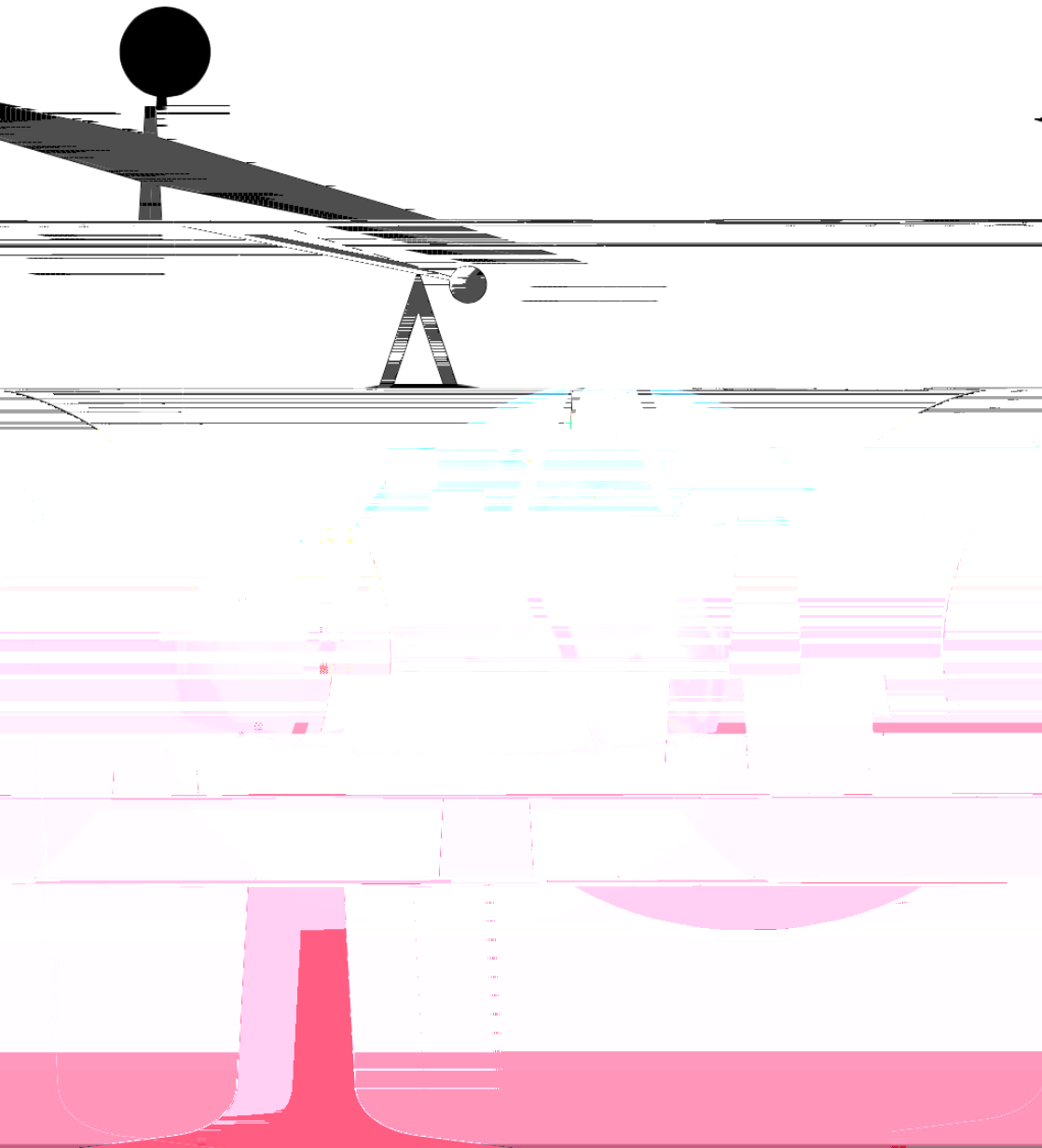


# A New Vision for Human Rights Education in Quebec High Schools



International Human Rights Internship Working Paper Series



## **About the Working Paper Series**

The Center for Human Rights and Legal Pluralism (CHRLP) Working Paper Series enables the dissemination of papers by students who have participated in the CHRLP's



## Part I. Introduction

Human rights education (“HRE”) is broadly defined as “a participatory process of empowering individuals and communities by raising awareness, changing attitudes and inspiring actions aligned with human rights principles”.<sup>1</sup> It does not only involve teaching people what human rights are but also aims at developing “an understanding of our common responsibility to make human rights a reality”.<sup>2</sup> In order to create a “culture of human rights” and a society engaged with human rights, “direct education of human rights is inevitably necessary”.<sup>3</sup>

During my internship at Equitas at the *International Human Rights Training Program* this summer, I met 77 participants from over 48 different countries who were exploring how human rights education should be taught in order to effect social change. This made me wonder about the place of human rights education in Canada and what, as a country who is viewed internationally as a place where people’s human rights are protected, we actually teach our younger generations about human rights. Do we simply tell them these rights exist or do we also invite them to engage critically with human rights issues and become social justice citizens<sup>4</sup> who play an active role in protecting human rights?

According to a 2013 survey conducted by the Canadian Teachers Association, 52% of Canadian teachers said that human rights education occurred in the schools either through curriculum or extra-curricular activities.<sup>56</sup> The survey found that at the high school level human rights education was most frequently found to be a component in Social Science and Humanities courses.<sup>7</sup> While 90% of teachers agree that there is value to human rights education<sup>8</sup>, only 36%

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will see why adopting a participatory approach to human rights education program based on a transformative model of human rights education within a subject-centered class is the most likely to form social justice citizens.

Finally, the paper will examine the public education system in Quebec and outline my proposal. The purpose is to show how my approach might address some of the problems and gaps identified in the existing system. While there are issues of feasibility and implementation that might hinder my subject-centered participatory approach, I think we are at a time when we need to talk about human rights education. If we, as a society, are truly committed to universal human rights then we need to shape our public school system in order to teach students to be engaged, critical and passionate citizens.

## **A. Why high school?**

Before addressing the key components of the paper, it is important to take a moment to explain why I have chosen high school rather than elementary school or university education. Adolescence is the most complex moment a person's development.<sup>13</sup> While children start understanding that there are human differences and similarities from a young age<sup>14</sup> and early childhood is about socialization and about living harmoniously in a community<sup>15</sup>, it is during this period that "young people can change the mental pictures which they have of the world beyond the school gates, and can thus derive a sense of their own responsibilities and resourcefulness".<sup>16</sup> While there might be "limits to what they can objectiv ch ch

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compulsory till a certain age in Canada. These two reasons are is why I have chosen to focus on human rights education at the high school level.

***i. A universal culture of human rights***

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was drafted shortly after the formation of the United Nations (“UN”) in the wake of the World War II. While its liberal and western ideals “did not



own political status and to pursue their own path to economic, social and cultural development".<sup>26</sup> Strong women's movements through political pressure virtually compelled the UN to adopt a *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, which came into force in 1981.<sup>27</sup> In more recent times, global migration has resulted in increasing questions about citizen rights and the rights of

***ii. The educational component of a commitment to human rights***

The Preamble of the UDHR emphasizes the promotion of human rights education “as a common standard of achievement for all peoples”



culture of human rights education is key.<sup>45</sup> It reveals why we should promote mandatory human rights education since “education can be part of the solution to injustice and violence”.<sup>46</sup>

## **B. The Canadian human rights landscape**

Canada has had a long history of involvement in the human rights movement and participated in the drafting of the UDHR. This section will study the implications of the entrenchment of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (“*Charter*”) and the adoption of a

human rights in Canada. Like the UDHR, it set out to govern the relationship between citizens and the state.<sup>50</sup> Unlike the UDHR, it was binding and enforceable.

The entrenchment of the *Charter* had a significant impact on the public education system.<sup>51</sup> Until this point, provinces had had exclusive jurisdiction to “make laws in relation to Education”<sup>52</sup> pursuant to s.93 of the *Constitutional Act, 1867*. The arrival of the *Charter* challenged this supremacy by ensuring that “laws affecting education and the policies and practices of school officials must abide by the rights and freedoms enunciated in the *Charter*”.<sup>53</sup> Over time, not only was the running of the school impacted but so too was the content of classes as the diversity of cultures and beliefs represented in the classroom were now protected.

The entrenchment of the *Charter* helped solidified the policy of multiculturalism that had been announced in the Canadian House of Commons back in 1971.

initiatives were simply a recognition of culture in terms of food, music and costumes”<sup>59</sup> and did not address true issues of diversity and racism. This tension between the rights of dominant the white majority and minority rights resulted in curriculum reform in the different provinces that brought anti-racist education into schools and slowly integrated diversity more critically into education about Canadian citizenship identity.<sup>60</sup>

As Canada adopted a policy of the reciprocal recognition of diversity human rights started appearing in different provincial curriculum.<sup>61</sup> The most common place for human rights to appear was in citizenship education. While citizenship education has historically been one of the main obligations of public schooling<sup>62</sup> different understanding of the nature of “good citizenship” have resulted in d







class lectures or readings.<sup>72</sup> While this approach is the most common in educational institutions at all level in North America, it has been challenged on the grounds that it is essentialist, focused on “abstract content [and solely emphasized] mental achievement”.<sup>73</sup> It is often compared with student or learner centered education.<sup>74</sup>

Student-centered approaches to education are founded in constructivist learning theory, which “assumes that meaning exists within us rather than in external forms and as such, learners

in their learning rather than passively absorbing it but the class is structured around an outline/plan.

Different authors have problematized the dichotomization of teacher-centered and subject-centered education because of the fact that teachers are involved in shaping student-centered education and students have been taking a more active role in teacher-centered education as the focus has shifted to developing not just knowledge but also competencies and skills.<sup>81</sup> Subject-centered classes, however, remains the most common approach to teaching students because it provides students with a focused setting to study a particular discipline. This structured setting is important in helping students actually develop the competencies of the subject being taught. It allows them to be focused, rather than scattered, in their learning.

The problem with human rights education in subject-centered courses is that learning about human rights is not an independent subject. The different Canadian provinces have integrated

curriculum.<sup>88</sup> While national curriculum program might allow and encourage teachers to address human rights in their different courses, the focus and the importance of these rights is not necessarily addressed in a cohesive manner. This is problematic because student are not really given the opportunity to engage critically with the idea of human rights nor are they given the “opportunity to develop and practice skills that are necessary for their own and other peoples’ rights”.<sup>89</sup>

Additionally, without a specialized core course, there is nothing “to guarantee a minimum level of understanding”<sup>90</sup> among all students. If we are committed to human rights education as a way to raise awareness, change attitudes and inspire action, we need to give students the tools with which to learn. A program that fails to ensure a minimum level of understanding fails to meet its objective.<sup>91</sup>

The significance of subject-focused classes on student development and the fact that an absence of a core course makes it impossible to ensure that students at least have a basic understanding of human rights helps justify why implementing a mandatory human rights education course at the high school level is a necessary and pressing project. While a human rights course could not successful if it was the only place in the school setting where student engaged with human rights, indeed human rights education is based on a whole-school (and societal) project<sup>92</sup>, there seems to have been a greater willingness to adopt human rights values



human rights [but] have great difficulty in grappling with the concept of universal rights for all people".<sup>100</sup> They understood human rights only at one level. In their study of mandatory compulsory *Citizenship and Human Rights Education* courses and *Democracy and Human Rights* courses in Turkey, Kenan Çayır and Melike Türkan Ba lı found that, while these courses may represent an step in developing respect for human rights in Turkey, it does so by imposing the western-ideology on students and does not actually empower students or facilitate their relationship with human rights.<sup>101</sup> These examples highlight how it is not clear whether the



focused and participatory, having a clear course plan and time-table is difficult which sometimes results in a lack of opportunity for youth to actually transfer and use the skills they are learning.<sup>119</sup> To address this issue, there is a tendency to rely of small group discussions for brainstorming and then a larger group discussion for the reporting of findings.<sup>120</sup>

Finally, “all empowerment models are dependent upon sustained community supports of some kind”.<sup>121</sup> Being unable to create a sense of safety, openness and trust makes it difficult for participants to feel comfortable engaging deeply with human rights in this setting. So, while Equitas holds its program in Canada because it gives participants a sense of safety and security that they might not have when addressing these issues in their own countries<sup>122</sup>, creating this sense of security in a high school might be difficult as students are faced with issues of bullying, school hierarchy, and many students do not see the classroom as a safe space. For a transformative model to work, human rights education must be a whole school project.<sup>123</sup>

**C.**







human rights but the importance of one particular right. Additionally, to date there is no evidence to date that this program actually results in producing young Canadians that recognize, are open to and respect religious diversity.

What is reflected through a study of the Quebec *History and Citizenship Program* and the ERC program is that, while these programs may reflect Canada's commitment to multiculturalism and some of the values outlined in the different human rights charters, there is no evidence which shows that these programs are actually resulting in citizens that are more aware of human rights issues and engage with them critically. While 52% of Canadian teachers might report that human rights education occurs in their schools through curriculum and extra-curricular activities<sup>134</sup>, we have not seen the fruits of this labor. A new approach is, therefore, required.

## **B. My proposal**

I recommend that we adopt a mandatory subject-centered human rights course that is taught using a participatory method and pedagogy, which combines the awareness and transformative models of human rights education. I imagine this course being taught in grade 11 at the end of high school so it can build off the knowledge that students would have developed through the integration of human rights in their other courses throughout their studies. In no way is this proposal supposed to extract human rights from other courses.

The course would involve two central parts. The first would be classroom focused and would combine both teacher-centered and student-centered pedagogy in order to transmit knowledge about human rights and create a space in which students could engage critically with the topic and take on leadership roles in the discussion. The second comp

elements of Equitas' *IHRTP* program – specifically their approach to participatory education<sup>135</sup>, the learning spiral<sup>136</sup> and the Individual Plan<sup>137</sup>.

***i. The classroom: ensuring the transmission of knowledge***

I would recommend that, unlike the *IHRTP* which starts by a focus on the participant and their experience of human rights, mandatory human rights education in Quebec start by using a more teacher-

Like the pre-training exercises filled out by the participants at the IHRT<sup>141</sup>, this would allow the teacher to gather quantitative data about levels of knowledge/awareness and provide for a space for more personal and individual exploration of the students' knowledge of/relationship to human rights. Teachers could then adapt their course appropriately.

responsibility would fall on the teacher to ensure that these exercises do not become stereotypical and reproduce privilege and bias. In some cases, teacher training would be required.<sup>146</sup>

After having engaged with human rights violations at the individual level, the course would further spiral outwards to discuss human rights violations that involve whole communities. To see how some groups as a whole have been historically discriminated against based on particular characteristics. Since not all classes can go out on fieldtrips and visit First Nation reserves, one way to ensure that this part of the course is student-focused for the teacher to assign students different groups and have them engage in independent research and presentations. This would force students to engage with material and facts and control how the information was passed on.

The next step would be to invite the students to engage critically with Canada's national commitment to human rights and evaluate whether this commitment has been translated into action that protects universal human rights. While the teacher/expert model would play a role in transmitting the information like in the first part of the class, students could be engaged through

**iii. The project**

The second component o

historical and pedagogical sources, the paper has outlined both *why* we need mandatory human rights education and *how* human rights should be taught. My (perhaps utopian) proposal is that we adopt a participatory approach to h







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Watkinson, Ailsa M. *Education, Student Rights and the Charter* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing Ldt, 1999).

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## **Legislation**

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*Constitution Act*