

Reframing poverty: Human Rights Education as a Tool for Social Change

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A Practicum submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
of the University of Manitoba
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Human Rights

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Abstract

Poverty is both an economic challenge and human rights issue that undermines access to dignity, equality, justice, and health. Public attitudes toward poverty, often shaped by stereotypes and stigma, play a critical role in influencing social policy, political priorities, and public support for redistributive measures. These attitudes can either reinforce systemic barriers faced by people living in poverty or contribute to more inclusive rights-based solutions.

This paper explores the intersection of poverty, stigma, and Human Rights Education (HRE), asking the central question: *How can Human Rights Education challenge misconceptions about poverty and promote more just and compassionate public attitudes?* The paper argues that HRE can serve as a transformative tool for reshaping societal perceptions of poverty by reframing it through a human rights lens. Rather than attributing poverty to individual failure, HRE emphasizes its structural and systemic causes, including neoliberal economic policies, labour market precarity, inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion.

Drawing on international human rights frameworks, educational theory, and existing empirical research, the paper examines how HRE fosters critical thinking, empathy, and civic responsibility. It further reflects on my firsthand experience with the Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties (MARL), where I facilitated human rights-based workshops for youth and adults designed to educate and empower participants. These reflections provide practical insight into how rights-based educational approaches can challenge stigma, encourage dialogue, and support collective advocacy for social justice.

Ultimately, the paper contends that Human Rights Education has the potential to transform public understandings of poverty, shifting dominant narratives away from blame and stigma toward solidarity, accountability, and justice. By cultivating informed and engaged citizens, HRE can contribute to broader efforts aimed at addressing poverty as a violation of human rights rather than an individual moral failing.

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Introduction: The Intersection of Poverty and Stigma

Poverty is a complicated issue that has been defined and understood in various ways. The way in which poverty is defined plays a crucial role in shaping policies that can be used to alleviate its impact on this vulnerable population. There are two ways we can measure poverty, the first being absolute poverty which is the inability to meet basic needs such as food, water and shelter, measured against a fixed global standard.¹ The second is relative poverty that is the inability to maintain the average standard of living in a specific society, measured by a percentage of the median income.² The definition put forward by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights combines various approaches, viewing poverty as ‘a human condition characterized by the sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights.’³

Beyond these definitions, poverty also often brings stigmatization which is defined as “possession or perceived possession of devalued characteristics and/or identities.”⁴ People living in poverty especially low-income women of colour are often depicted as lazy and immoral.⁵ These assumptions can lead to further exclusion and discrimination, making it more difficult for individuals to become free of poverty. These stereotypes include causal attributions about why

¹ Tim Forsyth, ed. *Encyclopedia of International Development*. First edition. Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2018.

² Ibid

³ Ilias Bantekas, and Lutz Oette. *International Human Rights Law and Practice*. Third edition. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2020. 594.

⁴ Deborah Belle, and Heather E Bullock. *The Psychology of Poverty, Wealth, and Economic Inequality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2023. 49.

⁵ Ibid, 38.

particular groups are facing poverty such as beliefs that poverty comes from personal failing rather than it being attributed to structural failure.⁶ For instance, people may assume those who live in poverty are poor due to lack of ambition, not working hard, or making bad financial decisions. These individualistic attributions overlook broader systematic and structural factors such as limited access to quality education, discrimination in the labour market, low wages, or insufficient social safety nets.

As societies work toward making more equitable changes, one powerful tool in challenging these misconceptions is Human Rights Education (HRE). Human rights education is the learning that develops the knowledge, skills, and values of human rights.⁷ By educating individuals on the root causes of poverty and promoting the dignity of all individuals, HRE can play a crucial role in altering public perceptions on poverty.

This paper aims to explore the intersection of poverty, stigma, and human rights education by answering the question: *How can Human Rights Education challenge misconceptions about poverty and promote more just and compassionate attitudes?*

Part I: Understanding Poverty Through a Human Rights Lens

Poverty is a condition and lived experience that has many different economic, social, and political causes, dimensions, and consequences.⁸ While the experiences and consequences of

⁶ Deborah Belle, and Heather E Bullock. *The Psychology of Poverty, Wealth, and Economic Inequality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2023. 31.

⁷ Nancy Flowers. *The Human Rights Education Handbook: Effective Practices for Learning, Action, and Change*. Human Rights Education Series, Topic Book. Human Rights Resource Center, University of Minnesota, 2000. 7.

⁸ Ilia Bantekas and Lutz Oette. *International Human Rights Law and Practice*. Third edition. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2020. 593.

poverty vary, it is often associated with low levels of educational attainment, poor health, precarious work and living conditions, stigmatization, and marginalization.⁹ People in poverty not only face many obstacles in accessing rights and entitlement (including education, housing, nutritious food, healthcare, and work, but also political participation); they also are caught in a vicious cycle in which those deprivations themselves make it more difficult for them to escape poverty.¹⁰

From 1990 to 2025, the total number of people worldwide living in extreme poverty declined from around 2.3 billion to 831 million, each trying to survive on less than \$3 per day.¹¹ This substantial reduction was mainly driven by strong, widespread economic growth in East Asia and South Asia.¹² Over the last decade, progress in reducing global poverty has slowed significantly. This deceleration is driven by a mix of overlapping challenges, including weak economic growth, high levels of debt, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing conflict and instability, and increasingly severe weather-related events.¹³ These overlapping crises have hit low-income countries the hardest. At the current pace of progress, it could take decades to eradicate extreme poverty and more than a century to lift people above \$6.85 per day.¹⁴

A human rights-based approach to poverty goes beyond simply recognizing unmet needs. It focuses on understanding and addressing the root causes of deprivation, viewing poverty as the

⁹ Iliia Bantekas and Lutz Oette. *International Human Rights Law and Practice*. Third edition. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2020. 593.

¹⁰ Martha F Davis, Morten Kjaerum, and Amanda Lyons. *Research Handbook on Human Rights and Poverty*. Edited by Morten Kjaerum, Martha F Davis, and Amanda Lyons. 1st ed. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021, 3. doi:10.4337/9781788977517. (Chicago 16th edition).

¹¹ "Poverty: World Bank Group." World Bank Group - International Development, Poverty, & Sustainability. Accessed March 24, 2026. <https://www.worldbank.org/ext/en/topic/poverty>.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ "Pathways out of the Polycrisis." World Bank, 2024, 1.

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/ed189cbd-46e7-4c9f-ab78-a68d50df5e67/content>.

outcome of systemic exclusion and discrimination.¹⁵ Local and international human rights non-governmental organizations have continued to combine a human right based approach with poverty reduction, but these experiences are not always well- documented, and questions remain as to their sustainability.¹⁶

Poverty is no longer defined in purely monetary terms-as a lack of income. It is seen, instead, as a multidimensional phenomenon associated with multiple violations of human rights, resulting from the lack of entitlement to a number of goods and services that are essential for the enjoyment of rights.¹⁷ Poverty is linked to the denial or violation of fundamental human rights, particularly economic, social, and cultural rights such as the right to housing, education, health, and an adequate standard of living.¹⁸ Viewing poverty through a human rights lens emphasizes that individuals are entitled to these conditions.

However, to understand the economic inequalities today it is important to look back in history to see why we are living in such an unequal society. The roots of disparities for Indigenous peoples can be traced back in Canadas history through the violent acts of assimilation through the *Indian Act* and residential schools.¹⁹ Through the *Indian Act* Indigenous peoples were displaced from their ancestral territories to reserves. Their identity and movements were regulated and when they took part in cultural practices they were criminalized. Residential schools were a significant part of the assimilatory regimes imposed by the Canadian government.

¹⁵ Martha F Davis, Morten Kjaerum, and Amanda Lyons. Research Handbook on Human Rights and Poverty. 2.

¹⁶ Markus Kaltenborn, Markus Krajewski, and Heike Kuhn. Sustainable Development Goals and Human Rights. 1st Edition 2020. Vol. 5. Cham: Springer Open, 2020, 12.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Suzanne Egan, and Anna Chadwick. Poverty and Human Rights: Multidisciplinary Perspectives. Edited by Anna Chadwick and Suzanne Egan, 1st ed., Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021, 4. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839102110>.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Comack. "Corporate Colonialism and the 'Crimes of the Powerful' Committed Against the Indigenous Peoples of Canada." Critical Criminology (Richmond, B.C.) (Dordrecht) 26, no. 4 (2018): 463-466.

With the goal of Indigenous erasure, they were places of torture characterized in some cases by rampant disease, abuse, underfunding, and other inhumane conditions.²⁰ Residential schools destroyed Indigenous communities by decimating their family structures, social organizations, cultural pride and traditions, language, and ways of knowing.

The negative consequences of intergenerational trauma inflicted on Indigenous peoples by residential schools are still prominent today. First Nations reserves are among the poorest communities in Canada.²¹ Conditions in many inner-city areas can be just as difficult, where Indigenous people often face what is described by Elizabeth Comack as “complex poverty.”²² This includes a high prevalence of inadequate housing, poor health, lower educational outcomes, exposure to gang activity and violence, social exclusion, racism, and the stigmatization and stereotyping of entire communities and their residents.²³ In 2022, Statistics Canada reported that 17.5% of the Indigenous population aged 15 years and older lived in poverty.²⁴ This is nearly double the poverty rate of the non-Indigenous population.²⁵ Indigenous people are statistically over-represented in all indicators of social well being (such as unemployment, poverty, and children in protective care).²⁶

Under international human rights law poverty is a fundamental human rights violation as set out in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

²⁰ Michaela M McGuire and Danielle J Murdoch, “(In)-justice: An Exploration of the Dehumanization, Victimization, Criminalization, and Over-incarceration of Indigenous Women in Canada,” 532.

²¹ Elizabeth Comack. “Corporate Colonialism and the ‘Crimes of the Powerful’ Committed Against the Indigenous Peoples of Canada.” *Critical Criminology* (Richmond, B.C.) (Dordrecht) 26, no. 4 (2018): 466.

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. “The Daily — Canadian Income Survey, 2022,” April 26, 2024. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240426/dq240426a-eng.htm#:~:text=Poverty%20rate%20approaches%20pre%2Dpandemic,up%20from%208.6%25%20in%202021.>

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Allison Harell, Stuart Soroka, and Kiera Ladner. “Public Opinion, Prejudice and the Racialization of Welfare in Canada.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (London) 37, no. 14 (2014): 2584.

(ICESCR) which states that everyone has a right to “an adequate standard of living for [their] family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.”²⁷ Similarly, Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”²⁸ This multidimensional understanding of poverty reflects the indivisible and interdependent nature of all human rights.

The United Nations Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights states that “poverty has an urgent human rights concern in itself. It is both a cause and consequence of human rights violations and an enabling condition for other violations. Not only is extreme poverty characterized by multiple reinforcing violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, but persons living in poverty generally experience regular denials of their dignity and equality.”²⁹

This means that states have an obligation under international law to respect, protect and fulfil these fundamental human rights.³⁰ Respecting rights requires states to not take any actions that

²⁷ International Covenant on Economic, social and cultural rights | ohchr. Accessed March 17, 2026. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>.

²⁸ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” United Nations. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

²⁹ Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights.” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, September 2012, 2. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/OHCHR_ExtremePovertyandHumanRights_EN.pdf.

³⁰ Suzanne Egan, and Anna Chadwick. Poverty and Human Rights: Multidisciplinary Perspectives. Edited by Anna Chadwick and Suzanne Egan, 1st ed., Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021, 11. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839102110>.

would violate human rights, protecting rights “entails a body of legally enforceable rights reinforced by remedies.”³¹ This means that states are required to protect individuals from human right violations committed by non-state actors, and fulfilling rights “can involve both providing and facilitating the right.”³² Governments therefore have an obligation to help alleviate the conditions that contribute to hardships endured by those facing poverty. At the same time, the obligation to respect places a negative duty on governments to avoid creating policies or economic conditions that push individuals into poverty or keep them trapped there without meaningful access to their rights, particularly through fiscal decisions and broader political and economic policies.³³ In addition, while the obligations to protect and to fulfill are especially important in addressing the material deprivation of economic, social, and cultural rights commonly experienced by those living in poverty, they are also critical in addressing non-material deprivations of civil and political rights.³⁴ These include fundamental rights such as political participation, personal security, and access to justice, which are often limited or denied to individuals experiencing poverty.³⁵

Individuals who experience poverty are often faced with systematic discrimination and structural barriers. Thomas Pogge argues that the link between poverty and human rights lies in the right to secure access to an adequate standard of living.³⁶ When this right is not fulfilled,

³¹ Rhona K. M. Smith, *International Human Rights Law*. 10th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, 308.

³² Rhona K. M. Smith, *International Human Rights Law*. 10th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, 308.

³³ Suzanne Egan, and Anna Chadwick. *Poverty and Human Rights: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Edited by Anna Chadwick and Suzanne Egan, 1st ed., Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021, 11. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839102110>.

³⁴ Suzanne Egan, and Anna Chadwick. *Poverty and Human Rights: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Edited by Anna Chadwick and Suzanne Egan, 1st ed., Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021, 11. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839102110>.

³⁵ *Ibid*

³⁶ Suzanne Egan, and Anna Chadwick. *Poverty and Human Rights: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Edited by Anna Chadwick and Suzanne Egan, 1st ed., Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021, 8. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839102110>.

people usually lack reliable access to the resources needed to enjoy other human rights.³⁷ This can include accessing the right to education.

Often accessing higher levels of education can be extremely challenging for many individuals. While some may assume that this issue only occurs in developing countries, it is also present here in Canada. Many communities lack local high schools, forcing youth to either relocate to complete their education or forgo earning their high school diploma all together. Inadequate access to schooling can often results in limited employment opportunities. In 2019, the Canadian unemployment rate for the non-Indigenous population was 5.5% versus 10.1% for Indigenous people.³⁸

Precarious employment often forces individuals to live in a state of ongoing insecurity, where unpredictable hours and unstable wages make it difficult to afford basic necessities such as housing.³⁹ In both Canada and the United States, labour laws are intended to protect workers by enforcing minimum standards for pay, benefits, and workplace safety, placing these responsibilities on employers. However, many employers have found ways to circumvent these protections through arrangements such as temporary agencies, franchise systems, and contract labour.⁴⁰ These practices often fall outside the scope of labour laws that were written nearly a century ago and no longer reflect the realities of modern work.⁴¹ The development of these new forms of employment is rooted in neoliberal ideas that emphasize increasing employer autonomy

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Quentin Durand-Moreau, Jesse Lafontaine, and Jennifer Ward. "Work and Health Challenges of Indigenous People in Canada." *The Lancet Global Health* (England) 10, no. 8 (2022): e1191.

³⁹ Deborah Belle, and Heather E Bullock. *The Psychology of Poverty, Wealth, and Economic Inequality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2023, 102.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

and encouraging businesses to hire more workers.⁴² This approach promotes flexibility in the labour market, allowing workers and expertise to move according to shifting market demands while bypassing union regulations and reducing organizational costs.⁴³ However, the precarious nature of work within the neoliberal era has contributed to a growing number of employed individuals living in poverty.⁴⁴

As a result, labour uncertainty can perpetuate intergenerational poverty by undermining long-term stability for workers and their families. These challenges are often more severe for individuals with intersecting identities, such as race, gender, or sexual orientation, who may experience the negative impacts of precarious work more severely than others.⁴⁵

Part II: The Impacts of Neoliberalism on Poverty

Under neoliberal economic policies, poverty is often intensified as the state withdraws from its traditional role of providing social support. Neoliberalism is a political, economic, and ideological system that prioritizes free market competition, limited government and individual rights.⁴⁶ Under neoliberal frameworks governments reduce public spending and remove market regulations to encourage private sector growth. They do this in part because they believe that the welfare state does not help people living in poverty; rather it reinforces and increases poverty

⁴²Guy Feldman. "Neoliberalism and Poverty: An Unbreakable Relationship." In *Routledge International Handbook of Poverty*, edited by Bent Greve, 1st ed., 345. Routledge, 2020. doi:10.4324/9780429058103-27.

⁴³ Guy Feldman. "Neoliberalism and Poverty: An Unbreakable Relationship." In *Routledge International Handbook of Poverty*, edited by Bent Greve, 1st ed., 345. Routledge, 2020. doi:10.4324/9780429058103-27.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵Deborah Belle, and Heather E Bullock. *The Psychology of Poverty, Wealth, and Economic Inequality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2023. 60.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

because it creates perverse incentives that lead poor people not to work and not to be productive and responsible citizens.⁴⁷ This causes poverty to be seen as a personal failure and not one that is caused by systems. Loïc Wacquant in *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* discusses that in the late 20th century, many western countries experienced a decline in stable industrial jobs, were facing precarious work, and reduced welfare support. This caused widespread social insecurity among working class and marginalized populations. Instead of addressing structural causes such as unemployment and inequality, governments shifted blame on to individuals.

Individualism places the responsibility for both success and failure on the individual largely ignoring structural factors.⁴⁸ Individualism is integral to neoliberalism and is consistently identified along with racism as a strong predictor of negative attitudes toward anti-poverty programs, making clear that individualism discourages our sense of collective responsibility to each other.⁴⁹ These policies weaken social safety nets such as welfare programs and public housing, causing people to suffer further from the effects of poverty.

As rich countries embraced free-market policies and personal responsibility, they also adopted tougher policing and punishment, especially against the poor and marginalized who struggled under these new economic conditions.⁵⁰ Neoliberalism emphasizes individual responsibility causing governments to become harsher and more punitive towards certain groups,

⁴⁷Guy Feldman. "Neoliberalism and Poverty: An Unbreakable Relationship." In Routledge International Handbook of Poverty, edited by Bent Greve, 1st ed. Routledge, 2020 342-343. doi:10.4324/9780429058103-27.

⁴⁸Deborah Belle, and Heather E Bullock. *The Psychology of Poverty, Wealth, and Economic Inequality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2023, 30.

⁴⁹Deborah Belle, and Heather E Bullock. *The Psychology of Poverty, Wealth, and Economic Inequality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2023, 31.

⁵⁰Loïc Wacquant. "Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity." libcom.org, 2009. 1. <https://libcom.org/article/punishing-poor-neoliberal-government-social-insecurity-loic-wacquant>.

especially poor people, the unemployed, and individuals involved in the criminal justice system.⁵¹ Therefore, problems that were once social or economic issues such as houselessness and addiction are now treated as criminal issues that require policing rather than social assistance. While the social welfare system begins to shrink the punitive system grows to fill the void.

While neoliberalism represents a particular policy approach within capitalist economies, the broader capitalist system itself also shapes the conditions that produce poverty. Under a capitalist society essential need such as education, healthcare, and housing are treated at commodities instead of universal rights. The negative impacts of capitalism and neoliberalism prove how economic systems can deepen inequalities and further perpetuate cycles of poverty. This demonstrates that poverty is not merely an individual issue but a systemic one that is produced by policy choices that prioritize market efficiency over social protection.

Together, neoliberal ideology, labour precarity, and capitalism's commodification of social rights create a reinforcing cycle of poverty. Neoliberalism weakens protections, labour uncertainty destabilizes livelihoods, and capitalism prioritizes profit over human rights. The result is not just economic deprivation but also a systemic denial of dignity, equality, and justice.

Reviews of empirical research indicate that discussions of poverty within Canadian professional communities are increasingly framed through a social exclusion lens. In scholarship this perspective emphasizes the processes and structural conditions that marginalize individuals and social groups, including the role of policies, programs, institutions, and social actors.⁵² By

⁵¹ Loïc Wacquant. "Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity." libcom.org, 2009. 4. <https://libcom.org/article/punishing-poor-neoliberal-government-social-insecurity-loic-wacquant>.

⁵² Linda I. Reutter, Gerry Veenstra, Miriam J. Stewart, Dennis Raphael, and et al. "Public Attributions for Poverty in Canada*." *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (02, 2006): 2.

doing so, it shifts the focus of social inequality away from individual responsibility and toward broader societal factors.⁵³ Public beliefs about the causes of poverty are central to discussions of social exclusion and inclusion. Stereotypical portrayals of people in poverty are embedded within, and perpetuated by, dominant societal explanations of poverty.⁵⁴

However, it has been identified that there is very little research published on stigma related to poverty in a Canadian context.⁵⁵ Therefore, there is a need for country specific research and data collection regarding attributions of poverty and public opinion.

Part III: How can we Change Public Attitudes Through Human Rights Education

Erving Goffman defined stigma as a deeply discrediting attribute that reduces an individual “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.”⁵⁶ This definition demonstrates that people who are stigmatized have something that makes them different often causing people to view them as “less than.” Stigma is a key factor in social exclusion, as those who are stigmatized tend to be viewed negatively and are consequently at greater risk of exclusion.⁵⁷ Challenging stereotypes and stigma surrounding poverty is critical, as many social

<https://uml.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/public-attributions-poverty-canada/docview/234926771/se-2>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁵⁵ Linda I. Reutter, Miriam J. Stewart, Gerry Veenstra, Rhonda Love, Dennis Raphael, and Edward Makwarimba. “Who Do They Think We Are, Anyway?": Perceptions of and Responses to Poverty Stigma.” *Qualitative Health Research* 19, no. 3 (March 2009): 298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732308330246>.

⁵⁶ Deborah Belle, and Heather E Bullock. *The Psychology of Poverty, Wealth, and Economic Inequality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2023. 50.

⁵⁷ Linda I. Reutter, Miriam J. Stewart, Gerry Veenstra, Rhonda Love, Dennis Raphael, and Edward Makwarimba. “Who Do They Think We Are, Anyway?": Perceptions of and Responses to Poverty Stigma.” *Qualitative Health Research* 19, no. 3 (March 2009): 298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732308330246>.

identities and characteristics are stigmatized, including those associated with marginalized groups, as well as behaviours perceived as socially inappropriate, such as nontraditional gender expression and substance misuse.⁵⁸ If these stigmas are not challenged this leads to gaps between communities, further excluding marginalized groups.

Deborah Belle and Heather E Bullock in *“The Psychology of Poverty, Wealth, and Economic Inequality,”* discussed the terms “takers” and “makers” which are often used in the United States. “Takers” are those who allegedly extract more from society and government than they contribute and “makers” those who create jobs and spur innovation.⁵⁹ Devalued as dependant “takers,” people receiving public assistance, particularly poor single mothers of colour, are stereotyped as lazy, sexually available, bad mothers, and uninterested in education and self-improvement.⁶⁰

I would argue that the division between “takers” and “makers” can also be observed in Canada, particularly in how people perceive those who rely on welfare programs. Individuals who use the welfare system are often stigmatized and labeled as “takers,” with the assumption that they are benefiting from government support without contributing to society. However, these judgments are frequently made without understanding the root causes of their circumstances, such as unemployment, health issues, limited access to education, or other structural barriers. At the same time, individuals who are wealthy or financially successful are often praised as hardworking and self-made, even though their success may also be influenced by factors such as family support, educational opportunities, or social advantages. This contrast highlights how

⁵⁸Deborah Belle, and Heather E Bullock. *The Psychology of Poverty, Wealth, and Economic Inequality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2023. 50.

⁵⁹Deborah Belle, and Heather E Bullock. *The Psychology of Poverty, Wealth, and Economic Inequality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2023.58.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

public perceptions can oversimplify complex social and economic realities, reinforcing stereotypes about welfare recipients while overlooking the broader conditions that shape people's opportunities and challenges. However, research in a Canadian context on poverty stigma is very limited.

Dolores Albarracin and Sharon Shavitt explain in their article *Attitudes and attitude change* how people develop opinions or evaluations about people, issues, or objects, and how these attitudes can change through persuasion, social interaction, and personal experiences. Elizabeth Segal suggests that perspectives on poverty tend to correlate with personal experiences or a lack thereof.⁶¹ Using a social empathy framework is useful in helping to educate students to appreciate the unique perspectives and experiences of individuals.⁶² Segal describes social empathy as a crucial pathway for achieving meaningful social change and advancing justice within communities.⁶³ Social empathy supports change efforts that are grounded in the real-life experiences of others. People who practice social empathy are more likely to recognize the complexity of society, understand the structural factors that contribute to social problems, and move beyond relying on personal assumptions or stereotypes.⁶⁴

Schwartz and Robinson in *Attitudes toward Poverty during Undergraduate Education* argue that formal coursework can significantly shape students' beliefs and attitudes toward marginalized populations. They note that how individuals perceive the causes of poverty is

⁶¹Elizabeth A. Segal "Social Empathy: A New Paradigm to Address Poverty." *Journal of Poverty* 11, no. 3 (2007): 77.

⁶²Jennifer M. Frank, and Karen Rice. 2017. "Perceptions of Poverty in America: Using Social Empathy to Reframe Students' Attitudes." *Social Work Education* 36 (4): 394. doi:10.1080/02615479.2017.1287261.

⁶³Elizabeth A. Segal, 2011. "Social Empathy: A Model Built on Empathy, Contextual Understanding, and Social Responsibility That Promotes Social Justice." *Journal of Social Service Research* 37 (3): 268. doi:10.1080/01488376.2011.564040.

⁶⁴ Jennifer M. Frank, and Karen Rice. 2017. "Perceptions of Poverty in America: Using Social Empathy to Reframe Students' Attitudes." *Social Work Education* 36 (4): 394. doi:10.1080/02615479.2017.1287261.

closely linked to their attitudes about people experiencing poverty.⁶⁵ Students who endorse individualistic explanations such as viewing poverty as the result of personal failings or poor decisions tend to hold more negative views of those who are poor.⁶⁶ These attitudes often translate into reduced support for programs intended to assist them. If these patterns continue, they may lead to students entering their professions without the social empathy necessary to recognize strengths and empower individuals experiencing poverty, or to students avoiding working with the communities that are the most marginalized and oppressed.

In the 1950s and 1960s, human rights education was defined as cognitive learning for young people in a formal school setting.⁶⁷ By the 1970s however, many educators had expanded the concept to include the development of critical thinking and concern as well as concern and empathy for those who have experienced a violation of their rights.⁶⁸ Despite this shift, the focus remained largely on school-based education for youth, with little or no attention to personal responsibility or action to promote and defend rights or effect social change.⁶⁹

This understanding began to broaden in the early 1990s. At the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, human rights education was declared “essential for the promotion and achievement of stable and harmonious relations among communities and for fostering mutual understanding, tolerance and peace.”⁷⁰ In December 1994, with the proclamation of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education, the United Nations General Assembly defined

⁶⁵ Sanford Schwartz, and Margaret M Robinson. “Attitudes toward Poverty during Undergraduate Education.” *Journal of Social Work Education* 27, no. 3 (1991): 290–96.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Nancy Flowers. *The Human Rights Education Handbook: Effective Practices for Learning, Action, and Change*. Human Rights Education Series, Topic Book. Human Rights Resource Center, University of Minnesota, 2000. 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Patricia Brander, Laure De Witte, Nazila Ghanea-Hercock, et al. *Compass: Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People*. 2nd edition (reprinted with revisions). Edited by Vera Juhász and Annette Schneider. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2016, 17.

human rights education as “a life-long process by which people at all levels of development and in all strata of society learn respect for the dignity of others and the means and methods of ensuring that respect for all societies.”⁷¹ The Assembly also emphasized that responsibility for human rights education rests with all elements of society including governments, nongovernmental organizations, professional associations, other sectors of civil society, and individuals.⁷²

Human rights education has been defined in various ways over time. The United Nations World Programme for Human Rights Education defines HRE as education, training, and information that aim to build a universal culture of human rights.⁷³ Comprehensive human rights education not only provides knowledge about human rights and the mechanisms that protect them but also develops the skills required to promote, defend, and apply human rights in everyday life. Furthermore, it fosters the attitudes and behaviours necessary to uphold the rights of all members of society.⁷⁴

Participation in democratic processes requires not only civic involvement but also a conscious commitment to core human rights and democratic values such as equality and fairness and the ability to identify injustices, including racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination,

⁷¹ Nancy Flowers. *The Human Rights Education Handbook: Effective Practices for Learning, Action, and Change*. Human Rights Education Series, Topic Book. Human Rights Resource Center, University of Minnesota, 2000. 9.

⁷² Nancy Flowers. *The Human Rights Education Handbook: Effective Practices for Learning, Action, and Change*. Human Rights Education Series, Topic Book. Human Rights Resource Center, University of Minnesota, 2000. 9.

⁷³ Patricia Brander, Laure De Witte, Nazila Ghanea-Hercock, et al. *Compass: Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People*. 2nd edition (reprinted with revisions). Edited by Vera Juhász and Annette Schneider. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2016, 18.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

as violations of those principles.⁷⁵ Only people who understand human rights will work to secure and defend them for themselves and others.⁷⁶

If taught in a meaningful way human rights education can play a vital role in active citizenship. It can equip individuals with the capacity to think critically, make ethical decisions, take principled positions on social issues, and engage meaningfully in democratic action. Human rights are often seen as universal ideals that highlight the victim's entitlements when violated by others. Many people focus on the abuses committed by outsiders but pay little attention to rights violations within their own ethnic or religious community.⁷⁷ Human rights education should not only teach about rights but also critically analyze how rights are produced, interpreted, and sometimes misused.

Understanding human rights is essential, but on its own it is not enough. Young people need a deeper awareness of how human rights arise from basic human needs and why they must be safeguarded.⁷⁸ For example, those who have not personally experienced racial discrimination might believe it does not affect them. However, from a human rights standpoint, this view is unacceptable. Everyone has a responsibility to uphold and protect the rights of others.⁷⁹

A Canadian study revealed significant variation in how the public understands the causes of poverty, with most participants favouring structural explanations over individualistic ones.⁸⁰

⁷⁵Nancy Flowers. *The Human Rights Education Handbook: Effective Practices for Learning, Action, and Change*. Human Rights Education Series, Topic Book. Human Rights Resource Center, University of Minnesota, 2000. 15.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷Michalinos Zembylas, and André Keet. *Critical Human Rights Education: Advancing Social-Justice-Oriented Educational Praxes*. 1st ed. 2019., vol. 13, Springer, 2019, 2. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27198-5>.

⁷⁸ Patricia Brander, Laure De Witte, Nazila Ghanea-Hercock, et al. *Compass: Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People*. 2nd edition (reprinted with revisions). Edited by Vera Juhász and Annette Schneider. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2016, 34.

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰Linda I. Reutter, Gerry Veenstra, Miriam J. Stewart, Dennis Raphael, et al. "Public Attributions for Poverty in Canada*." *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (02, 2006): 16.

Poverty was predominantly viewed as the result of social exclusion shaped and maintained by the actions of powerful groups and institutional policies, rather than personal failings. The findings also highlight the influence of education on these perceptions: although fewer than half of respondents had attended formal presentations on poverty, those who had were more likely to adopt structural attributions.⁸¹ Overall, the study suggests that awareness-raising and educational initiatives can play an important role in shaping beliefs and attitudes about poverty and its underlying causes.⁸²

Similarly, Jennifer Frank and Karen Rice discuss an American study that was developed to assist in understanding poverty through the perspective of those experiencing it. The purpose of the study was to determine if first-year social work students enrolled in *Perspectives in Poverty in America*, a social work course using a social empathy framework, would experience a difference in perceptions of poverty and those living in poverty following completion of the course.⁸³ After completing the course, students were more likely to support programs that help people in poverty and believed that the use of taxes to support these programs are appropriate.⁸⁴ By rejecting meritocracy, students were able to challenge the idea that poverty is a result of individual choice.⁸⁵ Therefore, students developed a deeper structural perspective on the causes and nature of poverty.⁸⁶ This course, grounded in a framework of social empathy and

<https://uml.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/public-attributions-poverty-canada/docview/234926771/se-2>.

⁸¹Ibid, 19.

⁸² Linda I. Reutter, Gerry Veenstra, Miriam J. Stewart, Dennis Raphael, et al. "Public Attributions for Poverty in Canada*." *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (02, 2006): 19.
<https://uml.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/public-attributions-poverty-canada/docview/234926771/se-2>.

⁸³ Jennifer M. Frank, and Karen Rice. 2017. "Perceptions of Poverty in America: Using Social Empathy to Reframe Students' Attitudes." *Social Work Education* 36 (4): 399. doi:10.1080/02615479.2017.1287261.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 400.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid

supported by the pedagogical tools used, proved to be an effective approach for changing some students' attitudes toward poverty.⁸⁷ Although, the study showed results in changing student's perspectives on poverty, it is difficult to say if these results would be transferable to the general public.

A study conducted in the United States examined the impact of a poverty simulation and how personal characteristics influence clinicians' attitudes toward poverty. These simulations are immersive experiences where participants role-play the life of a member of a low-income family, helping to improve understanding and attitudes toward individuals living in poverty.⁸⁸ These simulations have been tested in samples of undergraduate students and have been shown to effectively increase knowledge of the challenges of living in poverty.⁸⁹ Qualitative data collected immediately after the simulation overwhelmingly showed that participants found the simulation helpful and felt it increased their compassion, empathy, and understanding and decreased their judgment towards their low-income patients. Many participants described the simulation as “eye-opening” and reported that they experienced feelings of frustration and stress when role-playing life as a member of a low-income family.⁹⁰ Overall, the findings showed that poverty simulations are effective at least temporarily, in reducing stigma and increasing awareness of the external factors that contribute to poverty.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Jennifer M. Frank, and Karen Rice. 2017. “Perceptions of Poverty in America: Using Social Empathy to Reframe Students' Attitudes.” *Social Work Education* 36 (4): 401. doi:10.1080/02615479.2017.1287261.

⁸⁸ Paula M Murray, Aviril Sepulveda, and Jennifer Baird. “Longitudinal Impact of a Poverty Simulation on Healthcare Practitioners' Attitudes towards Poverty.” *Journal of Pediatric Nursing (United States)* 64 (May 2022): 25.

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Ibid, 27

⁹¹ Ibid, 29.

The Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties (MARL) is a non-profit organization that combines education, advocacy, and public engagement to promote justice in Manitoba.⁹² MARL's mission is to inspire action for social justice, human rights, and civil liberties. They do this through public education that is rooted in real world conversation. Their work focuses on equipping individuals and organizations with the critical tools needed to identify systemic inequalities and take informed action.

During my time at MARL, I worked alongside staff to design and facilitate workshops and events for both youth and adults. Some of the workshops I facilitated included *Unpacking Poverty*, *Knowing Your Rights*, *Anti-racism and Microaggressions*, and *Power and Privilege*. These experiences allowed me to engage directly with community members and gain a deeper understanding of how poverty is experienced and perceived at the local level. Through facilitating these sessions, I encouraged dialogue and reflection, raised awareness, and promoted critical thinking about issues such as inequality and systemic barriers. I also worked to challenge stereotypes and support participants in feeling empowered to take action within their communities.

I facilitated an *Unpacking Poverty* workshop at St. Marys Academy; a private school located in Winnipeg where we did an activity where participants were given individual profiles that outlined specific needs and fixed incomes. Working in groups, students had to decide how to allocate limited resources across essential expenses such as housing, food, clothing, and transportation. Although all of these are basic necessities, the activity highlighted the difficult and often impossible choices individuals living in poverty must make on a daily basis. This

⁹² The Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties, July 12, 2025. <https://marl.mb.ca/>.

exercise encouraged youth to view poverty from a different perspective, fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of the structural constraints that shape people's lives, rather than attributing hardship to personal failure.

Another workshop I facilitated was a *Know Your Rights* session for adults who live in Manitoba Housing, this workshop focused specifically on discrimination law. Many individuals living in poverty are often unaware of their legal rights. While it is important to educate those who are not experiencing poverty about issues related to poverty, it is equally important to inform those who are directly affected about their fundamental human rights. Providing this knowledge helps empower individuals to recognize and address human rights violations when they occur.

Some of my observations throughout the completion of my practicum with MARL include noticeable curriculum inconsistencies within schools. Although the curriculum in Manitoba is standardized across the province, it is often not delivered consistently in all classrooms. Variations in teacher training, available resources, and levels of classroom support mean that students do not all have equal opportunities to engage with and fully understand the material. As a result, inequitable educational outcomes can emerge, with some students receiving a more comprehensive or higher-quality learning experience than others, despite education being a universal right. This inconsistency is particularly evident when teaching sensitive but essential topics such as the history of residential schools and intergenerational trauma. Because these subjects are complex and emotionally charged, some educators may avoid or minimize these discussions out of concern about causing offence or discomfort. However, avoiding these conversations can limit students' understanding of historical and ongoing injustices, further contributing to gaps in knowledge and awareness.

Another observation I made was that funding for MARL was extremely limited, which required the organization to run many of its programs with very limited staff. This led to fewer workshops being delivered and, consequently, a reduced impact on the community. This challenge is compounded by the broader context in which many non-profit organizations are currently operating, where funding is increasingly scarce. As a result, organizations are often forced to minimize staff, which spreads existing staff capacity thin and can lead to burnout while limiting program effectiveness.

If human rights education is to have a meaningful impact on individuals, it requires sufficient funding to support an adequate number of facilitators. With more staff and resources, organizations would be better positioned to expand their reach, deliver more workshops, and create a deeper, more sustained impact within the community.

I also noticed significant funding disparities among schools. Private schools often have more financial resources than public schools to pay for external workshops and educational programming. This creates unequal access to these learning opportunities and may further perpetuate cycles of inequality, as schools with greater funding are more able to provide students with additional educational resources and experiences.

Overall, through my work with MARL, I learned that Human Rights Education is valuable because it allows learners to engage with alternative and more meaningful approaches to learning. These approaches include methods such as holistic learning, open-ended learning, and value clarification which encourage reflection, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of complex social issues.

Holistic learning focuses on the development of the whole person, including their intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative, and spiritual capacities.⁹³ It also recognizes that learning occurs within a broader social context that includes everyday experiences.⁹⁴ As a result, holistic learning is interdisciplinary in nature and extends beyond traditional subject boundaries within the curriculum.⁹⁵ At MARL, storytelling functions as a form of holistic learning by shifting abstract policy discussions toward lived experiences. In doing so, the human impacts of laws, institutional practices, and public policies become more visible and therefore harder to overlook

Open-ended learning is designed so that multiple and complex answers to problems are not only possible but expected. Rather than guiding participants toward a single “correct” answer, this approach acknowledges that real-world issues are often ambiguous and cannot be reduced to simple solutions.⁹⁶ Open-ended learning encourages self-confidence in expressing opinions and promotes critical thinking. This is particularly important in human rights education, as human rights issues often lead to differing perspectives and interpretations. Therefore, it is important for learners to engage with one another’s ideas while remaining free to disagree or arrive at different conclusions and viewpoints.⁹⁷

Value clarification allows participants opportunities to identify, clarify, and express their own beliefs and values and to confront them with others in a safe framework based on dignity of

⁹³ Patricia Brander, Laure De Witte, Nazila Ghanea-Hercock, et al. *Compass: Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People*. 2nd edition (reprinted with revisions). Edited by Vera Juhász and Annette Schneider. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2016, 32.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Patricia Brander, Laure De Witte, Nazila Ghanea-Hercock, et al. *Compass: Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People*. 2nd edition (reprinted with revisions). Edited by Vera Juhász and Annette Schneider. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2016, 32.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

every human being.⁹⁸ At MARL, we explore ideas collaboratively and foster open dialogue, recognizing that discussing different perspectives helps individuals broaden their understanding.

Conclusion: Progress Made, Work Remaining

In conclusion, knowing about human rights is not enough; people must also develop skills and attitudes to act together to defend human rights, they must use their heads, hearts, and hands to bring about the personal and social changes necessary for the creation of a global culture of human rights.⁹⁹

As demonstrated throughout this paper, poverty stigma is a powerful form of social exclusion that reinforces inequality. It not only affects individuals on an emotional and psychological level undermining self-worth and belonging but also creates real, structural barriers. People experiencing poverty may face discrimination in housing, employment, education, and healthcare, limiting their access to essential resources and opportunities. In this way, stigma does not simply reflect inequality; it actively reproduces and deepens it across generations. Addressing poverty, therefore, requires more than economic reform alone. It also demands a transformation in how society perceives and responds to those living in poverty.

Human Rights Education can play an important role in this process. Once individuals understand human rights concepts, they begin to look for their realization in their own lives, examining their communities, families, and personal experiences through a human rights lens.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Patricia Brander, Laure De Witte, Nazila Ghanea-Hercock, et al. *Compass: Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People*. 2nd edition (reprinted with revisions). Edited by Vera Juhász and Annette Schneider. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2016, 33.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Nancy Flowers. *The Human Rights Education Handbook: Effective Practices for Learning, Action, and Change*. Human Rights Education Series, Topic Book. Human Rights Resource Center, University of Minnesota, 2000, 16.

This shift in perspective can help challenge harmful stereotypes and reduce stigma by framing poverty as an issue of human dignity rather than individual failure.

The findings of this research suggest that policy initiatives should more intentionally incorporate HRE into formal and informal learning spaces. This could include integrating HRE into school curricula at various levels, supporting community-based education programs, and developing public awareness campaigns that promote dignity and inclusion. Educators and policymakers can also benefit from training that equips them to address poverty not only as an economic issue but as a human rights concern.

In addition, collaboration with community organizations, advocacy groups, and individuals with lived experience of poverty can strengthen these efforts. Including diverse voices ensures that educational initiatives are grounded in reality and resonate more effectively with learners. Media and public discourse also have an important role to play in reshaping narratives, moving away from blame-based portrayals toward more nuanced and humanizing representations. Additionally, incorporating experiential learning into school curricula can be highly valuable.¹⁰¹ Core human rights skills and values such as communication, critical thinking, advocacy, tolerance, and respect are not effectively taught through theory alone; they must be developed through lived experience and continuous practice.¹⁰²

Ultimately, Human Rights Education has the potential to empower individuals to challenge stigma, unlearn deeply rooted stereotypes, and advocate for more just and inclusive systems. By reframing poverty as a violation of fundamental human rights rather than a personal

¹⁰¹ Patricia Brander, Laure De Witte, Nazila Ghanea-Hercock, et al. *Compass: Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People*. 2nd edition (reprinted with revisions). Edited by Vera Juhász and Annette Schneider. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2016, 33.

¹⁰² Ibid

shortcoming, it becomes possible to foster greater solidarity, influence policy change, and work toward a society where dignity and equality are truly upheld for all.

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