

Growing a Better Future Through Human Rights Education

Paula Gerber

There is an ancient Chinese Proverb that says:

If you are thinking a year ahead — plant seeds.

If you are thinking 10 years ahead — plant a tree.

If you are thinking 100 years ahead — educate the people.¹

For too long our politicians have focused only on short-term goals and objectives; never thinking much beyond the next election. It is time that we all start thinking about our long-term future; in 100 years, what sort of society would we like our grandchildren to be part of? If the answer is, a society where human rights are universally respected; people have access to education and healthcare; are not tortured or arbitrarily detained; those fleeing wars and conflicts are treated with dignity; and racism and discrimination exist only in history books, then it is time to start educating our young about human rights.

This chapter begins by analysing international law initiatives relating to human rights education (HRE), before examining the extent to which Australia is complying with such international law obligations. It then briefly considers the obstacles to more widespread HRE in schools, before proposing a 10-step model to facilitate the implementation of a ‘whole of school’ approach to HRE.

International Initiatives Regarding Human Rights Education

The United Nations (UN) has long recognised that the best way to prevent human rights abuses is to ensure that there is widespread HRE. Thus, in 1948, when the UN proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), it included a mandate that:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

This provision has since been elaborated upon in a number of subsequent human rights treaties including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Notwithstanding these international law mandates, HRE is still not widespread. The UN therefore developed further initiatives to promote greater HRE. These included proclaiming the Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004) and the subsequent World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005–ongoing), the first phase of which is devoted to increasing human rights education in schools. Pursuant to these initiatives, States were encouraged to produce National Action Plans for HRE that included an assessment of HRE needs and the development of strategies for strengthening HRE. However, neither the Decade, nor World Programme, appear to have enjoyed much success in increasing HRE in schools. Very few teachers — the persons ultimately charged with delivering HRE within schools — have heard of either program. I would go so far as to say, that these endeavours represent one of the UN's best kept secret!

The UN usually carries on its activities through engagement with governments. However, in 1996, it created the website Cyberschoolbus, to directly inform school students and

teachers about human rights and the work of the UN.² The specific aims of the Cyberschoolbus are to:

- develop an on-line global education community;
- create educational action projects to show students that they have a role in finding solutions to global problems;
- give students a voice in global issues; and
- provide high-quality teaching resources to a wide range of educators in a cost-effective manner.

The website is rich with resources and activities, including, for example, a translation of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights into plain English; and projects for students to get involved in relating to such diverse issues as landmines, poverty, Indigenous peoples and rights at work. This is a positive attempt by the UN to directly access those responsible for HRE.

Thus, it is clear that at the international level, HRE is recognised as a pivotal part of the UN's endeavours to combat human rights violations, and promote a secure and peaceful world. Can the same be said of Australia?

Australia's Efforts to Promote Human Rights Education

The first thing to note is that Australia has not produced a National Plan of Action for HRE as recommended by the UN. There have been no attempts to identify the specific HRE needs within Australia, nor to develop a strategic plan to address those needs. In the result, efforts to promote HRE within Australian schools can best be described as ad hoc.

Pursuant to the Australian Constitution, education is the responsibility of the State and Territory Governments, rather than the Federal Government. However, the Commonwealth Government provides much of the funding for education, and therefore can, and does, influence educational policy by attaching conditions to the provision of funding. For example, in the past, the Federal Government has imposed conditions on school funding relating to a minimum number of hours per

week being devoted to physical activities for school children; report cards that rank students against national benchmarks; and a requirement that schools prominently display a National Values Framework and have a functioning flagpole flying the Australian flag.³ Thus the Federal Government has the power to insist that the states and territories include HRE in school curricula, but to date has not sought to use its influence in the area of HRE.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, when discussing how governments should implement HRE, said that:

In the absence of any specific formal endorsement in national law or policy, it seems unlikely that the relevant principles are or will be used to genuinely inform educational policies. The Committee therefore calls upon all States parties to take the necessary steps to formally incorporate these principles into their education policies and legislation at all levels.⁴

No governments within Australia have heeded this advice; no state or territory government has enacted legislation mandating that students learn about human rights as part of their school experience. Notwithstanding the absence of a legislative mandate pertaining to HRE, there are sporadic efforts being made to promote HRE within Australian schools. Some examples of these efforts are discussed below.

Australian Human Rights Commission

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (formerly, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission) is an independent statutory body created by Federal Parliament in 1986. Its responsibilities include education and raising public awareness about human rights. In furtherance of this objective, it has developed a series of modules, on different human rights topics, for use in schools. These include materials relating to the following issues:

- children's rights
- disability rights

- human rights
- Indigenous rights
- multiculturalism
- race relations
- sexual harassment.

An example of one of the modules is ‘Youth Challenge: Teaching Human Rights and Responsibilities’, which is an interactive workshop aimed at encouraging students to examine human rights, and the need to balance those rights with the rights of others. It is designed to hone the decision-making skills of students through the examination of a range of situations where competing rights are presented, and it encourages students to come up with innovative and just solutions. The program consists of four units, each of which includes role-plays of real life scenarios and personal stories. The program can be downloaded from the AHRC’s webpage, and teachers can also order the CD-Rom and DVD.⁵

One of the best aspects about the AHRC’s resources is that each one includes specific links to the curricula in each state and territory. This is a valuable tool for teachers, making it easy for them to see exactly how HRE can fit into the mandated curriculum. For example, the AHRC identifies that the ‘Bringing them Home’ Module, which focuses on the stolen generation, fits with Levels 4, 5 and 6 of the Civics and Citizenship and English curricula, and demonstrates precisely how it meets the specific standards within each level.⁶

National Human Rights Education Committee

This body was established by the Federal Government in 1998 as part of its response to the UN Decade for HRE. The level of funding has always been minimal with the result that the Committee’s work is done almost entirely by volunteers, and this has limited its effectiveness. However, the Victorian Human Rights Education Committee (VHREC) has been quite active and produced a few useful resources. The first is the Citizen of

Humanity Project aimed at primary schools. It is aimed at promoting awareness of the existence, and content, of the UDHR, and appreciation for the diversity of the human family.

The lesson ideas are comprised of four sections namely:

- What are Human Rights?
- One Human Family
- Celebrating Diversity
- Justice: A fair go for all.⁷

The ultimate aim is that all children would have good understandings of each of these areas by the time they finish primary school and would qualify to receive a *Citizen of Humanity Certificate*, which includes aspects of the UDHR.

The second notable project of the VHREC was the development of the *Ideas for Human Rights Education* booklet, which in 2005 was published by the Victorian Department of Education. This 20-page resource contains 107 suggestions from teachers about how to educate students about human rights. The purpose of the booklet is to disseminate ideas that teachers can use to initiate human rights lessons and activities. An example of one of the suggested tasks is:

As part of a class project, read the Convention on the Rights of the Child. (Australia ratified this convention on 16 January 1991.)

- Develop a list of questions to ask the country's leaders. The list can include:
 - What does this mean for Australia?
 - What advances have occurred in Australia or Victorian law since 1991 that relate to children's rights?
 - Does Australia meet all of its obligations under the convention?

or

- Produce a list of recommendations, which pursue, improve, promote and protect children's rights, or
- Draw up a proposal, including recommendations, to send to your members of parliament and local government.⁸

This is an excellent illustration of how teachers can make international human rights law relevant to students in Australia. A UN human rights treaty is sometimes perceived as a ‘foreign’ instrument irrelevant to Australians. This exercise gives students an opportunity to reflect on the rights that all children have, and whether these are, in fact, being respected in Australia. For example, do Indigenous children living in remote communities enjoy all the rights set for the Convention on the Rights of the Child?

One criticism of the booklet, is that it was designed to be used by teachers in ALL Victorian schools, yet there has been no attempt to sort the exercises into those appropriate for primary school children and those appropriate for secondary school students. This resource would have been more user-friendly if the activities had been separated out in this way, or even two separate books developed, rather than teachers having to scrutinise all the tasks to determine which ones are appropriate for which level of student.

Australian Education Union

The Australian Education Union (AEU) is committed to human rights and has established a section within its organisation to develop resources for teachers and students to assist them develop the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively advocate for human rights. In recent years, the AEU has been very active in this area and has produced a wide variety of materials for teachers wanting to pursue HRE, including:

- a video documentary entitled ‘No to child labour! Yes to education!’
- a Human Rights Training Manual produced jointly with Amnesty International to mark the 50th Anniversary of the UDHR
- a Refugee Story Competition encouraging students to interview refugees living in their community in an effort to find out about their lives. The winning stories have been published.

The above has demonstrated that there is no shortage of resources available to assist teachers wanting to implement HRE in their classroom.⁹ However, most of these resources come from independent entities, rather than from government, and many of them do not identify how they can be used within the existing curriculum.

What Can be Done to Increase HRE in Schools?

Teachers are expected to reach unattainable goals with inadequate tools. The miracle is that at times they accomplish this impossible task.¹⁰

The lack of a mandate, from the federal, state or territory governments that students should be educated about human rights is unfortunate, but not fatal to the provision of HRE in Australian schools. As indicated above, there are already extensive resources available to assist teachers in educating students about human rights. However, teachers need more than just resources, if they are to provide HRE. Empirical research has found that a major obstacle to HRE in schools is the fact that teachers have had no training in how to educate about human rights.¹¹ It is not something that is generally covered as part of the teacher training provided by university education faculties. Nor does it appear to form part of any regular professional development (PD). If we want our young to be educated about human rights, then a good starting point would be to campaign for teachers to be trained in the content and pedagogy associated with HRE. This requires university education faculties to develop courses addressing this area for aspiring teachers; and providers of in-service training to develop sessions about HRE for teachers already working in the school system.

Not only is there no direction from government regarding HRE, but there is often also no direction on this issue from school authorities. As a result, those teachers who do engage in HRE talk about feeling isolated in their efforts and a 'lone wolf'.¹² What is needed is a 'whole of school' approach. Introducing HRE into just one subject is unlikely to achieve the desired outcome. As one researcher noted:

A change in only one factor produces ephemeral modification ... followed by a rapid return to original patterns. Given that a school is a complex and conservative entity, seeking to change one aspect of the school's curriculum may, in like fashion, have only a transitory effect.¹³

In order to incorporate HRE in a way that is to have a lasting and meaningful outcome, it must be introduced into the whole of the school, and embraced by the principal and all teaching staff. The 10-step model, outlined below, is one way of infusing HRE into the curriculum, in contrast to the current ad hoc approach to HRE.¹⁴

1. Specify the aim or purpose of the project
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2. Establish a committee to facilitate the process of implementing HRE
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3. Map the already existing HRE
↓
4. Identify gaps, that is, what HRE is needed
↓
5. Conduct research into HRE programs at other schools
↓
6. Develop a policy statement or strategic plan on HRE and publicise it widely throughout the school community, inviting feedback and comment
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7. Source HRE training for teachers
↓
8. Acquire resources to support HRE, for example, books, magazines, films, internet sites and speakers from relevant non-government organisations (NGOs)
↓

9. Prepare and implement program for HRE that reaches across all subjects and all year levels



10. Monitor, review and refine the provision of HRE as required

In order to fully understand the model, some explanation of each step is appropriate.

1. Specify the Aim or Purpose of the Project

The aim could, for example, be to embed in all teaching, a comprehensive understanding of human rights, so that every student regardless of what subjects they undertake will be exposed to education about human rights throughout their schooling. The aim or purpose should be expressed in simple language that is readily understood by staff and students alike.

2. Establish a Committee to Facilitate the Process of Implementing HRE

In order to have legitimacy, the committee should be made up of the principal or assistant principal, teaching staff and student representatives.¹⁵ Each member of the committee should have a clear understanding of what their role is and what their responsibilities are as a committee member.

The school may also want to consider whether there are others who could make a contribution, for example representatives from human rights NGOs, government bodies such as the Australian Human Rights Commission, or university academics with expertise in HRE. If external persons are invited onto the committee, consideration should be given as to what role these additional committee members perform, for example contributing ideas, commenting on drafts, and/or monitoring and evaluating the program once implemented.

3. Map the HRE Already Existing Within the School

This essentially involves conducting an audit of what HRE is already happening within in the school. It should include what

pupils are already learning about human rights, who is teaching it, what the precise content is, and where is it occurring i.e. in what subjects and at what year level. Only after this exercise has been undertaken, can the fourth step in the model be embarked upon.

4. Identify Gaps

In order to identify gaps, the school needs to know what it is that it wants any HRE program to achieve. In the absence of a national bill of rights, the recommended starting point is Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child which provides that education should be directed to:

- (a) the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- (b) the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- (c) the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
- (d) the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
- (e) the development of respect for the natural environment.

Although Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is somewhat vague and wide-ranging it is a useful starting point.

5. Conduct Research Into HRE Programs at Other Schools

There are schools who have committed to, and are implementing, a 'whole of school' approach to HRE. The most extreme

example is the School for Human Rights in New York. Established in September 2004, it is a small school teaching grades 6 through 12. One of the aims of the school is that human rights are not only infused in the curriculum, but also in the culture of the school.¹⁶ Illustrating how human rights can be infused into a variety of subjects, Kevin Dotson, founding principal of the school stated: ‘In science, for example, kids could examine genetic profiling; in math, they could study demographics; and in English they could look at the perspective of minority characters in great works of literature.’¹⁷

The School for Human Rights prides itself on ensuring that students are taught not only the theory of human rights, but also its practice, that is, the school is committed to having students learn through volunteer work in their neighbourhoods. In addition, students can become involved in the school’s human rights radio club or the school chapter of Amnesty International.¹⁸

The School for Human Rights is a useful model for other schools contemplating a ‘whole of school’ approach to HRE. They may not want to embrace HRE as fully as the School for Human Rights in New York, but can nevertheless gain useful ideas and learn from the experience of this school.

6. Develop a Policy Statement or Strategic Plan Regarding HRE and Publicise it Widely Throughout the School Community, Inviting Feedback and Comment

A HRE policy statement or strategic plan is not something that can be copied from another school. If it is to have any resonance within the school community, it must be developed by staff and students themselves, so that they have a sense of ownership of the policy. However, the school may want to look at other schools’ efforts for inspiration. For example, the School for Human Rights in New York specifies that:

The mission of the School for Human Rights is to develop the academic and social capacity of all students, regardless of identity and ability. A combined middle and high school, The School for Human Rights offers an

integrated academic and social skills-based curriculum, to challenge its students to become critically thinking, compassionate, and socially engaged young adults committed to the practice of equity, dignity and social consciousness.

This school takes its inspiration from the countless individuals in this country and around the globe who have struggled to promote and protect the human rights of all people. Accordingly, it is modeled on the principles enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — an international agreement approved by all nations and embodying the basic principles of freedom, equality, and justice. Unlike any other public school in the United States or abroad The School for Human Rights explicitly teaches and models human rights across the curriculum and uses a pedagogical approach, staff and governance structure consistent with these principles. The core values of The School for Human Rights are:

- High expectations for academic and social growth for all members of school community;
- Dignity and respect. All members of the school community, including students, staff, parents, and participating community members, will be treated with dignity and respect and will model these ideals in their words and actions;
- The celebration of Uniqueness and Diversity; and
- Collective responsibility for the school's success.¹⁹

As stated previously, each school should develop their own mission, after extensive consultation with the entire school community, in order to ensure that everybody has a sense of ownership of the final product. Nevertheless, the above example of a Mission Statement can provide inspiration. The reference to the UDHR is appropriate, as would be the use of the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a core document.

Most schools already have Mission Statements and thus will not be in the same position of the School for Human Rights which had a 'clean slate' when it came to creating a mission statement in 2004. Existing schools may be more

restrained in the extent to which they can modify their current Mission Statement.

7. Source HRE Training for Teachers

As discussed above, improvements are needed to the PD that is available to teachers in relation to HRE. Until PD programs, endorsed or accredited, by the Departments of Education are available, schools needing HRE training for their staff will have to rely on human rights NGOs or academics to provide such training.²⁰

The training should not be done in isolation. It must encompass the development of ongoing support structures for teachers engaging in HRE. Ideally this support network should consist of peers, NGOs, the Department of Education, parents and the broader school community. For the successful implementation of HRE, teachers need to be encouraged and know there are people and organisations that can turn to for assistance as required.

8. Acquire Resources to Support HRE

In addition to the HRE resources that have been developed in Australia (discussed above) there are also valuable materials available overseas. For example, Amnesty International UK has been at the forefront in developing HRE materials for fields of study that are not generally thought of as traditional HRE subjects. In particular, they have published the following resources:

- A series of seven books on human rights in the curriculum for
 - *Mathematics*, which includes lessons such as vote-rigging and fair trade
 - *French*, which includes lessons on homelessness and discrimination
 - *Spanish*, which includes lessons on refugees and travellers rights

- *History*, which includes lessons on slavery and women's suffrage
- *Geography* (this resource has been commissioned but not yet published)
- *English* (this resource has been commissioned but not yet published)
- *Religious Education* (this resource has been commissioned but not yet published)
- *Just Right*: CD-Rom and Education Pack on Children's Rights
- *Freedom!* Human Rights Education Pack
- *Free Expressions* — an education pack for art teachers.

It would be expected that PD programs relating to HRE will give participants guidance regarding how to access the latest internet resources relating to HRE, including, for instance, subscribing to listserves such as that run by Human Rights Education Associates,²¹ which sends out regular email bulletins containing a wealth of information and resources on HRE.

9. Prepare and Implement an HRE Program that Reaches Across All Subjects and All Year Levels

This aspect of the model is at the core of the 'whole of school' approach to HRE. To maximise the chances of HRE being embraced across the teaching staff and by the student body, it should be done after extensive consultation with staff and students, through discussion forums, or workshops.

Teachers are understandably wary of the potential for changes to the curricula that will significantly increase their workload. Therefore, to the extent possible, the aim should be to introduce the HRE into the existing syllabus. For example, in a maths class, where students learn about statistics, exercises involving human rights can be incorporated as a way of showing students how to use and interpret statistics. Such exercises could include activities that look at life expectancy in different countries, or the number, and movement, of refugees

around the world.²² In this way, teachers do not have to undertake radical changes to their lessons, but rather can just supplement their existing lesson plans.

To emphasise the importance of HRE, and recognise the work that has gone into getting the program to this stage, a formal launch may be warranted. A dignitary, such as the Minister for Education, may be a suitable person to officially launch such an initiative.

10. Monitor, Review and Refine the Provision of HRE

In order to maximise the benefit from a review of the program, an audit should be conducted by an independent external body.²³ This should ideally be done after the first year of the program, and should include evaluation of materials used, observation of classes in which HRE is taking place, and in-depth interviews with both students and teachers.

Based on the feedback received, the program can then be modified as required. In the initial stages, it is suggested that the HRE program be evaluated every year. After the first three years, this could be scaled back to once every three or four years.

Following all the steps prescribed by this model will take time, and schools should therefore view the implementation and provision of HRE as a long term project.

Conclusion

There is currently a disconnect between the commitment Australia has made to HRE at the international level, and the commitment it has made to implementing HRE within Australia. On the international stage, Australia represents itself as a strong supporter of HRE, having ratified all the treaties that contain HRE provisions, and having signed onto both the UN Decade for HRE and the subsequent World Programme for HRE. However, on the local front, HRE in Australian schools is still largely absent. There is no legislative mandate for teachers to educate students about human rights (as recommended by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child), and HRE is largely absent from government mandated curric-

ula. There is an abundance of resources available to teachers who wish to embrace HRE, but the lack of training in the content and pedagogy of HRE continues to be an obstacle.

A government directive regarding the importance of HRE, perhaps by way of a national bill of rights, and a concerted effort to provide teachers with the requisite skills to teach their students about HRE, would go a long way towards ensuring that human rights form a part of the mainstream education of all young Australians. But even without such governmental leadership, there are ways for schools to implement HRE through a whole of school approach, along the lines outlined above in the 10-step model.

If these initiatives are embraced, we should start to see the building of a culture where human rights are respected, and the emergence of a generation of Australians who understand and promote human rights. Hopefully, it won't take 100 years for this dream to be realised!

Endnotes

- 1 Kuan-Tzu (4th–3rd Century BC) China.
- 2 The UN Cyberschoolbus is available at <http://cyberschoolbus.un.org/>
- 3 *Schools Assistance (Learning Together through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004* (Cth).
- 4 General Comment No. 1, The Aims of Education, 17 April 2001, CRC/GC/2001/1, para 17.
- 5 Retrieved 27 August 2009 from www.humanrights.gov.au/education/youthchallenge/download/index.html
- 6 Retrieved 27 August 2009 from www.humanrights.gov.au/education/bth/download/curriculum/Victoria_BTH_curriculum_links.doc
- 7 Retrieved 28 August 2009 from <http://www.vhrec.org.au/citizenofhumanity/index.htm>
- 8 Department of Education and Training (Vic) Ideas for Human Rights Education (2005) Department of Education and Training, Melbourne. Exercise 18. Retrieved 7 August 2009 from http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/student/lem/Human_rights_final.pdf

- 9 The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has created a list on its webpage of resources available to support teachers' HRE efforts. See <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/multicultural/tchhredresources.htm>
- 10 Ginott, H. Retrieved 28 August 2009 from http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/h/haim_ginott.html
- 11 Gerber, P. (2008). *From convention to classroom: The long road to human rights education*. Germany:VDM Publisher.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Burke, K. (1981). *A case study of curriculum practices in science education in the Catholic Parochial Primary*. University Microfilms International, Michigan, 211.
- 14 The idea for this model comes from a Tasmanian school's framework for introducing Values and Civics Education as reported in Williams, Dallas 'Values and Civics Education at the Don College' (Spring 2005) Principal Matters 27. Williams described in the most general terms how values and civics education had been introduced into the school, and inspired the development of the model set out above which significantly expands on the vague processes described by Williams.
- 15 Having one or more student representatives on the committee would be in keeping with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child concerning children's rights to participate and express views. HRE cannot occur in an environment where human rights are not respected. Thus it is essential to recognise the right of children to participate in the development of HRE within their school.
- 16 Robinson, Karen 'The School for Human Rights' Article 26: Amnesty International's Human Rights Education Update (October 2005).
- 17 Dotson, Kevin, former principal of the Human Rights School, as reported at www.insideschools.org on 16 October 2005. Accessed 28 August 2009.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Provided via email by Jessamyn Waldman, Lead Partner Program Associate, School for Human Rights, 600 Kingston Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11205. Email: jwaldman@hrea.org

- 20 For example, The Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, based at Monash University.
- 21 www.hrea.org
- 22 *Human Rights in the Curriculum: Mathematics* (2004). Amnesty International UK, 51 and 65.
- 23 Owen, J.M., & Rogers, P.J. (2008). *Program evaluation: Forms and approaches* (2nd ed.). Sydney: Allen & Unwin.



Paula Gerber is Deputy Director of the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law. She specialises in Construction Law and International Human Rights Law. She sits as a sessional member of the Victorian Civil & Administrative Tribunal and is a Board Member of the Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Her most recent book is *From Convention to Classroom: The Long Road to Human Rights Education*.