

Final Report

The Rights Stuff: Youth Training Workshops on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

Introduction

The Rights Stuff: Youth Training Workshops on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms has had an excellent year. We traveled across the country doing five regional forums, beginning in Sackville, New Brunswick, August, 2003 and ending January 29 in Montréal, Quebec. We started planning the logistics of the program in April of 2003 and continue to build a network of youth across the country, who are working as advocates of human rights in their regions. Our work has been rewarding as we helped foster a culture of human rights in many communities in Canada. In every workshop all territories and provinces have been represented, with youth stressing the importance of this work, wherever they came from. In this report we will proceed to outline our successes in detail, report what youth across Canada are concerned about, and make observations about where our work makes a difference. We would like to take this opportunity to thank Canadian Heritage, Human Rights Program for all your support in making this project a reality.

Outputs and Outcomes

Outputs:

- Regional Workshops
- School Presentations
- Dissemination of resource materials
- Building youth capacity to teach the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
- Creating The Rights Stuff website

Outcomes:

- A large, diverse network of youth discussing human rights across the country
- A group of youth from across Canada who now know and understand the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
- Canadian youth teaching the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in their schools and communities
- A youth manual, based on our workshops, helping youth teach human rights

Program Accomplishments

- **Building Awareness:** The first objective of this project has been to raise awareness and build understanding of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We held workshops on Sunday mornings in each region and had an average of 25 participants in each one. Most participants stated that they were very thankful to have had the opportunity to not only learn the Charter, but also to have in-depth discussions about it. There were quite a lot of youth who had never had the chance to study the Charter or any other human rights document. Many said that they would like to have it taught in their

schools and that they would love to be able to teach human rights and freedoms within a Canadian context.

While discussing the Charter and its impact on Canadian Human Rights practices, there were a lot of discussions about what human rights violations participants had observed in their own communities, schools and regions. Everything from youth suicide (lack of necessary facilities), police harassment, racial and cultural discrimination to homophobia and sexism was brought up as things that youth were concerned about. We found that many Canadian youths were aware of international issues and felt that they had opportunities to go overseas and learn about problems in other countries, but few knew about the Canadian constitution or the Canadian Charter of rights. In this way, our workshops served to build awareness that was not previously there.

- **Building Youth Networks:** Through information on our website (www.unac.org), providing links to regional resources and the creation of the Youth for Diversity online group, participants from our workshops have been able to stay in touch and continue discussions on human rights. Many youths remarked that they did not usually have a chance to meet or speak with other young people interested in similar issues. The forums were therefore an excellent and much appreciated opportunity for them to not feel isolated and uninformed. It was, however, clear that there was still a need for more of these opportunities and our participants continue to try and find links with other youths in their areas. It is, however, more difficult for youth in rural and isolated areas – particularly in northern communities – to stay linked to youth networks because many do not have access to the internet and some do not have access to phones. While making contacts and arrangements to go up north, we had to contact a lot of youth through their community centres and schools because of this lack of access to information technology. However, UNA-Canada continues to find ways to build networks in these isolated areas, as it appears that this is where they are most needed.
- **Youth Building Awareness:** This was probably the most important part of the project, and we believe that we have done an excellent job in finding youth who are willing and committed to the promotion of human rights in Canada. Copies of the Charter and The Guide to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms were disseminated throughout the months of travelling holding workshops. These are helping young people teach the Charter throughout the country. We have also received telephone calls and e-mails from youth who were unable to attend forums but who would like to teach the Charter in their schools and communities. Since then, the Human Rights program has developed and will be disseminating a manual (copy included) to not only help teach the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but also to help teach all areas of human rights. We have sought the support of past participants and students around the country to help us determine the usefulness of the manual and the reviews have been excellent. This manual will be distributed everywhere in support of young people who are already doing work and those who need help starting work as human rights monitors and advocates in Canada. It is a guide that focuses on Canadian youth and issues specific to Canadian schools and communities, something that our participants felt was greatly needed.
- **School Presentations:** Although not part of the initial project objectives, going into schools was an idea suggested by youth and regional coordinators. It was also something we did when we realised the vast amount of people we would be able to reach this way. This proved to be an excellent way for us to find out what was going on in Canadian schools and their connection to the human rights field. We were able to learn a lot about what human rights issues students were talking about and what they felt were urgent

issues in their areas. In fact we were able to identify gaps and recognise areas where there were needs for change. The following were the results of school visits:

Yellowknife, NWT

We had very positive and very helpful feedback (see: appendix 1) from teachers and students. We visited three schools on Thursday, September 18th and Friday, September 19th, and these were: Weledeh Catholic School, grade 7, St Patrick's High School, grades 9 and 10; and Sir John's High School. In total, we had 100 students participating in the school workshops. Approximately thirty more participants than we had hoped for. All schools comprised diverse student bodies, including African Canadians, Aboriginal as well as Inuit youth. Many of the students were new to Yellowknife, or at least relatively new – meaning they had been there for five years or less. Their differences – cultural, racial, etc. – proved to be a source of difficulty in the schools. Discussions of rights and freedoms brought heated and sometimes contentious discussions. The lack of knowledge and understanding of human rights as defined by the UN and the Canadian government was obvious. There were also discussions around the “fairness” of land rights and the nature of treaties. Many non-aboriginal students expressed resentment of aboriginal rights, but this was coming from no knowledge of history and the lack of opportunities for talks about human rights. Teachers and students stressed a need for more human rights education in schools, citing racism, cultural conflicts and effects of historical prejudices among their foremost concerns. Students did not feel that there was unity and understanding amongst them, and wanted to have places or groups where they could go and speak about human rights concerns on a regular basis. Sarah McGarry, a social studies teacher at St Patrick High School, has since kept in touch with us and wants to be a partner in creating sustainable projects to increase awareness of human rights issues and promote harmonious and discrimination-free schools.

All schools were given copies of the Charter and the Guide to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, a publication from the Department of Canadian Heritage, which they continue to teach and learn from.

Winnipeg, Manitoba

On Thursday and Friday we went into two inner-city schools. One was Argyle Alternative School with students who have not been in school regularly, and who were older than most high school students. Some were young parents who were working part-time and trying to complete high school. This was a very diverse group in their age, experience, culture, etc – which meant that the discussion was very different from those in schools we had previously visited. Whereas most high school students wanted to discuss historical cases linked to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and issues in their communities, the Argyle students were only interested in talking about their own individual problems as well as those of their immediate communities, and less concerned with the historical facts of the Charter.

Visiting Argyle was important because it felt as if we were reaching a group of people we do not normally reach. The professionals and other activists who usually come to our workshops are in a better position to attend than students at Argyle, and the teachers suggested that this was because of lack of time as they were juggling so many responsibilities in so little time. At the end of very strong, very passionate discussions on topics such as discrimination on the basis of age, social class and race, the students and the teachers concurred that these were very important discussions and that the school should be having more of them. We were invited to come again and lead other workshops in the future.

The second high school we were invited to was Sisler High School, a very well-respected school in the area, with a history of commitment to social justice. It was probably one of the most diverse high schools we had ever seen. Students' interests in national and international human rights were encouraged in both the history and social studies classes we attended. At the time of our visit the students were in the middle of preparing for their second year of working on their "virtual refugee camp" week, an educational model designed by the school to better inform students of the perils of refugee life, and the role of the United Nations in assisting refugees around the world.

The school regularly educates on the work of the United Nations and its role in today's society. There were also students who had formed clubs or groups that monitored international human rights violations and raised funds to support several rights causes around the world. We were invited to spend some time with these groups, learning how they worked and how they were started – some excellent examples on student organizing for social justice.

In light of all the work the school does, therefore, our discussions with the students on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms were very strong with a lot of participation from both teachers and students. The students were very interested in forming groups that would inform their peers about the Charter and its importance in Canadian society, as well as its relevance to the international community.

Kamloops, British Columbia – November 17

In Kamloops we were invited to three schools, West Side, North Kamloops and Valley View, all high schools.

The students at West Side had just begun studying the Charter, so this gave them an opportunity to do a more in-depth study of it, taking into account some national as well as international implications of the document. We also had a chance to talk about a few historical court cases in which decisions were made based on provisions of the Charter.

The next school we visited was North Kamloops, where we met with students from diverse backgrounds, with very different interests in the Charter. Discussions

were heated but focused, and the students challenged each other on issues such as racism, homophobia and terrorism. They also asked a lot of questions and were very appreciative of the workshop.

The last school we visited, Valley View, was very different from the first two because the students were all from the same background except for two, and the discussion was very challenging. Students' views were very discriminatory and quite offensive. It seemed to not be a safe space for the two students who came from cultures that were quite separate from the rest of the group. The workshop was possibly the most challenging one yet. There was no interference from the teachers, leaving us to do human rights education in a place where it was more needed than any other one we have been to. We spoke to the principal and the teachers about keeping in touch, sending the United Nations Association's anti-racism manual as well as the manual The Rights Stuff has created – Youth Teaching Rights (see: **Resource Materials**) - the school and spoke to the students about trying to form human rights groups/clubs that would encourage helpful dialogue in their environment.

Montreal, Quebec

Due to concerns about winter driving, how inaccessible the workshops might be to rural participants traveling by car as well as how expensive accommodations would be in Quebec City, we decided to take the workshop to Montreal, Quebec. We did two workshops at Mind High School with 60 students. Racism, cultural and language differences were three of the main topics students brought to the table. We discussed the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms alongside the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and spoke about racism, language and cultural concerns specific to Quebec. There was a lot of interest in the significance of the province's Charter and comparing it to the Federal Charter. Students had very productive discussions and responses to the workshop. While we tried going to different schools – both English and French – and while we speak both languages, we only got responses from English schools. The group was culturally and racially diverse; however we would have really liked to go to French schools. The response we got from many French schools was that there was only interest in the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and not in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. However, going to the province and bringing participants from rural areas within Quebec was a strong accomplishment and we continue to work with our regional coordinator, who is from Quebec, to try to reach more Francophone youth.

- **Resource Materials:** After identifying a high need for human rights education among Canadian youth, we put together our knowledge from the workshops we had done as well as the evaluations and feedback we got from participants. We then created a human rights manual for youth, which is accessible from our website. This manual was extremely important and very different from what is

available out there, based on our research and feedback from young Canadians. It is different because:

1. Unlike most manuals it is not geared towards school teachers. It was created to support young human rights educators and foster a culture of youth-as-human-rights-educators in all communities and schools.
 2. It is created specifically for addressing human rights issues in Canada, while most manuals on human rights focus on international human rights. This is because we recognize that Canadian youth have issues that are pressing and need attention, and we were responding to their call to help them teach human rights.
 3. It is designed to help Canadian youth focus on issues specific to their own communities and schools, and gives resources in each province and territory.
 4. It recognizes young Canadians as future decision makers and present human rights monitors, and encourages them on their journey to combating all types of discrimination.
 5. It includes and promotes the principles of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.
- **Bridging Gaps:** Our Travels to different parts of the country put us in touch with many people from diverse backgrounds and brought together individuals who had in many cases never had a chance to come together before. We provided space for young Canadians to meet others from different parts of the country and learn what was going on in places they had never been to. Not only did our forums create youth networks, but they also raised awareness and built better understanding of different parts of Canada. We only visited four provinces and one territory, but in the end we had met and spoken with youth from every province and every territory. This also gave youth to exchange ideas and build strategies for change together. For example, when in Yellowknife a young person from Nunavut was looking for ideas to reduce suicide rates and she got very helpful response from the Yukon, whose community had had some success in building morale among youth and combating factors that lead to youth suicide. Another example is that young people from St. John's Newfoundland spoke about their communities struggling to deal with a large number of refugees coming to live in the city – how there was a lot of racism from local residents – people from Halifax, where many immigrants and refugees had been living for many decades, offered suggestions on how to educate on issues newcomers face.

Workshop Structure

Our workshops – although always prepared beforehand – were always flexible and discussion-based. We structured our workshops around open, respectful conversations that flowed according to the needs of the participants. In the first two forums (New Brunswick and Yellowknife) we focused only on teaching the Charter and on building youth's capacity to teach the Charter themselves. However, it soon became clear that young people attended these forums not only to learn about the Charter but also to be in spaces where they would bring their human rights concerns to the table. The workshops

took on a different structure from the third (Winnipeg) to the last (Quebec) forum. We spent a lot of time after each discussion session talking about what youth were concerned about and what they felt should be done about problems in their regions. The most consistent suggestion we got from participants was that we should make the workshops longer, give it more time and more days because they had so much to discuss with us.

Challenges

- **Reaching rural, isolated youth:** One of our biggest challenges was in reaching rural and isolated youth. Especially in Northern communities, where there was no affordable transport to reach forums, we found that a lot of youth who were invited were not able to attend. 75 youth applied but because of expensive transportation, accommodation and a lack of funds, only 21 were able to attend the workshop. Those who did attend brought the concerns of rural and northern youth to us, making it clear that there was a great need for human rights education in these areas. There was also an incident where two aboriginal participants were confronted by a group of non-aboriginal youth and a fight ensued, where racial slurs were uttered. Young people reported that this happens a lot and that there needs to be more talk around youth's anger and their experience of hate-motivated conflicts. Forums of this nature are rare in northern communities, and young people stressed that they would like to come together more and have discussions on human rights. We found that our work was greatly needed by youth who unfortunately did not get the opportunity to talk about their concerns very often.
- **Time Constraints:** Because of the little time we had with each workshop (one half day), we found that we were ending discussions a lot sooner than youth were ready for. The most consistent suggestion we received from evaluations was that participants would have liked more time to talk because there were so many human rights concerns to discuss.
- **Different Interests:** It would have been better if we had had the opportunity to discuss human rights with youth in Quebec French schools, but we were not invited and our repeated requests and phone calls to teachers and principals often did not get responses. When discussing this with some teachers and youth, we were told that there is more of an interest in us coming only to discuss the Quebec Charter of Human Rights instead of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Although we stressed that we would be sure to discuss both Charters, this was not accepted. Quebec was the only region where there was a lack of interest in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. However, we did make some important contacts and we continue to try and find ways of having open dialogue on human rights with youth from Quebec. Many are on our internet discussion group, talking about issues that concern them.

Conclusion

Overall, The Rights Stuff: Youth Training Workshops on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was a highly successful project. We have built a strong network of youth across Canada, built awareness of the Charter and its significance in the lives of all Canadians and built youth capacity to teach the CCRF. Our website contains useful resources, helping youth teach the CCRF and giving links to other youth websites where there are on-going discussions on human rights. Our new manual, Youth Teaching Rights, is an extremely useful resource, tested by staff and young Canadians who will be able to use it in their schools and communities.

Appendix I

Region	Regions Participants came from	Human Rights Issues Discussed	Most Common Suggestions
Sackville, New Brunswick	Newfoundland, Southern, Eastern and Northern New Brunswick, Nova Scotia	Racism; immigration and refugee laws; cross-cultural conflicts; historical discrimination affecting black communities; newcomer issues/concerns	More workshops of this nature and more time
Yellowknife, NWT	Northern Alberta, Rural Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Yukon	Youth Suicide; lack of resources; isolation; racism; cross-cultural conflicts; youth justice system; health as a human right	More workshops of this nature; bring human rights education into schools; reach youth who are isolated; more time; need help with action plans
Winnipeg, Manitoba	Rural Manitoba, Western and South Western Ontario, Western Saskatchewan	Racism; new laws addressing homophobia; cross-cultural conflicts; newcomer issues; newcomer health	More time, more workshops
Kamloops, BC	Northern B.C., Alberta, Western Saskatchewan	Racism; aboriginal treaties & rights; Cross-cultural conflicts in schools.	More time; more workshops encouraging human rights education
Montreal, Quebec	Northern, rural Quebec, Eastern Ontario, Southern Quebec	Language and cultural differences; homophobia; job discrimination; racism; newcomer issues	More time, more workshops; more discussions

Budget and Youth Teaching Rights Manual Attached.