

Des Wilson

# Social Education



Special Section:

## The Rights of the Child

Beverly C. Edmonds and William R. Fernekes, editors

Also in this issue: Notable 1991 Children's Trade Books in the Field of Social Studies

The Official Journal of  
National Council for  
the Social Studies  
Volume 56  
Number 4  
April/May 1992

# Teaching Human Rights in Nigerian Schools: A Multimedia Approach

Des Wilson

*Social Education* 56(4), 1992, pp. 227-228, © 1992 National Council for the Social Studies

Nigeria is no different than other nations when it comes to teaching and practicing human rights and, specifically, children's rights. To teach children's rights, teachers must suit their strategies to students' real-life situations so that they can understand rights in a local context. Teachers, in other words, must bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Even though Nigeria has signed important international human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it has not yet set in motion the machinery necessary to implement such human rights obligations. A few United Nations publications have been made available to some institutions; the significance of human rights, children's rights, and people's and women's rights concepts, however, is often not clear to readers since they often clash with traditional cultural realities. For example, although a child learns that everyone has the right to life, individuals and the state violate that right every day. Sometimes the state justifies its violation of human rights leaving children caught between idealism and realism; sometimes the rights concepts are presented to the people in terms specific to Western culture making them difficult to understand in this non-Western country.

The Nigerian school system's curricular content is almost completely monocultural. Teachers are not significantly involved in curricular decision making at the elementary and secondary levels, and are expected to conform to the prescriptions of state educational policy. Even if educators wanted to teach children about the African Charter, obstacles exist because the charter is not included in the curriculum in a serious way. This is contrary to the provisions of Article 25 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, which clearly establishes the duty of the State Party to "promote and ensure through teaching, education and publication, the respect of the rights and freedoms contained in the present charter and to see to it that these freedoms and rights as well as corresponding obligations and duties are understood" (International Commis-

sion of Jurists 1985). In spite of the seemingly closed nature of Nigeria's curriculum, however, it is possible for teachers at all levels to incorporate human rights teaching into their lesson plans and to revise the existing curriculum.

## Strategies for Teaching Children's Rights

Nigeria's literacy rate is low compared to those of many industrialized nations. But even those deemed literate are, for all practical purposes, illiterate about these rights. They too need to be taught human rights. In fact, they sometimes constitute obstacles to the practice of human rights.

Teaching children's rights can be accomplished through the adoption of a multimedia, multichanneled approach both in and out of the classroom. A wide variety of modes exist for disseminating information, propagating culture, educating, entertaining, mobilizing, and promoting children's rights in society. Prominent among these methods are the printed media (including handbills and brochures), electronic media, and multimedia approaches such as interviews, talk, poetry, story telling, puppet shows, tape recordings, exhibitions, local fairs, music festivals, public film shows, itinerant information vans, street theater, workshops, conferences, and seminars. Teachers can select and employ the medium or channel most effective in their circumstances. The academic level of the class will, of course, help determine the medium used, because certain kinds of messages require certain media. Furthermore, teachers must carefully choose a medium that has cultural meaning for their students and that can be reinforced in the home. Human rights education must be approached within the traditional interests of the people and must be based on what they already know.

Most civil codes in Nigeria are built around family, village, and clan. Thus, the human rights educator's responsibility lies in attempting to extend these traditional codes, to modify them where they conflict with modern practices, and to point out the significance of the change. Before this process can succeed, educators must themselves be well educated on human rights issues.

## Classroom Caveats

Human and children's rights educators should be careful not to mystify human rights issues through the use of culture-specific forms of symbolism even though these are the most readily available. Rather than employing illustrations that

reflect specific cultural backgrounds—such as local modes of dress, idiomatic expressions, or other specific norms—and passing them off as universal, human rights educators should seek out and use relevant illustrations meaningful to specific cultural groups and situations, thus applying universal standards to local situations.

Teachers must strike a balance between age-old custom and an interpretation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child specific to Western culture. For instance, age plays an important symbolic role in social contact throughout Africa. Deference to and respect for the elder is crucial in African social relationships even though this practice has sometimes been exploited to the disadvantage of children. The sorts of interpretations of children's rights that could lead to a generational war are not desirable. As Clarence Dias (1987, 36–45) has noted, “existing human rights law tends to reflect its Eurocentric origins. It tends to be largely individualistic and assumes a level of equality in terms of capacity to assert one's rights.” On the other hand, Dias also avers, “in practice the strong have been much more successful in asserting their rights against the weak.”

Recognizing this, the task before educators is to help resolve these standards that lead to alienation. Educators can establish a link between theory and practice by giving voice to their experiences and, thus, can demystify human rights and allay the fears of adults. This is especially true in regard to educators from the world's poorest countries, where, as Dias (1987, 36–45) points out, human rights can be selectively enforced and, thus, misused by governments to “exploit, impoverish and perpetuate dependency relationships.”

One of the most effective ways to teach children about human rights is to employ songs. Dietz and Olatunji (1965, 1–2) have shown how music can be used to educate in nonliterate societies:

Through singing and clapping hands [the child] learns about the members of the family and the important people and events of [his or her] community, tribe and country....By singing songs which contain a moral, [the child's] mother teaches...what [his or her] people consider to be right or wrong...what [his or her] people value.

Because most learning activities in traditional Nigerian society are carried out through participation, including ceremonies, rituals, recitation, and demonstration, educators must fuse

these activities into their teaching whenever possible. For example, the ideas of “provision, protection, and participation,” which underlie the Convention on the Rights of the Child, can be taught through songs illustrating some of the convention's articles. A common theme in Nigerian folklore is the image of the lonely, unprotected child, usually the victim of the tradition of polygamy. Articles 18, 19, and 20 of the convention—which address child exploitation—can be demonstrated in song, extending the traditional child-victim theme to include violations covered in these articles.

Both in and out of the classroom, popular participatory theater can be used to propagate human rights awareness. The Samaru Street Theatre Project in Zaria, Nigeria, the Community Theatre for Education and Development of Sierra Leone, and the Marotholi Travelling Theatre and the Theatre for Development Project at the National University of Lesotho are current examples. In these projects, cast members discuss ideas with the community and additional ideas are often generated. With children, adults, and facilitators adding to the plot, it becomes easier for people to embrace a play's message. For instance, a child's right to live with his or her parents (Article 9 of the convention) can be easily articulated in a dramatic sketch that draws from the community audience the disadvantages of the separation of children and parents. Furthermore, if the characters are indigenous, the audience will more easily identify with them.

Such methods can enable children to learn in a manner consistent with human rights about important concepts such as the environment, the existence of rights in the nation-state and the world, and their duties and responsibilities to other human beings.

## References

- Dias, Clarence J. “Human Rights and Legal Services for the Rural Poor.” *The Review, Geneva: International Commission of Jurists*, no. 39 (December 1987): 36–45.
- Dietz, Betty W., and Michael B. Olatunji. *Musical Instruments of Africa*. New York: John Day Co., 1965.
- International Commission of Jurists. *Human and People's Rights in Africa and the African Charter*. Report of a Conference Held in Nairobi, 2–4 December 1985. Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 1985.

---

*Des Wilson is Associate Professor of Communication Arts at the University of Cross River State in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.*