

EVEN WARS HAVE LIMITS: EDUCATING ON INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

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“We have a choice today. We can either sit back, watch the devastation wrought by war and try to make our children look the other way; or we can choose to tell our children that what they see – or what they are themselves experiencing – is not acceptable, that this is not how it is supposed to be, and that they can behave differently, in ways inspired by deep-rooted respect for human dignity, both in peacetime and in the midst of armed conflict” (Jacques Forster, Vice-President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC).

This article presents an overview of why and how educators can respond to the changing nature of conflict and young people’s increasing exposure to it through the media. It highlights the need for and importance of educating young people on International Humanitarian Law (IHL) as a means of dealing with such changes and demonstrates how it can make a significant contribution to meeting the requirements of the various United Kingdom (UK) schools’ curricula.

Armed conflict has been a prevalent feature of human existence for thousands of years. It may manifest itself in various forms such as large-scale warfare between nations, internal conflict between different ethnic groups or civil unrest. The key trait these various forms of conflict have in common is the devastating impact on humankind. It was this human cost of conflict, witnessed by Henry Dunant at the Battle of Solferino in 1859, that led to his revolutionary idea of establishing an impartial and neutral body of helpers during peace time that could be mobilized to provide protection and care to the wounded and sick on all sides in times of conflict.

His idea led to the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the adoption of the Four Geneva Conventions of 1949. It is within these Conventions and their Additional Protocols that a major part of IHL (otherwise known as the laws of war) is contained. IHL is a set of rules that exist to limit the devastating consequences of armed conflict for civilians and non-combatants by restricting the means and methods of warfare. In relation to educating young people on IHL, it is not the actual word of law that is important, rather the exploration of the spirit of the law. It is important that young people understand the reasons for

adopting IHL and the consequences of non-adherence during armed conflict on human life and dignity.

Given the importance of humanitarian law, all States party to the Geneva Conventions have an obligation, both in times of peace and war, to spread knowledge of IHL to those for whom it is intended to protect. As guardian of the Geneva Conventions, the Red Cross is well placed to help the 194 State signatories meet their international obligations by providing training on the laws of war to their military personnel and public officials. In the next section, we examine why it is important to educate young people in IHL.

The relevance of IHL for young people

The nature of armed conflicts around the world is ever changing and as educators we need to be equipped to address these new scenarios. Tawil (2000) argues that:

“... it is becoming ever more difficult to distinguish between armed conflict and non-conflict settings, as all societies appear to be increasingly prone to various forms of violence. It may be more appropriate to situate all societies on a continuum of levels of violence ranging from school-based and street violence to social unrest, internal disturbances and armed conflict”.

Some people may suggest that education on IHL has no relevance in a society where armed conflict has not or is not taking place. However, even if a country is not involved in an armed conflict, whether internal or international, it is likely to be affected by conflict somewhere on the continuum of levels. For example, although the UK does not have an armed conflict within its own boundaries, it is involved in international conflicts, under threat of terrorism and grappling with increased instances of gang and street violence. These permeating forms of violence and conflict highlight the need to deal with issues of conflict and IHL in the classroom.

In countries not involved in armed conflict, young people may be unaware of what it is like to be caught up in the midst of armed conflict. They may only ever witness images of war and conflict through the media or video games, neither of which enables young people to fully understand the causes and consequences of conflict. A recent poll carried out by the volunteering agency v (2007), found that when young people were asked what global issues they were concerned about, the top response was ‘terrorism’ followed closely by ‘war’. In their research on learning needs

within global citizenship education, Davies et al (2005) found that war was the dominant global issue that both primary and secondary students wanted to learn about. The study also found that many teachers felt their pupils could empathise with the suffering produced by war as a result of their own personal experiences of conflict. Moreover, consultations carried out by the ICRC with young people in over ten countries around the world found that they were eager to explore ethical issues related to IHL and armed conflict (Tawil, 2000).

In the UK, media coverage of global issues has increased young people's exposure to conflict and some have experienced the direct or indirect effects of conflict situations. It is important, therefore, that young people understand the complex nature of conflict and its implications for human dignity, whether for detained prisoners or civilians. Moreover, education on humanitarian law can result in other beneficial pedagogical outcomes including attitudinal change and opportunities to explore issues of respect for life, human dignity and civic responsibility. Young people also derive the knowledge and skills necessary to critically reflect on armed conflicts and their consequences, and effectively interpret and question sources of information like the media so that they can recognise violations.

Increased understanding of humanitarian law and interest in international current events can encourage young people to view conflict situations, both in their own lives and further afield, from a humanitarian perspective. They can then be motivated to take action through involvement in school or local community activities that aim to protect and promote humanitarian attitudes.

Links to schools' curricula

Many schools' curricula across Europe now place greater emphasis on skills, attitudes and values, and therefore offer considerable scope for introducing IHL into classroom learning (Smith & Vaux, 2003). IHL can support the development of communication, media literacy and critical thinking skills as well as challenging young people's attitudes and values.

Education on IHL is particularly well suited to the delivery of citizenship education and its learning outcomes. Indeed the British Red Cross has been working for several years towards getting IHL on the citizenship curriculum in England and these efforts finally came to fruition in mid-2007. There is now reference to International Conventions at Key Stage 3 of the National Curriculum and specific reference to IHL at Key Stage 4 (see www.qca.org.uk).

As the British Red Cross is unique in its position as a provider of IHL

resources and training, these curriculum changes can only strengthen its position as a provider of teacher training and educational resources within the UK. However, opportunities to study IHL have opened up in other curricula: for example, Modern Studies in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, local and global citizenship in the Northern Ireland curriculum, Personal and Social Education (PSE) in the Welsh curriculum and as a cross curricular issue that can be explored in many subject areas.

It is the ICRC's strategic aim for IHL to become a statutory element in the formal curricula of secondary schools around the world. In order to strengthen the dissemination and implementation of IHL, the European Council pledged on behalf of the European Union to raise public awareness of IHL through a wide range of measures at national and international level including the Exploring Humanitarian Law (EHL) programme (Dec 2003). In May 2006, educational authorities and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies from over 20 countries gathered in Vienna to examine these pledges and discuss ways of working together with a view to including IHL/EHL in formal secondary education, and to exchange information with countries currently working with EHL. Member states of the African Union and the League of Arab States have also reviewed the EHL programme and recommended its official adoption.

Supporting teachers in exploring issues around conflict

As the promoter and guardian of IHL, the ICRC holds a unique position in disseminating knowledge and understanding of these humanitarian rules of conflict and in encouraging their full implementation. The Red Cross Movement is therefore perfectly placed to offer specialist support to educators who recognise the importance and benefits of discussing conflict and IHL within the classroom, particularly the fundamental principles governing the entire Movement, such as impartiality (being guided by needs alone) and neutrality (not taking sides in hostilities or engaging in controversies). By focusing on the human cost of conflict rather than on its causes, educators can discuss controversial situations without taking a position, thus avoiding bias and politicisation. This provides space to generate discussion with sensitivity to the needs and experiences of learners.

A number of different methodologies, teaching resources and techniques have been developed by the ICRC, IFRC and several national societies to enable young people to explore potentially controversial issues that often surround conflict.

Exploring Humanitarian Law (EHL) is one such project, which was established by the ICRC in 1999, with the aim of developing an international

education programme for introducing young people, aged 13-18, to the basic rules of IHL. Initial research for the project was carried out in 20 countries (including Northern Ireland) and included partnerships with Ministries of Education, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and other education experts. Consultation with groups of young people found ‘that ethical explorations of humanitarian law and the experience of war are perceived as relevant and meaningful learning, regardless of the local experience of conflict’ (EHL Project summary, 2006).

The first module of EHL enables students to examine the role of bystanders in conflict, the nature of humanitarian acts and how individuals can act in various ways to protect the life and human dignity of others. Other modules explore the basic rules of IHL and specific issues such as child soldiers, landmines and internally displaced people. Finally, the need for enforcement of IHL for trying and punishing perpetrators, the importance of humanitarian action in armed conflict and the issue of reconciliation are explored.

Teachers can currently get support through the EHL virtual campus (www.ehl.icrc.org), which has a discussion forum for teachers delivering IHL in the classroom. Here they can interact with other EHL practitioners from around the world, share experiences and ideas, and raise questions or concerns.

RAID Cross (French/Belgian Red Cross and World Scout Movement 2005) is a role play activity designed to introduce young people, aged 13 - 18, to difficulties faced by a range of people involved or caught up in conflict: prisoners of war, humanitarian workers, combatants and civilians. They move around a series of posts at which they face various obstacles, enabling them to develop decision-making, negotiation and teamwork skills. It has been run in a number of schools throughout the UK and has been positively received by both teachers and students as a valuable educational experience. One citizenship co-ordinator commented that the reason they chose to participate in the Raid Cross activity was ‘to extend the learning opportunities of students around the issues of the 21st century’, adding that ‘the activity enables the students to consider and respond to critical issues’.

Global Lines (British Red Cross, 2003) is a citizenship teaching resource for secondary schools that uses images and case studies from Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda to enable young people to explore conflict situations in local and international contexts. The aim of the resource is to increase young people’s awareness of the world around them and their place within it and to allow them to explore the difficulties and dilemmas faced by people confronted by conflict. It also looks at the role of the media in influencing public perceptions and questions

our own perceptions of victims, perpetrators and bystanders in conflict situations.

Support is also available to teachers in the UK through the British Red Cross Humanitarian Education Programme which was developed in response to the Department for International Development's (DfID) Enabling Effective Support strategy and follows recommendations proposed by research projects throughout the UK on the delivery of the global dimension in schools. In Northern Ireland, for example, 22 teachers completed a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) course from December 2006-May 2007. An important aspect of the course was to build the confidence of teachers in tackling difficult and sometimes controversial topics through training in participative and student-led approaches to learning. Support was also provided through the distribution of authoritative resources on topics such as disasters and emergencies, conflict and humanitarian action. A substantial amount of the course was centred around the teaching of conflict and IHL. The course will be delivered again in the 2007-2008 academic year in both Northern Ireland and Scotland and will be accredited to Open College Network (OCN) Level 3.

Conclusion

The increase in young people's exposure to conflict through the media and their desire to learn more about conflict-related issues underlines the need for education on IHL and emphasises its relevance and importance for young people in our own society as well as those living in conflict situations. The curricula throughout the UK provide an opportunity and scope for the introduction of IHL to pupils through citizenship and other relevant subjects. However, teachers will require support to help them meet the demands of teaching IHL and the global dimension in general. Support is at hand from the Red Cross for teachers throughout the UK who recognise the value of education on IHL and who require further training and resources.

For information on CPD training, EHL, the humanitarian education programme and teaching resources, see the contacts below.

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To join the EHL Virtual Campus and to explore the range of teaching materials, lesson plans, discussion activities, video clips and more, visit: www.ehl.icrc.org

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