

Learning while Teaching: Mainstreaming Human Rights in Basic Education

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Who dares to teach must never cease to learn

- John Cotton Dana

I am a teacher in Miriam College, a women's college in the Philippines.¹ I teach Philippine History at the International Studies Department. It has been almost two years since I got involved with the school's teacher-training program in gender-fair education. The program seeks to strengthen the school's core value of justice through the integration in curriculum design and teaching of a human rights framework - perspective on gender equality and social change. We work with teachers from the pre-school, basic, tertiary and graduate educational units through a school-wide body called the Gender Mainstreaming Committee. The Committee was launched by no less than the school President and benefited from the continued support of the school's special advocacy center on women's rights, the Women and Gender Institute (WAGI). Gender-fair education is, thus, an institutional effort of the school administration. This is not surprising for a school that is primarily educating girl-children and young women.

This essay relates the experiences and outlook of teachers of the Grade School and High School units who actively integrated the rights perspective into their teaching. As Committee Coordinator, I am constantly alert to the needs of teachers who had committed to the promotion of positive gender justice as a way of ridding the education system of pervasive gender bias and who were for the first time, exposed to the concepts and tenets of women's human rights. Since I am also new in this field I closely interact with the teachers as a source of valuable learning for my personal development as a rights-aware woman and teacher.

I interviewed fifteen (15) teachers: eight taught in the Grade School and seven in the High School. All were exposed to rights-based gender-fair education only in the last two years, a handful even less. They were all part of the first batch of teachers who underwent training in gender-fair education.

Except for one, all of the teachers were females. A majority of them taught Social Studies (11) while a handful taught Christian Living (4). Both subjects, which deal with the study of society/social life or the interaction of individuals with the social environment, provide immediate and suitable contexts for

mainstreaming human rights and gender equality into the school curriculum. In addition to these subjects, they also said that the topics were also being “mainstreamed” in the teaching of the following subjects: history, geography and those that dealt with social issues and value formation.

What rights-related concepts were mainstreamed? For the grade school teachers, these were: individual rights and dignity, equality, freedom, women’s rights, children’s rights, rights of marginalized sectors and citizen’s rights. On the other hand, high school teachers focused on the following: equality, justice, civil and political rights, freedom, discrimination, right to education and other special rights.

Regardless of whether one taught in the grade school or high school, teachers usually introduced concepts by way of formal definitions. Grade school teachers expressed anxiety about their ability to effectively simplify, illustrate or concretize the concepts in ways that facilitated understanding by the young. Most resorted to the use of familiar examples and less complex words in their elaboration of the definitions. Nevertheless they expressed uncertainty about their effectiveness in communicating the concepts to the students but accompanied this with hopefulness that the rights-informed teaching in the upper levels would be able to build upon the new learning they helped stimulate. High school teachers, on the other hand, exhibited more certainty about the effect of their teaching on student learning. They gave importance to checking for new information gained, claiming that they usually instructed student to memorize international and national laws on human rights.

The teaching of human rights was strongly linked to the development of individual humans as they were closely connected with others and in the context of their embedment in social relations. What the teachers promoted were the values and tenets of ethical individualism that is the foundation of human rights and not the practice of individualism which is

a different concept altogether. Hence the following values aimed at collective rights and justice were emphasized in the course of mainstreaming a rights perspective: respect for oneself and others, awareness of rights and duties, love of country and nationalism, social justice, and the defense of personal and social rights and freedoms.

Generally, the approach used was to discuss clusters of rights as separate topics. The choice of topics at this time remained quite arbitrary, depending on which set of rights the teacher was familiar with. A major challenge was how to systematically integrate the various clusters of rights and how to link these to the overall course learning. Many felt that what was needed was a monitoring procedure for integration as well as a feedback system that would enable them to check how students were living out the learned values.

To facilitate learning, the common classroom strategies used were the following: Situational Analysis, Problem Solving, Individual Reflection, Group Discussion and Film Viewing. Nevertheless, teachers articulated the need for more innovative teaching strategies. According to them, the students were easily attracted to the notion of human rights because they could relate to it in a personal way. “Human rights always touched their *pagka-tao* [personhood]”, one teacher said. However, sustaining the connection between the knower and the knowledge needs more boost through innovative and creative teaching strategies and activities. In aid of classroom learning, a number of specific needs were mentioned, as follows: teaching materials including reference books, facts and information, resource persons who could be invited to speak, and more discussion time to elaborate on topics.

Without doubt, teachers are a vital lifeline for the socialization of more egalitarian and rights-based values and principles. They deserve to be trained and ably assisted in the performance of their critical role of nurturing girls/young women (and men) who will lead lives

with a vision of a society that respects and promotes human rights, justice and gender equality. While professional training and the provision of resources in support of their professional responsibilities are important, my interaction with teachers as well as my own experience in mainstreaming human rights in teaching, had also made me realize that to become an effective human rights teacher, one would need to become a true advocate in the context of one's culture and society. Human rights educators need to be able to confront their own set of biases, understand why they persist, and endeavor to transform their mindset. We would need to consciously live-out this advocacy, asserting and defending human and women's rights, in the face of every-day acts of injustice, intolerance and discrimination.

In short, human rights education is not just teaching others but also learning to value one's being and those of others, a process of criti-

cally re-examining our own conception of what it is to be human and what rights are intrinsic to our humanity as women and as men. For my co-teachers, I say: let us continue to make human rights an exciting subject to teach alongside our serious effort to transform our sense of womanhood and our social life.

Endnotes

* The author heads the Gender Fair Education Program of Miriam College-Women and Gender Institute (MC-WAGI) in the Philippines. She wishes to thank the Miriam College faculty members who gave their time to respond to these questions and Ms. Gigi Francisco, MC-WAGI Executive Director, for her guidance and editorial support.

¹ Miriam College has female students at Grade School, High School and Tertiary Levels. Males are accepted at the Pre-school, Graduate Studies and Adult Education units.