the same time, students are obliged to observe school discipline to ensure order and self-development. Students' rights include the right to vote for and be elected as union leaders. Once a majority decision is made, everybody must honor it. This is "democratic centralism."

The state, school authorities, and teachers are duty-bound to respect the students' rights, including to select jobs after graduation and to keep their examination marks confidential. At the same time, the students are helped to understand the need to correctly handle the relationship between their interests and those of the collective and state. The Chinese people have a fine tradition of "willingness to bear hardships when the country is in peril; and last to enjoy comfort when the country prospers"—a tradition being promoted through human rights education.

Students are also helped to understand sovereignty vs. human rights. China's humiliations in the past century tell us that once a country is deprived of sovereignty, its people will have no right to speak. We are duty-bound to tell our youth that on no account must we allow attempts by anyone to undermine China's sovereignty, and that neither must we interfere in the affairs of other countries.

Ethics

In September 1997 a group of globally renowned politicians headed by Helmut Schmidt, former chancellor of Germany, drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities. Article 4 states: "All people, endowed with reason and conscience, must accept a responsibility to each and all, to families and communities, to races, nations, and religions in a spirit of solidarity: What you do not wish to be done to yourself, do not do to others."

Confucius taught: "What you do not wish to be done to yourself, do not do to others." Chinese classics have many other teachings related to human responsibilities. The *Book of Rites*, compiled by Confucius, for example, states that the "human race will be a commonwealth when the Great Way prevails." Another Confucian maxim that has been followed

throughout the millennium calls for "caring for your elders, caring for elders of others; caring for your own children, caring for others' children." The Chinese Communist Party has continued this tradition by calling upon its members to serve the people wholeheartedly. The 1997–1998 financial crisis pushed many Asian economies to the verge of collapse. The Chinese economy, too, was adversely affected. Yet, China's strong sense of responsibility to the world kept the Chinese currency stable instead of devaluing it at the expense of other countries. For that, China won the world's admiration. We cite examples like this to help our youth foster a sense of responsibility for the world.

Questions remain that merit study in our human rights education. For example, should students have the right to privacy with regard to their examination marks? Should comments from students and others about teachers be kept confidential? Ways to improve human rights education have been proposed. One, for example, calls for making human rights an independent discipline and compiling textbooks for human rights education. These are important, and we believe that human rights education will constantly improve by drawing on foreign experiences while taking into account China's reality.