

# Youth and Citizenship: Education

Based on Caroline Beauvais, Lindsey McKay, Adam Seddon,  
*A Literature Review on Youth and Citizenship* (CPRN, 2001).

## An Avenue to Exclusion

One of the goals of education is to prepare young people for future employment and for their future role as citizens. Acquiring a high school diploma is generally seen as a right of passage from youth to adulthood, opening the door to greater independence and equality, and therefore as a route to full citizenship.

In some cases, educational experience can also be a factor that limits the achievement of full citizenship. Despite a steady decline in the drop-out rate, approximately 20 percent of young people fail to graduate from high school. While in the past, those with low levels of education were generally able to find employment, this is increasingly no longer the case. Dropping out of high school reduces a young person's opportunity to achieve independence and the ability to cope successfully in society later in life.

Those most affected are poor students and Aboriginal youth, a trend that is repeated in successive generations. Ironically, government policies that impose fees on students who take longer than normal to graduate may have the unintended effect of discouraging some youth from remaining in school.

Social exclusion is also present within the school system in the form of sexism, racism and discrimination on the basis of ability. A "hidden curriculum" continues to encourage girls to pursue "traditional" career paths, thus reinforcing stereotypes concerning women's abilities and gender roles.

There is also evidence of discrimination in encouraging more assertive behaviour in boys, often at the expense of female participation. Some researchers contend that the school system may be failing to meet the needs of young boys by not recognizing their tendencies both to be more aggressive and to possess weaker verbal and communication skills than girls.

As with sexism, racial discrimination affects the educational and social opportunities of young people. To enable youth to cope with racism, students must be encouraged and provided with the means to think critically about racism as a societal problem. It is important to highlight the issue within the curriculum as a whole, rather than treating it as a special unit.

Immigrant youth often experience problems associated with identity, communication, and customs and values, as well as gender discrimination. In particular, training in English as a second language (or French as a second language) is often inadequate to meet their needs.

Students with physical disabilities continue to experience problems in the school system. They are over-represented in the lower educational categories and under-represented in the higher ones. Due to barriers that exist throughout the education system, they are usually not properly prepared for post-secondary education.

## A Route to Independence and Equality

An important goal of education is to prepare students to become good citizens. Students learn by both experience and observation. School functions as an important and early place where students can observe the exercise of democracy and citizenship, although insufficient emphasis is placed on educating students about the practice of citizenship.

Citizenship education tends to focus on formal political institutions rather than on promoting critical thinking about issues that encourages direct political participation. Moreover, the school system itself, the very institution that teaches citizenship, is less than democratic. Students tend to have little say in how the education system operates, even though they are arguably the most affected by any changes which are made. As a result, citizenship education as it is presently taught in the school system may not teach or reinforce good citizenship practices.

Studies have found that extracurricular activities, including volunteering, have a positive effect on citizenship by promoting political involvement later in life. Inequalities in access to extracurricular activities, in combination with budget cuts and the introduction of user fees for services, may have a negative impact on citizenship, especially for young people from poorer backgrounds.

In health education there is a concern that curriculum is more often shaped by adult aspirations to control youth behaviour, rather than by a desire to serve the actual needs of youth. For example, simplistic messages of prohibition and abstinence from alcohol and recreational drug use are often rejected by students as hypocritical, as they rarely address the reasons why young people engage in substance use in the first place. For young people, such activities are often an avenue for exploring issues of personal identity and a way to symbolize a shift to a more mature adult status.

Prevention literature that promotes abstinence may fail to provide youth with the necessary resources to make informed decisions. For instance, smoking prevention and cessation programs should address the underlying causes of smoking, including the use of tobacco as a form of weight control among young women. Teaching youth the skills needed to make healthy choices would involve addressing smoking and substance abuse as behaviours symptomatic of other problems.

Sexuality is one of the areas where young people develop autonomy. Information about and techniques to control one's own body are a fundamental right of citizenship. Yet the teaching of sexuality in school is often inadequate, failing to address such important topics as early childbearing, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual orientation and date rape. Moreover, the problem has been compounded in recent years by declining access to preventive services.

## Conclusions

- ❖ Young people who drop out of school are likely to experience social exclusion and corresponding exclusion from full citizenship status. The citizenship status of youth is also weakened by discrimination based upon gender, race, sexual orientation and ability, all forms of exclusion which exist within the school system itself.
- ❖ The school health curriculum should address the real needs of young people by providing information on limiting harm from substance use and for coping with difficult circumstances.
- ❖ The failure to provide young people with the knowledge and capacity to make informed and intelligent choices limits the ability of youth to take control of their own lives and therefore take full responsibility for their actions.