International Human Rights Education (IHRE) in the Context of Canada

By: Sedi Minachi

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Introduction: Historical Background

Human rights are rights to which everyone is entitled regardless of gender, sex, race, religion, ethnicity and political opinion. International Human Rights Education (IHRE) is an education that not only promotes inclusivity, tolerance and respect for international human rights principles locally and nationally, it also promotes a deeper understanding of the culture of international human rights values and principles internationally while encouraging people to become agents of change in the global community.

The history of IHRE dates back to the establishment of the United Nations (UN) followed by the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) on December 10, 1948. While the UDHR lists thirty rights to which all people worldwide are entitled, it recognizes in particular four fundamental rights: the right to shelter, the right to clean water, the right to health care and the right to education. Although UNESCO’s Associated Schools Program addressed IHRE for the first time in 1953, the initial formal request for the need to educate school children and youth about human rights was approved in 1974 in an article known as “Recommendation Concerning Education for International Understanding, Cooperation, Peace, Human Rights Education and Fundamental Freedoms.” Following this recommendation, the International Congress

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on the Teaching of Humans Rights formed and participants met in 1978 to frame the formal curricula for the application of the IHRE.

IHRE became an official concern of the UN in 1995, when the UN approved the *Decade for Human Rights Education* (DHRE) and the aims of IHRE were reformed once again.

In 2005 the *World Programme for Human Rights Education* (WPHRE) was formed, to advance the implementation of IHRE within all sectors of civil society. The WPHRE is structured in two phases: “The first phase (2005-2009) focused on human rights education in the primary and secondary school systems. The second phase (2010-2014) focuses on human rights education for higher education and on human rights training programmes for teachers and educators, civil servants, law enforcement officials and military personnel.”¹

To implement the second phase of WPHRE, the *United Nations General Assembly* took a further step in December 2011 and adopted a new declaration known as the *Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training* (Declaration on HRET) which articulates everyone’s right to know her or his internationally protected human rights. According to a report by Lawyers’ Right Watch Canada (2012), “This Declaration is also a benchmark in the UN World Programme on Human Rights Education (WPHRE) created in 2004 by the General Assembly to implement human rights education and

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training (HRET), promote understanding of human rights education and principles, and set goals for the development and delivery of HRET by states (p. iii).”

It is important to note that the *UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights* has played an important role in the development of human rights law in Canada. It in fact led to the enactment of the Canadian Bill of Rights in 1960, and the adaptation of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in 1982 (Schabas, 1998). Since then, the Canadian education system has been increasingly promoting human rights in social science and civic education courses (Bromley, 2011). However, as reported in the document produced by Lawyer’s Rights Watch Canada (2012), there is no evidence to show that HRET and WPHRE implementation is supported in British Columbia (BC) or other Canadian provinces. Regarding the importance of the implementation of HRET and WPHRE in Canada, the report states:

The Declaration on HRET marks a focal point in the emerging global consensus that implementation of international human rights depends on universal education and training about rights articulated by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and protected by international human rights treaties. The Declaration on HRET emphasizes that obligations to adhere to and enforce international human rights law apply to governmental authorities in all parts of the State, including provinces in federal states such as Canada. This means that BC has international legal obligations to implement and enforce all human rights treaties ratified by Canada within its spheres of constitutional responsibility. (p. iii)

As explained in the report, while existing Canadian human rights education programs include all rights and activities aimed at promoting respect for others, inclusivity and civic responsibilities, there are no programs in the BC school system intended to increase public knowledge of international human rights treaties except some limited information on the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. 
Theoretical Review

In this era of globalization and transnational movement of people, implementing IHRE at schools and every other public institution in Canada and other countries around the world is needed more than ever. In the context of Canada, as emphasized in the Lawyers’ Rights Watch Canada (2012) report, IHRE not only provide a framework for the Canadian state to develop and implement action plans to foster knowledge, skills and attitudes consistent with internationally recognized human rights principles, it also can provide preventable instruments in terms of restricting the neglect and abuse of power by government authorities and individual stakeholders.

In advanced industrialized countries where the empowerment of individuals is encouraged, societies demand their citizens be able to actively participate in their complex and increasingly globalized societies rather than being passive subjects (Osler & Starkey, 1996). Human rights scholars Audrey Osler and Hugh Starkey believe that as an instrument of change, IHRE contributes to progressive social evolution by working to create proactive individuals who think critically and make decisions for themselves (1996). In this context, children and youth are empowered to think critically, rely on reason rather than emotion, and ask questions that will help them analyze factors affecting their lives.

Children and youth strongly affected by political and social conflict require special attention in their school programs. One of the ways these children and youth can overcome the impact of conflict and crisis in their lives is to learn about their human
rights according to international law. In this context, IHRE can be integrated into literacy programs through which they are able to develop an understanding of fundamental human rights and also be given opportunities to discuss their difficult personal experiences of violence, abuse, loss and grief. According to scholars (Walker, 1989; Osler, 1996 and Ray, 1994), marginalized children and youth participating in literacy programs learn to develop skills to deal with conflict in addition to acquiring knowledge about their international rights and responsibilities as active citizens.

Jagannath Mohanty (2003), an advocate of human rights education in India, believes that IHRE not only includes the teaching of peace, democracy and social justice, it also includes teaching students non-violent skills that are based on tolerance, dialogue and cooperation.

He emphasizes the power of IHRE in teaching democratic values to students and argues that without the emancipation of individuals from inequality, tyranny and oppression, democracy is not possible in any society (2003). Mohanty suggests that education plays a special role in building a democratic society and that IHRE contributes to the development of engaged citizens as active members of their societies.

Two leading authors in the field of IHRE, George Andreopoulos and Richard Claude (1997), argue that IHRE offers hope for the future of children and for the destiny of humanity as a whole. In validating the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they argue that IHRE is needed to protect people from harm. For this reason, Andreopoulos and Claude pose that the implementation of IHRE is an international obligation and everyone who believes in freedom and democracy must promote respect for human rights for all of humanity.
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) emphasizes that all individuals must have access to education. While it has been proven that applied IHRE can be an important factor in protecting children and youth against exploitation, hazardous conditions and armed conflict (Women’s Commission, 2004), providing IHRE to displaced children and youth from conflict and post-conflict regions of the world is critical. This is because it provides them with the opportunity to learn about their rights as human beings, and provides them with skills to analyze issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, while promoting inclusivity, peace, security and social justice values in their communities (Andreopoulos & Claude, 1997).

The common theme in almost every article reviewed for this section is that IHRE is an education that aims to promote a culture of international human rights. In the context of schools, the task of IHRE is to empower both the students and the educators to adopt dialogue and cooperation to actively eliminate all forms of discrimination and division based on religion, ethnic background, gender, race and class. Therefore, IHRE not only provides educators with the ability to reasonably intervene by raising awareness about values conducive to an inclusive environment and democratic society in accordance with the UN Declaration of Human Rights, it is also regarded as a resource providing safety and security to individuals against exploitation, violence, neglect and abuse.

The availability of IHRE in Canada
Canada places a significant emphasis on the delivery of IHRE in its education system. In fact, as mentioned, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, also known as International human rights (IHR), is the central theme of the Canadian constitution and the, *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. As a result all Canadian educational institutions, ministries and departments and agencies have policies designed to promote inclusivity, tolerance, respect for human rights and respect for the recognition of cultural diversity among students and the general public (Bromley, 2011). Public school systems in British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland-Labrador, Ontario, Quebec and Saskatchewan, are committed to delivering lesson plans designed to teach human rights and to provide learning environments that are inclusive and respectful of diversity.

In response to the request of the Director-General of UNESCO in 1995 for information on steps taken by member states to apply the *UN Declaration and the Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace and Human Rights*, the Canadian Council of Ministers of Education prepared a report in 2001. In its concluding remarks, this report states that the principles of the *Declaration and the Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace and Human Rights* have been well received and widely applied in Canada, and that many educators already had considerable experience working with these principles prior to 1995. Meyer, Bromley and Ramirez (2010) who examined 465 social science textbooks from 69 countries, found that IHRE is the central component of civic education in BC and that there has been an increase in human rights discourse in social science courses in this province since 1970, however, as argued by Bromley
(2011), there are no indications whether students demonstrate respect for human rights and cultural diversity outside the school setting.

In describing the general policies in place for the implementation of the *UN Declaration and the Integrated Framework of Action on Education*, the Council of Education Ministers’ report writes:

> Within their policies, institutions are committed to the principle that all people, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race, colour, religion or disability have a right to equal opportunity in education and employment. Institutions are also committed to identifying and removing any discriminatory barriers, which prevent access to equal opportunity in education and employment. (2001, p. 68)

Regarding the promotion of principles of IHRE as applied to Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia the same report concludes:

> B.C. has also taken steps to improve the knowledge of all students in provincial schools about Aboriginal peoples. A key resource is *Shared Learnings: Integrating B.C.Aboriginal Content K–10*, a set of guides for teachers to integrate Aboriginal topics into all subject areas at an introductory level. The aim is to assist educators in creating a greater sensitivity to and respect for the richness and diversity of the Aboriginal peoples of British Columbia. In recognition of the many cultural and experiential differences that exist among B.C. Aboriginal peoples, the “shared learnings” are intended to highlight issues, concerns, and realities that are common to most or all. Specifically, the “shared learnings” are statements of knowledge about B.C. Aboriginal peoples' cultures, values, beliefs, traditions, history, and languages, … (p. 104).

Similar initiatives have been taken in all other Canadian provinces to increase public knowledge about Aboriginal peoples' history and cultures.

IHRE plays a pivotal role in refugee and new immigrants’ lives in Canada and is often within ESL courses to increase understanding, respect and tolerance between the refugee and new immigrant communities (Bromley, 2011). Within this context ESL
teachers also introduce newcomers to Canada the perceptions of human rights within cultural diversity, civic activities and democratic functioning of the country. It is important for Canadian schools to integrate IHRE into ESL courses, because it enables students - particularly those affected by war and conflict in their home countries - to acquire knowledge, a positive attitude, tolerance, understanding and non violent skills, assisting them in making a smooth transition to their new life in Canada.

To assess the availability of IHRE in BC, Lawyers’ Rights Watch Canada conducted a research and asked schools, educational institutions, human rights organizations, civil servants, law enforcement officials, military personnel, judges and lawyers about their IHRE and HRET training and education. They also asked them about their knowledge of international human rights laws and treaties with respect to phase I and II of the World Programme for Human Rights Education (WPHRE).

In its findings their report states that the availability of IHRE and IHRET in BC includes programs designed to foster a “culture of human rights” by preventing bullying and promoting respect and recognition of diversity but “there were no BC programs referred to in the evaluation report…that focused on imparting knowledge of and skills to use local, national, regional and international human rights instruments and mechanisms for the protection of human rights pursuant to the Plan of Action for WPHRE Phase I (p. 62).” The report concludes that in terms of BC promoting or providing access to IHRET, the province “… has a long way to go before it could become an example to the rest of Canada or to the world (p. 91).”
Another important document produced by human rights researcher, Melanie Young (2006) for Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Law Education and Society examined the curricular connections of IHRE within BC K-12 schools. In reporting her findings Young states that the topic of human rights is addressed formally and informally from K-12 in social studies, health and environmental education. However she finds that the main topics of human rights related courses in BC schools include culture, multiculturalism, social responsibility, indigenous peoples’ rights, environmental and economic rights, security and conflict.

**Implications of IHRE for schools and for teacher education programs in Canada**

Equal access to education is a basic human right to which everyone is entitled, and schools are supposed to be places where individuals learn about respect for their rights and also learn about national and international human rights. As part of its commitment to the *UN Declaration of Human Rights*, Canada has taken tremendous efforts to integrate IHRE into Canadian educational institutions and has made progress in producing policies and providing equal access to educational opportunities to all students including those from marginalized backgrounds. For example, as reported by Michael Mendelson (2006), Aboriginal peoples have higher rates of high school graduation compared to two or three decades ago, particularly in Western and Northern Canada.

Another important implication of IHRE for schools and teacher education programs is that through IHRE, students from diverse backgrounds are empowered to actively participate in decisions affecting their lives and also are motivated to build an

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2 The same report states that the rate of success in postsecondary education for Aboriginal peoples is still low.
inclusive and democratic society within which everyone is treated with respect and fairness in accordance with their internationally protected rights.

Finally, through the implementation of IHRE at schools and teacher education programs, participants develop an understanding of difficult issues facing people in developing countries such as poverty, lack of access to basic necessities (the right to shelter, clean water, education, etc.), refugees, environmental protection and abuse of power by state authorities. This sort of knowledge enables them to work with the world community in eradicating the barriers to universal human rights. It is therefore crucial for Canadian schools and teacher education programs to integrate IHRE into their curricula because it prepares learners to become active and successful members of their local, national and international communities.

**Conclusion:**

Canada can play an important role in furthering human rights and democratic values. Canadian educational institutions have taken some steps forward in incorporating human rights principles in social science related courses with a particular interest in fostering inclusivity and respect for diversity. In Canada there is evidence that at least there are good intentions with respect to core democratic values such as freedom, justice and equality. It is clear however that much remains to be done and that the application of IHRE in Canada is fairly narrow in scope. The 2011 UN Declaration of IHRET presents Canadian policy makers and educators an opportunity to make good on the good intentions and promote a broader, more global, understanding of international human rights standards and their relevance internationally and domestically.
Work Cited


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