

# The Work of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand on Human Rights Education in Thai Schools

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The National Human Rights Commission of Thailand was established in 2001 under the 1997 Constitution with a broad mandate to promote and protect human rights guaranteed by the Constitution, domestic legislation and international human rights treaties to which Thailand is a party. The National Human Rights Commission started its work in July 2001 under the National Human Rights Act of 1999. One of its mandates according to Section 15 of the Act is “to promote education, researches and the dissemination of knowledge on human rights.” In its six-year Strategic Plan for 2002-2007, the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand emphasized, among others, the campaign for human rights education and the establishment of a social learning process as a means to raise awareness and conscience of human dignity. It is evident that since the beginning the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand has placed importance to human rights education that has become one of the five focus areas (Children, youth and family; Law and justice system; Social Policy; Natural resource base and the community rights; and Human Rights Education) in the Commission’s Strategic Plan.<sup>1</sup>

Human rights education activities have been carried out since 2002 by two Sub-commissions appointed by the Commission:

- Sub-commission on Education and Development which focuses mainly on the rights to education and the life-long learning process, and
- Sub-commission on Human Rights Education which focuses on integration of human rights learning / teaching into education

system, schools, teachers education and professional activities.

## **The Sub-commission on Human rights Education**

From the outset, the Sub-commission on Human Rights Education examined the National Education Act of 1999 as well as the basic

education curriculum of 2001 with a view to integrating human rights into the curriculum and the learning process. Chapter 1 of the National Education Act states that

Education shall aim at the full development of the Thai people in all aspects: physical and mental health; intellect; knowledge; morality; integrity; and desirable way of life so as to be able to **live in harmony with other people**” and that “the learning process shall aim at inculcating sound awareness of politics and democratic system of government under a constitutional monarchy; **ability to protect and promote their rights, responsibilities, freedom, respect for the rule of law, equality and human dignity**; pride in Thai identity; ability to protect public and national interests; promotion of religion, art, national culture, sports, local wisdom, Thai wisdom and universal knowledge; inculcating ability to preserve natural resources and the environment; ability to earn a living; self-reliance; creativity; and acquiring thirst for knowledge and capacity of self-learning on a continuous basis. (emphasis mine)

Chapter 2 of the National Education Act focuses on Educational Rights and Opportunities:

In the provision of education, all individuals shall have equal rights and opportunities to receive basic education provided by the State for the duration of at least 12 years. Such education, provided on nationwide basis, shall be of quality and free of charge. Persons with physical, mental, intellectual, emotional, social, communication, and learning deficiencies; those with physical disabilities; or the cripples; or those unable to support themselves; or those destitute or disadvantaged; shall have the rights and opportunities to receive basic education specially provided.

The Sub-commission on Human Rights Education found that the basic education curriculum had been formulated to ensure consistency with the National Education Act. Its objectives are the following:

1. Possessing good moral, ethical and desirable values; being able to work and live peacefully in the Thai society and in the global society
2. Being healthy, exhibit good personality, appreciating beauty
3. Possessing thinking and problem solving ability, leadership characteristic, and good vision
4. Mastering necessary knowledge and skills, being eager to learn throughout one’s life
5. Being proud of the Thai identity, and being good citizens in a democratic system with the Monarch as the Supreme Head of State
6. Being ready to co-operate creatively in developing one’s society and in serving the environment, being able to compete fairly in the global society.

The Sub-commission on Human Rights Education also found that a new dimension of values education had emerged. Both National Education Act and the new basic education curriculum have called for the development of individuals who **are able to live happily with others, who protect and promote human dignity and rights** and who protect and preserve natural resources and the environment. It is also evident that the new Act and the new basic education curriculum provide for the possibility of fostering such core values as peace, happiness, harmony, tolerance, human rights, international understanding as implied on the concept of living together in peace and harmony, and in particular, the concept of human rights education declared by the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) and insisted by the First Phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005-2009).

According to the National Education Act, basic education means education provided for twelve years after early childhood education and before higher education. These twelve years are divided into six years of primary level and an-

other six years of secondary level. The development of the basic education curriculum is based on the thinking that the provision of education is meant to develop human beings to serve the society and to keep up with social changes. Learners are trained in self-development, career development and social development.

Learning contents at the basic education (both primary and secondary levels) are divided into eight groups of subjects namely,

1. Thai language
2. Mathematics
3. Sciences
4. Social Studies, Religion and Culture
5. Health and Physical Education
6. Art
7. Career Education and Technology
8. Foreign Languages.

Values education had been introduced as an integral part of the basic education curriculum even though the curriculum objectives and principles do not clearly specify promotion of values education as such. Ethical and moral values as well as those related to peace and harmony are stressed and embedded in the teaching/learning of the above mentioned subject groups. They are particularly evident in social studies groups.

After considering ways and means to integrate human rights into the school curriculum, the Sub-commission on Human Rights Education decided that human rights as core value, as well as its related values such as equality, freedom and justice, could be transmitted in schools and classroom through:

1. The teaching / learning of subjects designed to deal with core moral and ethical contents
2. The teaching / learning of subject groups such as Social Studies, Languages' Science, etc.
3. Extra-curricular activities held by the schools.

An active child-centered approach would serve to enhance the teaching/learning of hu-

man rights and their related values. The teacher could serve as facilitator of learning process in the classroom where such values are being conveyed.

Convinced that teachers could play an important role in transmitting human rights value in the classroom, the Sub-commission on Human Rights decided to focus its work on teacher training and developing instructional materials for teachers.

### Teacher Training

In Thailand, teacher training / education is offered in the thirty-six Rajabhat Universities under the Ministry of Education, as well as in the Department of Education in most public universities. The Sub-commission on Human Rights Education decided then to approach the Rajabhat Universities. Together, they organized workshops to review the existing curriculum with the view to integrating human rights value into the curriculum. They also organized training to improve knowledge, skills and understanding of the human rights concept and value.

In spite of clear intentions of incorporating human rights education into Rajabhat Universities, certain problems have been identified. There were not enough people with experience in the field of human rights to assist all the thirty-six Rajabhat Universities. A one-week training course is certainly not adequate to produce a trainer or facilitator in human rights. There is indeed a need for ongoing training to be organized by the universities themselves. Another problem identified is the lack of instructional materials for both teachers and students. The Sub-commission on Human Rights Education has, nevertheless, continued to work with the Rajabhat Universities in the promotion of human rights education.

At the same time, the Sub-commission on Human Rights Education started to review the existing curriculum models, modules or mate-

rials used in promoting human rights value at all levels of education; formal, non-formal, as well as informal. The result of which encouraged the Sub-commission on Human Rights Education to organize training workshops for school directors/principals, teachers, administrators both in formal and non-formal education systems. Within four years, from 2004 to 2007, more than one thousand six hundred personnel from primary and secondary schools, technical and vocational schools as well as non-formal education personnel were invited to participate in some fifty training workshops on human rights organized by the Sub-commission on Human Rights Education in fifty provinces in every region of the country, namely North, North-east, East, South and Central parts of Thailand, including the conflicted areas in the three southern provinces.

It should be mentioned here that along side the training workshops organized by the Sub-commission on Human Rights Education, there exist similar training courses organized by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, Thailand (mostly for teachers from private schools); and by Amnesty International, Thailand (for teacher, non-formal education personnel and community leaders). Certain teachers who are interested in learning about and understanding human rights are willing to participate in the three training workshops/courses organized by the three different organizations. Reports show that from 1999 to 2008 the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace has organized training courses for two thousand eleven teachers from seventy schools. While Amnesty International covers eighty teachers and non-formal education personnel from fifty schools and non-formal education centers.

Would the trained personnel and teachers go back to their respective schools and classrooms and help the children to learn about their rights (the Rights of the Child being in the primary school curriculum)? Would they raise student awareness of some international instruments designed to ensure protection and realization

of human rights? Would they deepen student understanding about the values required to achieve respect for human dignity and rights, and integrate these values into their learning, their daily actions and behaviors? These are questions that need to be considered and followed up.

Follow up activities have been carried out and the reports of which are positive. A number of schools particularly in the North and North-eastern parts of the country have formed a network of schools for human rights education with the aim of assisting each other to integrate human rights value into the learning process and school activities. Some schools in Bangkok have organized regular meetings for their students to exchange their understanding about the rights of the child.

### **Student Camp**

Convinced that teachers are well aware of human rights concept and value, and are prepared to assist their students, the Sub-commission on Human Rights Education decided to launch student camps for human rights protection volunteers. The first one was organized in Surin, a province in North-east where students from fourteen schools in the region participated actively. The student camp was a success and a network was created to promote human rights learning and protection among students from various schools within the region. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and the Amnesty International-Thailand organized more student camps, in addition to those organized by the Sub-commission on Human Rights. It should be noted here that both the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and Amnesty International-Thailand have been asked by the Commission to collaborate with its Sub-commission on Human Rights Education.

It is evident that a successful student camp depends on the commitment of the teachers both during and after the camp, in particular

their willingness and sustained effort to continue the learning process and undertake follow-up activities.

### **Teaching / Learning Materials and Resources**

All education personnel (teachers, school directors, school managers, teacher educators) need to have adequate teaching materials and resources at their disposal. However, as mentioned above, there was a lack of materials and resources on human rights in Thai language intended for use by teachers at primary and secondary school levels. In this connection, it is necessary to produce teaching/learning materials, resources, including education technologies and modern communication tools to be used by all education personnel engaged in human rights education. The Sub-commission on Human Rights Education has, since the beginning, endeavored to produce, reproduce and translate various teaching/learning materials, among which is the translation and publication of “Human Rights Lesson Plans for Southeast Asian Schools” prepared and published by Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center. This publication, in Thai version, has been distributed vastly among school teachers and education personnel throughout the country. It has, in fact, guided them to approach human rights and assisted them to prepare their own lesson plans. In each training workshop or training course, three to four hours are allocated for the preparation of lesson plans and most of the teachers find this activity very useful. At the moment there are more than a hundred lesson plans prepared by teachers during the training courses, which cover learning contents of all the eight groups of subjects in the primary and secondary school levels. However, there is much more to be done and the Sub-commission on Human Rights Education should seek more cooperation with United Nations agencies as well as human rights non-governmental organizations.

### **Conclusion**

The National Human Rights Commission, through its Sub-commission on Human Rights Education, has achieved its aim of promoting human rights education in primary and secondary school systems through education and professional development of teachers and other personnel, providing them with the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies to facilitate the learning and practice of human rights in schools and classrooms. Through its initiatives and endeavor, the Sub-commission on Human Rights Education had also been able to support networking and cooperation among local schools and students. However, there is still much to be done, in order to reach every school. The Ministry of Education, which has the main responsibility for primary and secondary school systems at national level, should be main leader and actor. But it seems that human rights education is not yet its priority.

### **Endnote**

<sup>1</sup> See full text of the Strategic Plan in the website of the Commission: [www.nhrc.or.th/menu\\_content.php?doc\\_id=173](http://www.nhrc.or.th/menu_content.php?doc_id=173)