

# Human Rights Education in New Zealand – The Challenge of Developing “New Zealand Schools as Human Rights Communities”

JANINE McGRUDDY

*No earlier Age had access to awareness of such comprehensive menace, or of such awesome chance.*

– Fernandez-Armesto, Millennium, 1999

## Why this Project and Why Now?

**W**orldwide efforts are being made to include Human Rights Education (HRE)/Citizenship education in their national curriculums. It is simply time for New Zealand to face up to its responsibilities to educate our young into the world in which they live.

A 2003 survey reports “83% of New Zealanders are “fairly” or “very interested in the issue of human rights” in New Zealand, but 21% of respondents have not heard of the ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’.”<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, as we can see from this survey, among the general population of New Zealanders there is limited knowledge and understanding of human rights. This is surprising when you consider the rather proud human rights history of New Zealand, being the first real democracy (that is the democracy that gave the vote to *all* adults), one of first welfare states, an early and vocal campaigner for universal human rights, the first in the Asia-Pacific to establish a human rights commission, its role as a major contributor to peacekeeping, election monitoring and its strong public commitment to human rights values.

During the 1940s New Zealand was a tireless campaigner for human dignity and rights to be better respected in the post-war world

order. The government of the day played a significant role in the campaign for what was to become the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) – “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of the Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.”

Despite frequent exhortations since the adoption of the UDHR in 1948 for United Nations Member States “to ensure that education is aimed at strengthening the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms (Vienna Declaration, 1993), there appears to be generally little or no *explicit* addressing of human rights in New Zealand schools.

Formal and informal costs of education create barriers at all levels. There are systemic disparities, including participation and achievement rates for those from poor communities, particular groups of boys, Maori and Pacific peoples, and disabled people. There is discrimination, bullying, and harassment particularly around race, disability, sexual orientation and gender. In 2003, over 50,000 children reported being bullied to the What's Up phone counselling service.

– *Human Rights in  
New Zealand Today, 2004*

In a multi faith and multi ethnic society such as New Zealand, it is necessary to have a perspective on values that transcends past, national and ethnic traditions. As teachers we are likely to find the task of teaching easier to manage if we have agreed principles on which to base our judgments and decisions. Whatever our personal religious beliefs or our background, it should be possible for us to find common ground, on questions of values, with the vast majority of our students and their families, if we refer to transcendent values – such as those voiced by representatives of international organizations and the world community. These transcendent values are expressed in declarations and conventions on human rights.

Studies done overseas conclude that a commitment to rights and democracy among the young cannot be assumed; each generation needs to be educated into human rights and democracy (Osler & Starkey, 1996). Whether or not schools have planned for human rights education they are actively engaged in it. They legitimate particular knowledge and constructions of knowledge.

To the extent that “human rights” is “taught” in New Zealand it is usually covered in the Social Studies Curriculum, but usually as a “topic” rather than the full potential explored under the Social Organization, Culture and Heritage; Time, Continuity, and Change curriculum strands. Human rights are not ad-

dressed explicitly in other areas of the formal curriculum.

New Zealand schools are faced with a plethora of programs aimed at enhancing human dignity and rights such as Cool Schools (anti-bullying) and the Virtues Project (values education), but these rarely make an explicit link to “human rights.”

The spirit of the UDHR is clearly at odds with this piecemeal and haphazard approach in schools to human rights education. As UNESCO committee said of the UDHR in the 1940's: “every paragraph is a call to action, every line a condemnation of apathy, every sentence a repudiation of some moment of our individual or national history.”

New Zealanders need to see the intrinsic value of educating our young to understand their rights, responsibilities and roles in society as an important step towards future proofing its people:

In strategic terms, New Zealand should make it an absolute priority to enhance by education in its most complete sense the qualitative transition of all levels of culture in all dimensions, especially on the part of those who, as this study shows, are the most likely to be limited to out-moded worldviews and consequently inadequate repertoires for modern life. (Alan Webster, 2001, p. 228).

Education is a human right; schools are a means of keeping children safe (or should be). They teach children the knowledge, values, skills and behavior that will give them an adequate standard of living and help them contribute to the community. Unfortunately at this point in time

New Zealand does not have a fully recognised and agreed framework of human rights or for delivering human rights education, and there is no nationally co-ordinated or strategic approach. Rather, education is often initiated on an ad-hoc basis in response

to perceived problems, and tends to have a narrow focus.<sup>2</sup>

### **How will the Project Change This?**

This issue can be addressed by developing a nation-wide strategic approach to HRE/Citizenship education in collaboration with government and non-governmental agencies and organizations. Relationships developed so far include an enviable mix of non-governmental organization (NGO), teacher union and governmental bodies including: Amnesty International – New Zealand, the Human Rights Commission, Dev-Zone, Office for the Commissioner for Children, New Zealand Peace Foundation, New Zealand Educational Institute, Educational Review Office, and the Wellington Community Law Centre, with more organizations being involved weekly.

Being well aware of the over worked and under valued status of teachers, the process will strive to be as participatory as possible, with integration of resources, rather than duplication, being a key element.

Tools to be developed though pilots will include a ‘starter’ kit for schools prepared in a collaborative way by students, teachers, boards of trustees, principals, and HRE/Citizenship educators with specialist knowledge and experience in resource development.

A network of skilled educators will be developed to share knowledge and resources and to develop a framework to assess best practice and outcomes.

The formal project structure is as follows:

- Trust board
  - Project governance and decision-making on the project framework
- Project partners
  - Organizations committed to working with other Project Partners to develop and implement the project across New Zealand, contributing expertise, public support and/or other resources
- Project supporters

- Agencies working in association with the project

Informally, we aim to work at the grassroots level, with students, teachers, unions, School Board of Trustees (New Zealand’s school governance system) in order to create a framework that reflects the needs of a diverse range of New Zealanders.

The project is seeking funding from a range of sources, public and private trusts and governmental bodies, as with any NGO project, adequate funding is essential to the success of the project.

### **What do We See as the Desired Outcome of the Project?**

As the project has only just got underway these are just suggestions for the types of outcomes that are possible. Ultimately it would be great to see HRE/Citizenship education becoming a major thread running through the school curriculum, reflected in knowledge, understanding, skills, values and attitudes and encompassing both local and global perspectives. This formal education needs to be reflected in the culture of the school and the policies and practices of the school administration.

The goal is develop a strong and well thought out framework for facilitating the development of *all* New Zealand schools as “human rights communities” – communities that encourage diverse approaches (appropriate to their particular culture) with a common theme – human dignity, rights and responsibilities.

New Zealanders have aspirations for a fair and just society for New Zealand youth and society; we see this project as being one way to meet New Zealanders’ aspirations for that fair and just society, while at the same time fulfilling the existing principles of the New Zealand Curriculum Framework.

The school curriculum, through its practices and procedures, will reinforce the com-

monly held values of individual and collective responsibility, which underpin New Zealand's democratic society. These values include honesty, reliability, respect for others, respect for the law, tolerance (*rangimarie*), fairness, caring or compassion (*aroha*), non-sexism, and non-racism.

– *New Zealand Curriculum Framework Principles*

If successful, the project has the ability to create coherence in a crowded formal/informal curriculum, providing teachers and students with clear links between the theory of human rights and the practice.

To qualify as a human rights community a school might...

- Ensure staff and students are knowledgeable about “human rights”
- Explore human aspirations
- Know about the history of the evolution of “human rights,” and New Zealand's role
- Know about current local, regional and global human rights issues
- Explore the multidimensionality of human rights
- Provide an environment in which students and staff explore and commit to human rights values in practice.

What “New Zealand Schools as Human Rights Communities” (NZSAHRC) would like to see come out of the this project is a “re-firing” of the human imagination, a fresh commitment to the principles that raise the human condition and provide all students with a platform for empowerment and civic aware-

ness, whether by becoming more active in their school community, local community, national or global community.

As Hegel argued, the only ethical human condition is the mutual, shared, respectful, civic recognition of human interdependence. Or, put another way, “Schools as Human Rights Communities.”

## References

- Brown, L. et al. 1999. *State of the world 1999: Millennium edition*. New York: Norton.
- Goldstein, Richard. “*The Role of Education in Developing a Culture of Human Rights*” SAPIENTA AND DOCTRINA LECTURE, Global Human Rights Education listserv. Archives of the list can be found at: <http://www.hrea.org/lists/hr-education/markup/maillist.php>
- Osler, Audrey and Starkey, Hugh. 1996. *Teacher Education and Human Rights*, London: David Fulton Publishers.
- New Zealand Human Rights Commission. 2004. *Human Rights in New Zealand Today Nga Tika Tangata O te Motu – New Zealand Action Plan for Human Rights*. Auckland: Human Rights Commission.
- Webster, Alan. 2001. *Spiral of Values: The flow from survival values to global consciousness in New Zealand*. Hawera: Alpha Publications.

## Endnotes

1. *Human Rights in New Zealand Today*, 2004 (Auckland: Human Rights Commission), p. 376; UMR Research.2003.*Human Rights Survey: A Quantitative Study* (Auckland: Human Rights Commission).
2. Ibid.