

**Learning and knowing their rights:
The inclusion of mandatory international human rights education in Ontario secondary
school curriculum**

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A Practicum paper submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree

MASTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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Abstract

This paper explores the need to implement a compulsory international human rights curriculum in the Ontario education system as a means of empowering children to actualize their rights and stand up against human rights violations. The importance of children's participation in civil society and respect for their autonomy is discussed, followed by a presentation of the relevant international human rights treaties that support this proposal. The current high school curriculums and courses in Ontario are analyzed to demonstrate the gaps in relevant human rights content, as well as where such content would be appropriate, as there is currently no compulsory course in place. To establish that such a curriculum is not just important but also effective, the success and review of the Australian national curriculum are discussed. Following the Australian case, recommendations for the Ontario Ministry of Education are presented to demonstrate that ameliorating the human rights curriculum in the province is attainable and would be successful in educating the next generation of change-makers.

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Introduction

Imagine facing an issue of violence, environmental degradation, or racial discrimination as a child, but you are unaware of your rights and how to act upon them. Imagine being unable to make decisions or speak for yourself and having to rely on an intermediary to relay vital information to and from you, but with a high likelihood that they omit or inaccurately relay information. This is an unfortunate reality for children across Canada. Education systems across the country are failing to adequately educate students about the rights that they are entitled to and how to access them as citizens of the world – particularly the rights they ought to enjoy as individuals under the age of 18. As will be discussed, access to education being a human right under the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* supports an education-based approach to filling knowledge gaps (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Not only is there a right to education, but the *CRC* establishes responsibility on the state to educate civil society and children specifically about their rights. As children continue to live in a world created by adults, it is increasingly important to consider the notion of children's agency.

With the unique lived experiences of children, and their keen desire to be the makers of change, it is pressing to implement human rights education, with attention to agency, as part of secondary school curriculums. This allows children to be active participants treated as equals amongst adults within a political sphere. There is a need to find a middle ground between the free-ranger and caretaker theories in order to produce a new frame of thinking that allows children to speak for themselves, with the political or legal support of adults.

Many children seek change, but they often lack the knowledge needed to create a better tomorrow. This paper will begin with an overview of my recent practicum at the Manitoba

Association for Rights and Liberties, and the impact this had on inspiring this topic. Following a presentation of the definition of a “child”, an analysis of the international human rights treaties that Canada is obligated to respect will be provided. The paper will continue with a presentation of the opposing perspectives of the free-ranger and caretaker theories as they apply to the participation of children in civil society. Following this, an analysis of the Ontario secondary school curriculum – in subjects relating to human rights such as social sciences and humanities – will demonstrate that there is a lack of mandatory international human rights curriculum in the province, yet there is space for such content to be included. The high school level was chosen as the appropriate school age to target due to the political nature and complexities of human rights. The paper will then continue with an overview of examples of the human rights curriculum in Australia. To conclude, justifications and recommendations for mandatory human rights curriculum will be provided. Altogether, this paper will demonstrate how Ontario and its provincial Ministry of Education are failing to provide adequate human rights education, and ultimately serves as an extension of how Canada is failing to fulfill its commitments and responsibilities concerning children’s rights to education and participation.

Practicum at the Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties (MARL)

In the summer of 2022, I completed a 4-month practicum with the Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties (MARL). MARL is a non-profit organization based in Winnipeg that “takes action in education and advocacy for human rights and civil liberties toward greater social justice in the province” (Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties, n.d.c, para. 1). It was through my position as the Children’s Program Coordinator that I was exposed to the lack of general human rights knowledge amongst children, as well as children’s lack of knowledge of how to advocate for themselves when rights are violated. This experience inspired me to

investigate the curriculum and education system that I went through as a student in Ontario, an education system in which I was not exposed to the concept of human rights and related instruments through compulsory secondary school education.

Throughout my practicum placement at MARL, I was largely focused on the development of a multi-day human rights-themed camp. The sessions were tailored for the appropriate age group as participants ranged in age from 7 to 17. This camp served as a first source of human rights learning for many of the participants. As there was a lot of information to convey, I organized the delivery around three pillars. First, the human rights fundamentals pillar opened the camp to ensure that all participants had the same understanding. This pillar focused on concepts including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*, the history of human rights, the three generations of rights, and fundamental freedoms (Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties, n.d.b). Second, building on the knowledge of what rights are, participants learned about different issues through the raising awareness pillar. This was the opportunity to engage with current issues. The day was tailored depending on the group of participants, such as programming with Aurora Family Therapy Centre's newcomer program, which was focused on immigrant rights and children's rights. Finally, the camp wrapped up with an opportunity for the participants to take all this knowledge and build their own social movement. To the older groups, the focus was on how to build a protest and ensure safety. For days spent with younger participants at the Rotary Leadership Circle, the focus was on art and activism, and teaching the power of art to portray a message. During these days, participants had the chance to create a mural that portrayed issues important to them, such as environmental issues and poverty.

The implementation and reception of this programming were quite rewarding, as I saw children from different backgrounds and communities engaging with important information and learning how to become engaged political citizens. While this was rewarding, I was still shocked by the lack of human rights knowledge the children possessed – especially the older groups. I recognize that MARL does a lot of work with immigrant organizations and so their lived realities differ greatly. However, this just increases the need to educate children on their rights as they grow to become active political participants.

Defining the “Child”

As the sole treaty focusing on children’s rights, the *CRC*’s definition of ‘children’ is key. Under Article 1, the *CRC* defines ‘children’ as “every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, p. 4). Though the term is defined, it is not accurate to say that all ‘children’ develop or mature at the same rate and should have to wait until 18 to be able to engage in areas of civil society. Therefore, it is important to understand that the notion of the ‘child’ is a social construction, in that “it is not based upon universal biological certainty, but rather is developed through distinct cultural and social values and practices” (Huynh et al., 2015, p. 10). While children have yet to attain the age of majority under the law, they still have the ability and the right to form their own views, opinions and participate in civil society and exercise their agency, as addressed in Article 12 of the *CRC*. Agency is understood as “the capacity to exert and interpret power to produce an intended effect, even in situations that are created and regulated by [others]” – for children, this is living in a world created by adults (Huynh et al., 2015, p. 49). However, children, just by virtue of being humans, do have agency and have the ability – though sometimes barred – to exercise it every day. Children have

“demonstrated the capacity to be peace builders and to contribute to cultures of peace within their societies” (Huynh et al., 2015, p. 186). In fact, children’s everyday interactions with the world around them – being in school, caring for family members and sometimes even the ways in which they choose to play with others – constitute an element of political participation. While many may associate political participation with actions of politics or direct engagement with politics, political participation can be understood as “activities through which people develop and express their opinions on the world” (Khasnabis et al, 2010, para. 2). For children, their everyday activities allow for opportunities to discuss issues affecting them, develop opinions, or form groups rallied around one social issue (Khasnabis et al., 2010). This political engagement brings children from a place of subjectivity to active participation, from “[depoliticization] to self-government and self-determination” (Huynh et al., 2015, p. 202).

Not only are children the next generation, but they also constitute a large portion of the world’s growing population, and their actions should not be limited, they must be taken seriously (Watson, 2009). The allowance and acceptance of participation of children expands “the possibilities for [their] investments in peace (Huynh et al., 2015, p. 203). The leaders of tomorrow must be taken seriously today.

Throughout this paper, while the definition includes all ages from 0 to 18, the terms ‘child’ or ‘children’ will be used in largely in reference to adolescents.

Caretaker versus Free-ranger Debate

It is important to understand the caretaker versus free-ranger debate as it provides context on the opposing theories adults take regarding the participation of children in civil society.

While caretakers believe that individuals should be able, and are capable, to determine their own future, they do not believe that children fit into this (Huynh et al., 2015). They believe

that children are “not yet capable of making free and sound decisions [and as such] self-determination is too important to be left in their hands ... [and if] left unattended they will surely grow crookedly or wither” (Huynh et al., 2015, p. 37). Caretakers believe that children ought to be spoken for and represented by adults, as they are assumed to know best. Children’s agency is completely removed in this theory as children lack experience in the world, meaning they have nothing on which to base their decisions (Huynh et al., 2015). Children remain “physically, psychologically and emotionally vulnerable”, unable to form rational thoughts, and need to be saved by adults (Huynh et al., 2015, p. 37). This theory seeks to isolate children from the adult world. However, this begs the question of when children are meant to learn if they are controlled by adults until they become an adult themselves.

On the other end of the spectrum is the free-ranger theory. The free-ranger theory “favour[s] plurality, presume[s] complexity and celebrate[s] difference” in that there is more than one path to adulthood and each child is unique (Huynh et al., 2015, p. 44). This is an important consideration in allowing for the different experiences of childhood that occur around the world and across the country. The free-ranger theory accepts that, despite living in an adult-focused world, “children themselves can and do exert agency” (Huynh et al., 2015, p. 49). Those that follow this thinking seek to disrupt the stereotypical path from childhood to adulthood; it is milestones rather than age that mark the transition (Huynh et al., 2015). The free-ranger theory works to remove the “oppressive adult-centric” way of viewing childhood and agency and allows children to explore and learn (Huynh et al., 2015, p. 49).

An important step in creating a balance between the two theories is to consider the mature minor doctrine. Recent studies into the cognitive development of individuals under 18 years of age have demonstrated that “basic cognitive processes reach adult levels of maturity by

mid-adolescence" (Steinberg, 2013, p. 261). This supports the notion that children are capable of the critical thinking required for a human rights curriculum to be successful (Steinberg, 2013; Bala & Houston, 2015). The mature minor argument is not only backed by scientific research, but it is a standard that is articulated in the law. In the Canadian context, the doctrine forms part of common law that allows for children "who are sufficiently mature to make their own ... decisions" (Bala & Houston, 2015, p. 57). It has been used in cases of criminal responsibility and medical autonomy involving individuals under the age of majority (Steinberg, 2013). The Supreme Court of Canada upheld the idea that children, under the age of 16, can possess the maturity to understand and have discussions about serious topics, even life and death, and that such capacities must be recognized by law – in line with the child's best interest (*AC v Manitoba* 2009 SCC 30). This aligns with the notion that children must be able to know, understand and act upon their human rights and those of others.

There is a need to find a balance between the two extremes when it comes to finding a place for children in civil society that is based on children's inherent personhood and opportunities to understand and actualize their fundamental human rights. As demonstrated, the caretaker theory hovers too close to children, not allowing them to act on their own; the free-ranger theory may provide too much space and not enough direction. This balance can take from the mature minor doctrine as it seeks to find and support such participation in autonomy, integrity, and self-determination for minors. Taking a piece from each of these notions would allow for children to be able to participate on all levels, and for adults to take a role of facilitation rather than domination over children's civil and political participation.

Human Rights Framework

On the international stage, Canada promotes itself as a defender of human rights, yet its population is not receiving adequate education about human rights (Statistics Canada, 2022). The most notable sources of rights that Canada is in violation of are found in the following treaties: *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*, and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*. Having ratified these treaties, Canada must submit regular reports on its treaty implementation to each of the respective monitoring committees (Government of Canada, n.d.). These reports serve as an accountability mechanism. Moreover, Canada is a dualist system meaning that national legislature must enact “a statute to incorporate [international law] into domestic law” to make the treaty binding (Sloss, 2011, p. 4). Canada has adopted the rights set out in the *CRC*, *UDHR*, *ICESCR*, and *ICCPR* in various sources of national law, including the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom*, *Canadian Human Rights Act*, and the *Constitution Act, 1982* (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

In 1989, the UN General Assembly adopted the *CRC*. This was a first step towards including individuals under the age of 18 in international legal discourse. The Convention has become the most widely ratified treaty in the entirety of the international system, with Canada ratifying it in 1991 (UNICEF Canada, n.d.). Throughout the *CRC*, there are several articles that point to elements of education and civic participation that support the need for a human rights curriculum.

The *UDHR* is the founding international human rights document. Following its adoption in 1948, it became a legally binding document for all its signatories and set out the rights that ought to be protected and applied universally (United Nations, n.d.). Canada has been party to

the *UDHR* since it was accepted in 1948 and brought into national law in 1982 through the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* – making the rights constitutionally protected (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

Another treaty that supports the proposal of human rights curriculum as a means of exercising children’s autonomy is the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*. The *ICCPR* was ratified by Canada in 1976 and was brought into force in 1976. The *ICCPR* supports the notion of children being active political participants.

The final treaty that is important to this topic is the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)* was adopted in 1966. The *ICESCR* further affirms the right to education and the state obligations that come with respecting these rights.

The rights will be presented in a thematic manner. The repetition of rights and themes demonstrates the importance and need for respect in these treaties. Across the four treaties, the following two themes are found, both including anti-discrimination: obligations to education and participation in civil society. The following section will present the human rights that Canada is bound to under international law which support the proposal for a human rights curriculum; such an improved curriculum will ultimately serve to empower children to act. Of note, while the universality of human rights is not perfect in its implementation, the following section provides an overview of the rights that ought to be respected universally and without discrimination.

Obligations to Children

The *CRC*, in its entirety, seeks to protect children and a major part of this is ensuring that the notion of “the best interests of the child” is taken into consideration – as it is a guiding principle for the treaty. The implementation of a mandatory international human rights education

is in the best interest of the child as it will provide them with all necessary information about their rights in terms of what they are, how to hold governments accountable and how to act against violations.

The *CRC* supports this notion under two key rights that outline state obligation. First, Article 3 places responsibility on all public institutions, in which schools are included, to place the best interest of the child as a primary consideration in any decision making (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). This is furthered by extending responsibilities to parents and guardians, as well as applicable staff. The development of an international human rights curriculum would ensure that the provincial government and other partners are acting in the best interest of the child by respecting the rights to education and participation – as will be discussed. Additionally, Article 4 places responsibility on the federal government to ensure that “all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the present Convention” are undertaken (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, p. 2). In all, attention to the best interest of the child would include the responsibility on the federal and Ontario governments to develop a mandatory international human rights curriculum as it would support their development into an active member of political and civil society.

Obligations to Education

The right to education is found under the *CRC*, *UDHR* and *ICESCR*. These rights support the creation and implementation of a human rights curriculum. This proposal is further supported by the rights that specifically mention education that supports and respects human rights.

Under the *CRC*, there are two key rights that support education and the need for a human rights curriculum. First, Article 28 states the “right of the child to education” with attention to the

development of secondary education and encouraging regular attendance (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, p. 8). This supports the notion that the education system is an appropriate environment to promote human rights and ensure that children are equipped with human rights knowledge. In addition, Article 29 (b) calls on the education systems to direct learning towards the “development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations” (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, p. 9). This right alone supports the need for a human rights-based curriculum. Without it, Canada is in violation of the *CRC*.

Education is also supported by the *UDHR*. Article 26 of the *UDHR* protects the right to education (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). Much like in the *CRC*, the right to education supports the proposal that the classroom is the most appropriate place to promote human rights. The *UDHR* applies to all humans, regardless of age, and so children are seen as equal to adults under this treaty and so their thoughts, opinions and expressions ought to be treated with the same due respect.

The final treaty that is important to education is the *ICESCR*. The *ICESCR* highlights the right to education under Article 13. This article recognizes the “right of everyone to education ... [that is] directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966, p. 4). Not only does the right to education under the *ICESCR* support what the *CRC* protects, but it goes further to state that “education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups, and further the

activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace” (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966, p. 4).

Obligation to Political Participation

There are rights found across the selected treaties that support children’s right to political participation. This section highlights these rights and demonstrates that the education system is an effective way to empower children to use their rights.

First is Article 6 of the *CRC* and its reference to the inherent right to life and the state’s responsibility in ensuring the survival and development of the child (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, p. 3). Children ought to know what it means to have the “right to life” and how to protect this right to ensure their ability to live a full life free from physical punishment, suffering, and other forms of deprivation. Next, Articles 12, 13, 14, and 15 form a set of rights that together support the need for a curriculum that provides children not only the space, but information required to become politically active. Such information allows them to form their own views and express their views in an appropriate environment. Article 12 speaks to the child’s right to form their own views, to express their views, to have their views respected, and to be able to be heard in a judicial proceeding (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). This is crucial to having children be respected in civil society once empowered with the knowledge received in a mandatory human rights curriculum. This is then furthered under Article 13, which protects the right to freedom of expression, including the “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds” (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, p.4). Article 14 highlights the right “to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, p. 4). This ensures that children are free to seek and to form their own beliefs. The final right in this set is Article

15, the right to “freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly” (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, p. 4). These four rights provide the foundation of the responsibility of Canada to ensure that children receive an adequate amount of appropriate information and support in becoming their own person. Ultimately ensuring that children not only have a platform to express and defend these views but feel safe to do so.

Further, Article 17 under the *CRC* mentions the responsibility of states to ensure that children, through the role of mass media, have “access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health” (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, p. 5). This right is essential in building a human rights curriculum that is not biased towards one specific viewpoint. Human rights discourse is often criticized as being too Western and not accounting for the lived realities of those outside of the West (Sharma, 2012). This supports the need to ensure that the development of a new human rights curriculum accounts for cultural relativism and pluralism. Including space for cultural relativism in the curriculum guarantees the ability to create diverse, rich dialogue and to “dismantle harmful power relations” (Prasad, 2007, p. 595).

The *UDHR* speaks to the right to political participation. Articles 18 and 19 speak to the right to be one’s own person through the freedoms of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as the right to the freedom of expression and opinion (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). As previously mentioned, these rights support an education which teaches children a variety of perspectives without biases. Next, Article 20, through the promotion of the right of peaceful assembly and association, supports the need for a human rights curriculum which teaches children how to act against violations in their surroundings. Teaching and empowering

children to rally against violations supports the right of children to be engaged in political and civil society as mentioned in Article 20.

Another treaty that supports the proposal of human rights curriculum as a means of empowering children is the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*. The *ICCPR* was one of two treaties adopted in 1966. Under the *ICCPR*, Articles 1, 18, and 19 support the notion of political participation. Article 1 supports the right to self-determination, that is, children can determine what issues they support and how they would like to associate politically (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966). Article 18, like other treaties, supports the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966). Article 19 supports the “right to hold opinions without interference” (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, p. 11). As mentioned, children need to be aware that they have these rights that support their abilities to be autonomous beings and empower them to mobilize and make a change. The *ICCPR* further supports the *CRC* under Article 22’s right to freedom of association (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966). This right allows children to form groups with like-minded counterparts. Finally, the *ICCPR* reaffirms the importance of giving children equal respect. Article 24 is an anti-discriminatory right which seeks to protect children from harm (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966). In all, the *ICCPR* supports the implementation of a mandatory human rights course to ensure that children are empowered and aware of their rights, participate in civil and political society and actualize their fundamental human rights not only for their future potential but in childhood.

Federal Participation in Education

While education is within provincial jurisdiction – in terms of creating and implementing curriculum, policy, standards, and guidelines, providing funding, etc. - the federal government does possess some control over the education system (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018 & Wallin, Young & Levin, 2021). Under Section 93 of the *Constitution Act*, provinces are given primary authority, but the federal government is not precluded from being involved (Wallin et al., 2021 & Constitution Act, 1982). The federal government is involved in federal education programs and provincial and territorial programs (Wallin et al., 2021 & Phillips, 2019). Ultimately, Section 93 “indicates that both the provincial and federal governments have jurisdiction in education” (Phillips, 2019, p. 7). With federal support, the provinces could support Canada in its international obligations. For example, Ontario could use its own jurisdictional powers to create and implement an appropriate human rights course and curriculum.

Finding Gaps in the Ontario Curriculum

Premier Doug Ford first took office in 2018 and was quick to make sweeping changes to the Ontario education system (Powers, 2019). However, the lack of human rights contained in the curriculum pre-exists the controversial and unwelcomed changes brought about by the Ford government. Neither the 2013 iteration of the *Social Sciences and Humanities* curriculum nor the 2015 iteration of the *Canadian and World Studies* curriculum includes a course that focuses primarily on teaching international human rights (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). This shows that the lack of curriculum is not only an issue under the current Conservative government but has been an issue under prior Liberal governments. In 2022, there is no compulsory course in its entirety that focuses on human rights education. The Ontario Ministry of Education establishes its curriculum in terms of “overall expectations” and “big ideas” that are to be covered in any given course. For the following courses, these elements

will be stated to demonstrate the absence of this content but also the potential for human rights to be included.

In examining the entirety of the Ontario high school course list, there is only one mandatory course that includes human rights in its curriculum. The course, “Civics and Citizenship” is a compulsory course that students must take in grade 10; however, it is only a half-credit course meaning that it takes place across only half a semester. The course description states the following:

This course explores rights and responsibilities associated with being an active citizen in a democratic society. Students will explore issues of civic importance and the influence of social media, while developing their understanding of the role of civic engagement and of political processes in the local, national, and/or global community. Students will apply the concepts of political thinking and the political inquiry process to investigate, and express informed opinions about, a range of political issues and developments that are both of significance in today’s world and of personal interest to them. This course also includes learning on digital literacy and critical-thinking skills, the mechanisms of government, Indigenous governance systems and structures, the historical foundations of the rights and freedoms we enjoy in Canada, ways in which government policy affects individuals’ lives and the economy, and ways for students to serve their communities.

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022a, para. 1)

In looking at this description, there is a very vague reference to “rights and freedoms” in the last sentence (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022a). However, at first read, it seems as though the content would focus solely on the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and not the international context, in which the *CRC* is of crucial importance. The expectations and ideas of the course further demonstrate the vague approach to human rights education. First is the notion of “rights and responsibilities” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022b). Throughout the course, students are expected to “analyse key rights and responsibilities associated with citizenship, in both the Canadian and global context, and some ways in which these rights are protected and infringed upon” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022b, para. 8). While this is a great start in that there is direct mention of the learning of rights at both national and international levels, it is

largely limited to Canadian jurisdiction. Children are affected by issues well beyond the scope and borders of Canada. Being limited in the scope of jurisdiction demonstrates a gap in the curriculum in that students will not be knowledgeable of rights in the broader international context. If children are not aware of the international context, they will not know that Canada operates under the dualist system and, therefore will not understand how rights are translated into the Canadian context. Moreover, should Canada fail to enact national legislation in a timely manner, there may not be a national law in which children can study to understand their rights within the country. The Ministry's big idea supporting this expectation is that those living in Canada have rights and freedoms that are both based on and protected by Canadian law, however, this notion is very limited in scope as it speaks only to Canadian law and not the rights that exist outside of it. Human rights do not exist in a Canadian silo, they are an international matter and must be taught in a way that reflects this. It is important to include the international scope as this knowledge becomes a tool for children to be not only global citizens but to be able to hold Canada accountable for violations. An international scope teaches children which treaties Canada has ratified and ought to bring into national legislation.

This course also attempts to engage with the notion of civic engagement, which is the latter component of this proposal. The civics course presents the overall expectation of "engaged citizenship and creating change" in which students will be able to analyze an issue and propose ways of creating positive change in this area, and assess its effectiveness (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022b, para. 10). This is a vital lesson to teach students if they are going to be able to be fully engaged in movements. However, the following question remains: how are students supposed to know what issues they are interested in or that their communities are affected by if they are not receiving a well-rounded human rights education? A human rights education limited

to Canadian legal jurisdiction, as described by the first course expectation, does not provide this knowledge. Further, students are prompted, by the course's "big idea", to think critically to find ways to contribute to their communities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022b). Again, if limited to learning about Canadian legal jurisdiction, students are not to know of rights beyond those that have been enacted in national legislation. While this course is best suited to include human rights content, its duration is only half a semester (Human Rights Education, 2022b). This is important to consider as what could be covered in regard to human rights in this course is not likely to go far enough into detail and will remain inadequate.

As there was only one compulsory course found in the overall high school curriculum, there was a need to look beyond this into the elective courses to see what was being offered. First, at the grade 12 level, is "World Issues: A Geographic Analysis". This course creates a space for students to analyze, address and discuss the challenge of creating a sustainable and equal world (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Students are expected to do so through an exploration of topics including "economic disparities, threats to the environment, globalization, human rights, and quality of life" and the role and position of government and international policies, laws, and agreements in all of this (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 193). This course provides students with the opportunity, through its overall expectation, to learn of the influence of governments and those in power and how this may influence social movements and change (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Moreover, it provides the opportunity for students to learn from past movements and agents of change. This course is the ideal course, through both its content and layout, to promote human rights and social change. However, it is only offered in the final year of high school and as an elective (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Therefore,

this class will only reach a limited number of children – likely those that already had an interest and therefore does not include everyone.

Second, “Challenge and Change in Society” is another elective course offered at the grade 12 level that exposes students to the realm of social sciences (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). This course uses theory to understand and explain the impact that a change in knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs may have on the world around us (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Students are expected to learn about the different demographic that make up a given society and the ways in which they may influence “social patterns and trends, both nationally and globally” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 323). “Challenge and Change” is another course that has the potential to be an effective means of conveying human rights knowledge, but it has two shortfalls. First, it has no mention of human rights in its curriculum. While it is situated within the right general subject – social sciences and humanities – it lacks that specific knowledge and content. Further, like “World Issues”, it is a grade 12 level elective and so it will only reach a select number of students.

A final course that has potential to be a vehicle for human rights education is “Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice” (Ministry of Education, 2013). This course is another grade 12 level elective that takes a more theoretical approach to understand “various equity and social justice issues” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 81). It seeks to explain the role of legislation and public policy as a means of enacting social change, thereby tackling the engagement part of the curriculum issue. While it does not focus on civic engagement for positive change, it does add another layer in ensuring permanent positive change through legislative and policy protection. However, much like the other elective courses, “Equity and

Social Justice” does not include enough content and learning expectations regarding human rights.

Through the examination of “World Issues”, “Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice” and “Challenge and Change”, it is evident that there is capacity on behalf of the Ministry of Education to build curriculum in the realm of human rights. However, these three courses do not go far enough in ensuring that students are equipped with enough knowledge of human rights to be able to act on them as they are merely electives. Moreover, these courses are tailored to students that are seeking to pursue social sciences and humanities at the post-secondary level, rather than the general student population. With this, the Ministry of Education is failing to provide an education that may prompt crucial thoughts and ideas within students who may have never otherwise considered engaging with human rights and social movements. By ensuring that all students enjoy a human rights-based curriculum, schools across Ontario could be inspiring the next generation of change-makers.

Power of Human Rights Education in other Jurisdictions

In light of the gaps in the Ontario curriculum, the following section seeks to explore the implementation of a human rights curriculum in another jurisdiction. The case of Australia, another commonwealth country and developed nation, will be examined, as the country implemented a national human rights curriculum over 10 years ago (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011). This section will serve as proof that implementing such a curriculum is possible and effective.

Australia

In 2011, the Australian Human Rights Commission (“the Commission”) published a position paper on the implementation of human rights education in the national school

curriculum. This change came as a result of the federal, state, and territorial governments across Australia mandating a national school curriculum (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011). The curriculum change was welcomed by the Commission as a means to ensure that all children in the country have the same understanding of human rights, and that fostering a community of respect begins with education in the classroom (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011). Of importance to the positive reception and success of the curriculum is the drafting and writing of the content. Writers with human rights expertise were appointed to draft the content, and a range of people was consulted – including parents, teachers, and professionals in the field, amongst others (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011). The curriculum is built around three main components: acquiring human rights knowledge, developing values and attitudes aligned with respect for human rights, and motivating action and change (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011). The Commission highlighted why such a curriculum was important to implement across the country. First, receiving such an education creates a positive impact on students. Children spend their formative years in school, as mandatory education is a protected right, and are influenced by what is around them. Therefore, as demonstrated by the national curriculum, children that are exposed to human rights in the classroom are more likely to incorporate them into their personal attitudes and values (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011). The Commission reported that:

Australian schools [show] that where education around [human rights] values is embedded in the content and pedagogy of the classroom, there is evidence of improved student engagement with schooling, better learning outcomes, and enhanced social and emotional wellbeing. As a result [,] ... schools have reported increased empathy, tolerance and respect, and increased student confidence to address bullying. Schools have also reported a reduction in disciplinary measures, an increase in school attendance, and positive shifts in classroom and playground relationships as well as relationships at home. (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011, p. 6)

Not only does this curriculum implementation create a positive environment, but it also ensures that Australia is adhering to its international human rights commitments. The Commission affirms that the selected rights found in the *CRC*, *UDHR*, *ICCPR* and *ICESCR* are upheld and respected through a human rights curriculum. As a fellow commonwealth country – with strong education systems – Canada, and Ontario specifically, could look to the success of Australia as a case study in implementing a new human rights curriculum.

Recommendations for Ontario’s Ministry of Education

Adults must take on the role of facilitator in regard to children’s interactions and participation with human rights (Percy-Smith, 2010). This supports the implementation of a human rights curriculum at the secondary level, as teachers would take on the role of facilitator by providing their students with the information and subsequently support their students in allowing a space for dialogue or in creating “groups or communities where they can meet together and talk about their experiences and the issues that affect them” (Huynh et al., 2015, p. 204).

Age Appropriate

High school students are at a vital stage of their cognitive development. At the age at which they are practicing their critical thinking skills and an executive functioning as the prefrontal cortex of the brain is continuing to develop (Stanford Medicine Children’s Health, n.d.). Critical thinking is understood as being able to evaluate “arguments by weighing the evidence that supports them” (Best, 2021, p. 7). Through the development of their critical thinking skills, children at this age are able to perform abstract thinking, reason, and consider different points of view (Stanford Medicine Children’s Health, n.d.). These are vital skills that children must possess in order to be able to fully understand a human rights education. The

ability to perform abstract thinking allows children to think about what it may be like to have their rights violated, or what a world where all rights are afforded equally may be like – children are able to think about the “what ifs” in the complex realm of human rights. Being able to reason is important as this will help to develop their views, opinions, and values as they relate to human rights. Developing these cognitive abilities is not only important to be able to act on violations but are rights themselves protected in the various treaties. Finally, the ability to consider other points of view is extremely important in the realm of human rights as it is a highly politicized and complex field. Having such an ability would ensure that students may see why certain cultures have certain practices that may be seen as a rights violation. For example, girls in developing countries often do not attend school due to having to assume domestic roles, however, in these cultures this is understood as a norm and not a rights violation. Moreover, critical thinking is an important skill to possess as everyone has different issues that are most important to them so it is crucial that children recognize that others may have differing views, opinions and values that may contradict their own. This skill is important in children’s ability to make a positive change. In all, it is at this age that children begin to develop their own worldviews and so it is important to ensure that they have all necessary information at their disposal in forming these views. To teach this content in the final years of high school is a missed opportunity as students have moved away from general education and towards a streamlined path to post-secondary.

Adapting Existing Curriculum

Following the United Nations Decade for Human Rights education in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many UN members began to adopt such a curriculum with the international

consensus on the importance of a human rights curriculum (Cayir & Bagli, 2011). Canada, through the Ontario Ministry of Education, must do more to meet these commitments.

As was explored in a previous section, the Ministry of Education in Ontario is not far from having a course that meets the need for human rights education and empowering students to make a change. Through the “Civics and Citizenship”, “World Issues”, “Challenge and Change” and “Equity and Justice” courses, the ministry has built the foundations of a compulsory human rights course. In Ontario, courses taken in grades nine and ten are largely compulsory while grades eleven and twelve present students with the opportunity to tailor their learning as they prepare for post-secondary education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Therefore, it is best to target the first two years of high school for this compulsory learning before students begin to focus on a specific field of study. With that, grade 10, as it aligns well with the content of “Civics and Citizenship”, would be the most appropriate grade to adopt such a course. Moreover, incorporating the expectation of understanding how to be an engaged citizen and be able to create change is an important element to keep. In addition to a compulsory course, students could learn in hands-on ways, such as through student governance, school clubs and community activities. At such a crucial age, this would ensure that children become citizens of the world. The capacity to create a new human rights course exists within the Ministry of Education, they are not far off with the courses that already exist, but they need to expand the human rights content and make it compulsory.

Building New Content

While the foundation of a human rights course exists, there is still ample work to be done on the part of the Ministry to build new content. This involves deciding how to teach, what to

teach, what to expect from students, and how to evaluate. Such a process involves the Ministry, educators, and outside partners.

In terms of which rights to teach, in order to get the most important information across, the curriculum would need to include: the *UDHR*, as it is the founding human rights document; the *ICCPR* and *ICESCR*, as these treaties along with the *UDHR* form the binding international bill of human rights; and the *CRC*, as this treaty is made specifically for the needs and rights of children.

Evidently, teaching human rights is complex as it is a complex subject matter. The approach taken by Australia, as well as the approach I took in building a human rights-based camp for the MARL in my capacity as Children's Program Coordinator, has proven to be quite effective. Both programs approached the teaching of human rights through the adoption of three pillars; while the pillars differ slightly in their content, they provide the same strong foundation (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011; Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties, n.d.a). Looking at the development of the MARL camp proves the efficacy of this approach. Much like the Australian curriculum, the camp was built around the three pillars of human rights fundamentals, raising awareness, and taking action (Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties, n.d.a.). In all, this three-pillar approach not only allowed for a variety of topics to be covered in a short amount of time, but also facilitated the organization and delivery of the content.

Adopting this approach could look like the following. The grade 10 compulsory course would be divided into three major sections: human rights fundamentals, current social issues, and taking action. The first section, much like the first pillar for MARL, would include content surrounding the history of human rights; founding human rights treaties (such as the *UDHR*,

ICCPR, *ICESCR*, *CRC*, and whichever other documents the teacher may deem appropriate or applicable); human rights in Canada (such as the *Charter of Rights in Freedoms*). This section would serve as a means of ensuring that all children are on an equal playing field in terms of fundamental knowledge. Following this, the course would transition into an analysis of current social issues, the scope at the discretion of the teacher. This is an opportunity to look at current events happening around the world and analyze them from a human rights lens to understand what rights may be violated, who is responsible and accountable, and what should be done. Subjects could include local issues such as a drug epidemic, a national issue like Indigenous rights, or an issue facing the entire world like climate change. Such a pillar ensures that children can apply what they learned in the first section. Finally, the course would end with a section that focuses on how to take action. Receiving a human rights education is important, but much of it would be lost if it was not supported by how to use this newly learned information. In this section, children would learn how to build a movement be it through a protest, a fundraiser, a petition, etc. Children would leave this course full of knowledge and ideas of how to move forward and make change in their community.

Collaborating with Outside Partners

Where ministry employees and educators do not feel as though they can develop the curriculum effectively, they should bring in outside community partners to fill this gap. There are organizations across the country that focus on human rights and its many interrelations. For example, outside of the Ontario context, MARL provides workshops to different groups around Winnipeg and surrounding areas on a variety of human rights topics to a variety of demographics (Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties, n.d.a). These workshops are often delivered to children in school, and cover topics such as human rights fundamentals, taking action, and

racism (Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties, n.d.a). Their content is tailored to the different grades with the ultimate goal of providing students with the most pertinent information in a manner that is open and allows for discussions to happen organically (Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties, n.d.a). MARL believes that education is vital to the growth of social justice within the province of Manitoba. In the Ontario context, there are several non-government organizations (NGOs) situated in all communities. In Ottawa, for example, there are NGOs that span across all subjects and issues, such as: Amnesty International Canada, known internationally for their efforts to promote and protect human rights could provide a guest lecture session during the second section of the course; or, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, which protects the voice and rights of Inuit in Canada could provide context on Indigenous issues during a guest lecture (Human Rights Careers, n.d.). Organizations become an increasingly important part of our society as their role as subject matter experts can serve two functions, they can help build the curriculum and they can help teach the content.

Future Endeavors

Amnesty International, a powerhouse in the human rights non-governmental organization realm, has developed a program known as the *Human Rights Friendly Schools* (HRFS). This program seeks to support schools around the world, and the communities in which they are situated, that are working to build a strong culture of human rights. These schools “empower young people and promote the active participation of all members of the school community to integrate human rights values and principles into all areas of school life” (Amnesty International, n.d., para. 1). Not only are students in the schools learning about human rights, but they are also learning how to apply them and put them into practice, including how to defend them (Amnesty International, n.d.). HRFSSs are found in over 20 countries including Benin, Denmark, Ghana,

Ireland, Italy, Paraguay, and the United Kingdom – there is no HRFS in the entirety of Canada (Amnesty International, n.d.). Following the development and implementation of a human rights curriculum it is, therefore, recommended that the Ministry of Education in Ontario choose a school to pilot being an HRFS and work with Amnesty International to bring this to fruition. The learning and application of human rights in the HRFS systems build a community of children that “become catalysts for change in their wide communities” (Amnesty International, n.d., para. 3). This would be a tremendous opportunity for Canada to consider solidifying their commitment to human rights.

Conclusion

Children, as holders of fundamental human rights, ought to be afforded the same rights as adults – balanced by their best interests. Proper education provides children with knowledge of the rights they hold and how to prohibit adults from acting as gatekeepers. In looking at the multitude of human rights found across the *UDHR*, *CRC*, *ICCPR* and the *ICESCR* it is evident that there is an international obligation to ensure children are aware of their rights. The most effective way to ensure that children are aware of their rights and able to act on them is through the implementation of a human rights curriculum. Through the exploration of the lack of content in the Ontario high school curriculum, it is found that the adoption of a compulsory grade 10 level course would be the most appropriate. Not only are students in the early years of high school of the appropriate cognitive ability to learn and absorb a human rights education they are also “competent and knowledgeable actors in society with full human value ..., capable decision-makers ... and capable holders of human rights” (Robinson, 2017, p. 127). The structure of such a course exists already but there is much work to do. Following the success of the Australian national curriculum as well as, on a smaller scale, the MARL camps, it is evident that the

Ministry of Education ought to take an approach based on three pillars in building the new curriculum. In working in collaboration with outside partners, such as local NGOs, the Ministry of Education can ensure that its new human rights curriculum is strong.

The implementation of this course is important. Not only would it equip children with knowledge, but it would also challenge the current system and balance of powers and ideas of children's competencies. As Canadians continue to face violence, atrocities, and rights violations, it is increasingly important that children be able to challenge those in power to make substantive change. Giving children the knowledge of their rights and how to take action “[challenges] the ethos of dependency and control of state institutions and structures and instead [celebrates] emerging counter cultural orientations [and approaches] in citizen participation” – that is, the role of adults and children in society is no longer so paternal (Percy-Smith, 2010, p. 109). Children are the people of today, with inherent rights to personhood, and are the future leaders of tomorrow. Empowering them with the knowledge of their rights in childhood is more likely to provide opportunities for them to actualize their rights today, that may also help them to prosper and build a better tomorrow for all.

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