Teaching young people to respect human dignity

Contribution of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

by Édith Baeriswyl

"Children are a taboo subject, sacred to all regardless of nationality or religion. Protecting children is a duty."

Dr Adnan Houballah[1]

Young people are the focus of special interest in studies on the humanitarian, social and political situation throughout the world. As "victims", their plight attracts particular attention on account of their vulnerability, which is recognized in all cultures everywhere — albeit with considerable variation in views as to the age of reaching adulthood. If they belong to "deviant" groups such as street children, criminals, children outside the school system or child soldiers, they are treated as victims, permanent outcasts or a threat, depending on where they are and what they do. Lastly, those who belong to a "controlled" group, in other words those enjoying a normal social and/or school life, are subject to demands which

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[1] See Bibliography at annex 2.

are all the greater given their elders' own disarray in face of the accelerated pace of change at the turn of the century, and the adults' desire to prepare the rising generation to cope with an uncertain future.

Like other national and international bodies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has been keen for decades to involve young people, either as partners (youth sections of National Societies) or as a special target group for its assistance operations or its efforts to spread knowledge of international humanitarian law. The volume and range of such activities deserve to be better exploited, perhaps through permanent and active coordination designed to give the Movement's work in this area and its identity a more specific focus and create a genuine international impetus for solidarity with the young.[2] For despite the declarations adopted by different International Conferences of the Red Cross and Red Crescent on the need to develop operations through and for young people, the structures set up to coordinate youth activities have not really fulfilled their promise of enhancing relations among National Societies or defining a common framework so as to preserve a specific role for the Movement in that area.

Generally speaking, young people constitute a vast target audience for messages from the Movement, and the humanitarian needs of some of them — those who are victims — are especially acute in the eyes of a humanitarian organization. At a time when the world's complexity is confounding all attempts at analysis and leading many organizations to expand their work in behalf of young people, there is bound to be a danger of duplication, while some problems will be overlooked. Without advocating compartmentalization or entering into competition, it would certainly be wise to define certain priorities more clearly and refocus the basic message which the Movement is committed to promoting. What is at stake is both the dignity of young victims of violence (which is always generated by social or political dysfunction) and the credibility of the Movement itself, which cannot allow its identity to be dissipated in vague platitudes or piecemeal half-measures.

The promising development of youth sections in many National Societies, coupled with the ICRC's own decision to create a specific post for promoting knowledge of humanitarian principles among young people,

[2] A sort of "Red Cross for young people", as journalist Brij Khindaria recently called it in the *Tribune de Genève*, 28 June 1996.

are preliminary steps in the right direction; however, a vast amount of work remains to be done if the wealth of the Movement's experience in the area of education is to be tapped and genuinely converted to the needs of young people in today's complex world.

The purpose of this article is to explore a few lines of thought in the limited area of promotion of the law and education for young people through operations currently under way in the field.[3]

Some recent promotional and educational activities for young people

The National Societies were initially anxious to create and maintain a nucleus of young people capable eventually of taking over from adult volunteers: the programmes devised were thus limited because they centred chiefly on passing on knowledge about the Movement and its working principles so as to prepare the young people concerned for humanitarian activities. There were exceptions, notably in Africa and South America, where youth sections often formed part of school structures and organized various activities. Gradually, reaching out systematically to young people — essentially through the school system — became the main aim of many programmes and thus their content was broadened. Until very recently, on the other hand, very few dissemination programmes were aimed specifically at young people involved in different forms of violence (child soldiers, armed gangs), and rare indeed were those that sought to avert any such involvement among young people living in dangerous environments (street children, survivors of conflicts, child prisoners, etc.).

A recent review of a few dozen dissemination strategies introduced by National Societies and/or the ICRC for young people since the 1970s shows that they fall into two main categories, depending on the chief goal sought: either their priority is to achieve active solidarity with victims or the most vulnerable, or they give greater emphasis to reflecting on behavioural reactions to violent situations. Both aims, sometimes pursued in parallel in a single programme, are often backed by information sessions on the Movement.[4]

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[3] The programmes mentioned here are given by way of example, and the reader should not infer any value judgement from the fact that a programme is or is not mentioned in this article.

[4] No mention will be made of the many programmes specifically designed by National Societies and/or the Federation for Red Cross youth volunteers, as these are internal training programmes.

Enlisting young people in a practical humanitarian solidarity movement

The existence of youth sections within National Societies allows the young to take part in activities to help the most vulnerable sectors of society, the suffering and the needy. They provide a framework conducive to consideration of the significance and the ethics of humanitarian action, with full respect for the Fundamental Principles of the Movement. Examples of the commitment of young volunteers are plentiful, but it is rarer to see programmes implemented outside the National Society context — in schools, for instance — which set out to put theory into practice. But anchoring theory in practice is basic to any educational purpose, just as it is to the spirit of the Movement; indeed, it is essential to the Movement's credibility, and more particularly to the transmission of a message. It is the link between curative emergency work and preventive action.[5]

> *"Everyone knows in general terms what should or should not be done (...) and refers to his own set of values. But that has little or nothing to do with his actual conduct under the pressure of circumstances."* — S. Milgram

Action without reflection is often dangerous, and theory without practice lacks credibility — at least when the idea is to reach the greatest number and not just an expert audience. Just as the Movement cannot be content with curative emergency action and must back it up with hopes of a possible preventive effect, nor can it conduct exclusively preventive activities on the pretext that curative action is a makeshift solution. The Movement has taken that dual approach ever since Henry Dunant's time, but has not always exploited it as a central educational notion: too many programmes offered to young people still comprise no reflection on the dilemmas arising from the provision of relief while respecting the recipients' dignity, and too many programmes remain theoretical with no grounding in real life.

> *"Attitudes and mentalities are shaped, at least in part, by experience [because] self-knowledge (...) is much more powerful than inert knowledge of others that we gain from books and lectures."* — N. Nodding

[5] The term "preventive action" is used here in the sense of "preventing explosions of violence", both through knowledge of and respect for international humanitarian law in times of conflict and through knowledge of humanitarian law and solidarity with the most vulnerable in non-conflict situations.

Moreover, any failure to place practical work within reach of young people might increase their reluctance to perform tasks which they may regard either as matters exclusively for adult specialists or as too complex and daunting to be broached. In this age of television zapping and surfing on the Internet, we must be careful not to encourage "humanitarian zapping" among young people who, according to an international survey conducted in 1985, place altruism far behind their desire for freedom ("to live as I see fit"), wealth and social status.[6] Here are a few recent examples based on practice.

— In *Croatia*, ever since the war ended, the National Society has been working in cooperation with the ICRC to restore its youth sections. The aim is to mobilize young people still suffering from the prevailing feelings of disillusionment to engage in humanitarian activities geared to the psychological and material reconstruction of their environment. The programme was first launched in schools but quickly developed into a fruitful interaction between the National Society and the school system.

— In *Colombia*, a behavioural manual fostering social conviviality and mutual assistance and initially designed purely for internal use has since 1996 gradually come to be used by the National Society for activities organized for young people, whether attending school or not, and particularly for street children.

— In *Guinea*, the National Society has for several years been organizing solidarity operations for young volunteers, such as cleaning public places and hospitals or entertaining children in refugee camps. This pragmatic dimension will be retained in a Red Cross programme now being prepared for incorporation in various official school subjects.

— In *Belarus*, "Red Cross schools" being set up throughout the country are enabling young people, whether formally enrolled in the National Society or not, to carry out various activities for the most vulnerable members of society: assisting disabled youngsters, providing material aid for underprivileged children and visiting lonely old people, orphans and invalids, etc. Mutual instruction among young people is also being developed as a sort of exercise in learning how to give.

[6] See J. Houssaye.

Making young people aware of the humanitarian mission in times of conflict and of the principles of humanitarian law

Although the involvement of young people in violence is not a new phenomenon in itself, it is seen as a particularly dangerous trend at the turn of the century, when the constants that were traditionally supposed to regulate social relationships (the family unit, religious structures, traditional role models, etc.) are being undermined. In conflict situations a vicious circle is created whereby children are not just hopeless, passive victims but may easily become pawns of unscrupulous adults who know how to exploit their malleability. As the pace of change accelerates in a world geared chiefly to profit, the number of young people being left on the sidelines is swelling throughout the world, dangerously increasing the risk of conflict and, on a more local level, of outbreaks of violence. Obviously, the Movement does not have a primary mandate in all those areas, nor can it find answers to all the problems affecting young people on its own; but it does offer a number of specific solutions and has experience and dynamics of its own which have certainly not yet been exploited to the full.

Some promising avenues have recently been explored in an attempt to counter negative influences and make young people aware of the various consequences of violence and human suffering. Depending on the region concerned, such activities seek to infuse a spirit of compassion that will preserve the notions of humanity, human dignity and civic responsibility in situations of violence, and to spread awareness of the minimum rules of behaviour that must be observed in all circumstances.

In situations of peace or relative peace, that aim is reflected in educational programmes for all young people through the school system. Some examples are given below.

— In the countries of the *former Soviet Union*, a school programme incorporated in textbooks on national literature seeks to stimulate thought on the values underlying international humanitarian law and those which guide the Movement's activities.[7]

— In the *Netherlands*, an interactive file on humanitarian law, the phenomenon of war and the regulations governing it was introduced in secondary schools in 1995.

[7] See annex 1.

— In *France*, a teaching kit for primary school pupils is designed to encourage forms of behaviour based on Red Cross ethics (respect for human dignity, solidarity, combating all forms of suffering).

— In *Egypt*, the ICRC delegation in Cairo has been working in cooperation with the country's school authorities since 1995 to have some basic notions of humanitarian law included in various official courses (biology, history, languages, etc.) as school textbooks are updated by the Ministry of Education.

It is hard to evaluate such programmes because their aim is not merely to pass on information but to influence attitudes and perceptions. Moreover, the way they are used by teachers is largely beyond their initiators' control. And *"when what the school teaches is contrary to the lessons of experience, it cannot prevail for long"* (Lê Than Khôi).

Then again, the transmission of knowledge in the area of human behaviour is still a controversial subject. In all corners of the world, however, a consensus seems to be emerging to the effect that *"the educator's way of behaving and the transgression of the educated have more influence than words or examples"* (J. Houssaye).

In conflict situations or those with a high potential for violence, programmes set out first and foremost to reach young people who are already or are likely to become involved. This type of programme has been developed only very recently and much research on each individual context is still needed to find messages and means suitable for adolescents who, because of their inherent vulnerability, have had no choice as to whether or not to take part in violence.

— In *Somalia*, the "Look before you leap" programme based on comic strips, song and theatre is intended to prompt certain behavioural reflexes among young militiamen even in their own violent environment. The representation of the everyday conduct displayed by these armed youngsters is interspersed with lessons on the consequences of the attitudes they commonly adopt.

— In *South Africa*, many educators are trying to interrupt the cycle of violence among young people marked by years of social and political conflict and impatient to see things change. The ICRC is working on educational material likely to encourage reflection on the choices to be made in order to break with violent behaviour.

— In *Colombia*, recurrent instability has thrown many youngsters onto the streets and some have formed veritable armed gangs pursuing

various goals. The ICRC has initiated a study of the phenomenon to see whether any appropriate educational operation can be launched.

A few avenues for reflection

While there is no need to dwell on the educational virtues of specific operations, it might be useful to consider the purpose of the message to be imparted to young people.

The vast majority of the Movement's programmes, often devised by professionals of the educational world, have been carefully tailored to local habits and needs. However, on the one hand that unquestionably valuable process of adaptation raises questions as to the consistency of the message throughout the world and, on the other, it places the message delivered to adult audiences at variance with the one intended for the young. Some slippage is noted whenever the actual results of programmes are analysed: teaching international humanitarian law sometimes involves references to moral or religious values; humanitarian values are sometimes advocated in terms of prosperity and beauty for all; or again, a contribution towards a faster and more meaningful return to peace ends up as an argument for pacifism.

It is certainly not our intention to reject the ultimate ideals of a world at peace and prosperity for all. However, it is worth reflecting on the need to make a greater effort to anchor the founding message of the Movement — that is, respect for human dignity in circumstances where environmental influences tend to deny it — more securely, and to present such international legal edifices as international humanitarian law not as moral imperatives for Good but as a reference system constructed by nations to regulate human conduct in exceptional circumstances. Making young people aware of the spirit of that reference system is not so alien to their life-style as is generally supposed.

International humanitarian law in the school yard

> *"The definition of the individual and of the respect due to him or her forms part and parcel of those implicit social rules which go back to a pre-understanding of what we have always known, rules which in 'normal' situations are the subject of an unspoken and undisputed agreement. However, in a period of crisis (...) it is precisely their self-evident character that those definitions lose (...). The question then is no longer what man is or must be to be worthy of respect, but what rule we can agree upon to express the quality of what is respectable."*
> — M. Hunyadi

Many humanitarian and other organizations have in recent years launched into the field of education for young people with the aim of teaching notions of peace, tolerance, human rights, democracy and conflict resolution. However praiseworthy and important it may be, such teaching may come into conflict with the ideas that the Movement and the ICRC are promoting at different levels (for example among the military and governments). In the long term, therefore, it may undermine the specific aims of the Red Cross and Red Crescent world.

Such occurrences, noted in a few of the Movement's programmes, often arise from a widely-held conviction that international humanitarian law, which in essence is formulated for a particular audience (combatants) in a particular situation (armed conflict), is "unfit for consumption" by young people.

International humanitarian law, which the nations of the entire world have undertaken to teach, respect and have respected in times of armed conflict, comprises a set of rules designed to preserve the dignity of the individual, whether combatant or non-combatant. Maintaining that dignity is the precondition for preventing a conflict from degenerating into carnage and leaving indelible scars on the collective and individual consciousness; for such scars are sure to perpetuate hatred and fear, those classic factors in the spiral of violence which constantly rocks certain regions of our planet.

Admittedly, there is some truth in the view that such matters have no direct part to play in the education of young people, but it also reveals some confusion as to what education is all about.

The element of truth lies in the fact that humanitarian law as a body of rules applicable in armed conflicts has no reality for young people, or at least for the vast majority of them. The confusion arises because, as every educational act involves a transposition, reality for a young person, wherever he or she may be, also means violence and seeking ways of regulating it; it is the quest for limits; and among adults it is an effort to channel aggressive tendencies and prevent them from degenerating into violence. Some cultures sublimate violence, for instance by introducing initiatory rites of passage or the systematic practice of martial arts, while others impose constraints by means of laws and regulations. But they all generate strategies for teaching children rules which will limit their aggressive impulses.

> *"Pupils very often stray from texts or reject them as being too remote from social reality (...). It is important to reverse the perception*

and function spontaneously accorded to texts, particularly Declarations and Conventions, for they do not mechanically derive from human and social behaviour. Nevertheless, they do lay down references necessary for analysing, assessing and appreciating such behaviour and possibly for remedying it." — F. Audigier

Rules and violations of humanitarian law do exist in the school yard. Every educator has encountered them and has spent time imposing and discussing the former and controlling the latter: the former are called standards of behaviour, rules of the game, etc., and the latter take the form of cheating, sneers, insults, random beatings, etc.

"Playing initiates the child into family and social rules and prepares him for his future adult role (...). In collective games, the child learns his position relative to others within the framework of defined hierarchical structures." — UNESCO

Some of the accounts given and comments made by educators in this regard are striking in their similarity.

— There was the case of Dr Korzack who, tired of trying to stamp out violence among the children in his orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto, decided to allow it as long as a single rule was observed, namely that any fight had to be notified to the adversary in writing 24 hours in advance. The thought necessary to put such an intention down in writing effected the transition from impulse to reason, and succeeded where direct appeals for non-violence had failed.

— There is also the example of a headmistress who installed a "ring" in her school as a place for settling conflicts, an institutional move that "reduced the accident rate by 80%".[8]

— Some teachers, out of concern to restore circuits of communication, tirelessly discussed with their pupils certain rules of sociability to be introduced and respected and penalties for infringing them. This setting of limits lies at the heart of many so-called "civic", "social" or "institutional" courses of instruction, and even of educational approaches based on the notion of a "contract", which are aimed not only at instilling knowledge but also at contributing to social construction.

Establishing limits (rules, laws, charters, rights, etc.) serves as a common objective or a reference system on the basis of which each person

[8] See M. Libratti.

can explain his or her actions to himself and to others. Setting aside problems such as strict observance and penalties, many ICRC delegates perceive and utilize that dimension in their work to promote humanitarian law in the field. It is surely fundamental because it promotes communication.

> *"Whatever the field of action, whether it involves language or not, it is the rules - and the rules alone - that lend meaning to the practices they define."* — M. Hunyadi (after Wittgenstein)

Working from or towards international humanitarian law is a means of educating young people that has not yet been fully explored. It is a tool which prepares them for reflecting on the need to regulate behaviour in a social relationship: whether such regulation be codified or customary, explicit or implicit, it nonetheless exists in every culture and every coherent human grouping, including young people. The specific nature and value of humanitarian law derive from the fact that it is based on an extreme reality, namely armed violence, in which all moral points of reference, even those firmly rooted in the culture and the family, are swept away in the name of a supposedly higher goal. Humanitarian law can also serve as a mediating tool, for every fight in a school yard or periurban slum is a special and sometimes extreme event in the life of young person.

> *"(...) Violence in any form, however absurd it may appear, is an exchange or a desperate quest for exchange."* — P. Delaroche

At a time when some people are querying the relevance of international humanitarian law in new types of conflict, others urge a strengthening of the spirit of the rules and of the law to counter the erosion of values traditionally handed down by the family, religion or even the political sphere. Many educators hold that view, as do some politicians of all hues.

Humanitarian law, as an ultimate point of reference for judging conduct in exceptional situations, might therefore serve as a reference for mediating between the values developed in each culture and the extreme influences which annihilate them, just as — more prosaically — the rules of boxing and football serve as a brake on the obsessive will to win. Including those points of reference in education may provide a way of preparing young people *"to distance themselves from political inertia and lack of imagination in the legal sphere (and) to claim the right to law"* (O. Russbach).

Conclusion

After an initial bout of naive enthusiasm, necessary to preserve their motivation and give meaning to their work, professionals in the field of

education are increasingly inclined to regard themselves as amateurs. Experts they are, but amateurs, too, since they realize that any single educational act, however well planned, is nothing but a drop in an ocean of immense complexity, despite the abundant and constructive research that has been done in the past few decades. They know that every educational institution is only one of many places where knowledge is forged, and they find out — sometimes the hard way — that learning is a slow process which advances and recedes, and that the best intentions, like the cleverest pedagogic devices, only rarely guarantee that the instruction given will be well received by all and, more important, will be permanently implemented.

This "amateur" aspect of educational endeavour is all the more significant in that the skills to be acquired belong to the sphere of behaviour, which very largely depends on factors outside the classroom. It is even more obvious when violence is discussed: educators know that violence among the young is not a phenomenon peculiar to our times or to any particular group, but that it is often an exaggerated expression of faulty communication with the environment. Many educators are aware that no strict prohibition has ever completely succeeded in eradicating violent behaviour in exceptional situations; and a child resorting to violence is always at the heart of an exceptional situation from his own viewpoint. Paradoxically, therefore, as their knowledge increases, teachers often become modest about their own role, even if they are sometimes tempted to regard themselves as influential instruments so as to preserve intact their desire to help build a better future.

With regard to dissemination activities within the Red Cross world,[9] the views outlined above sometimes stem from the difficulty of seeing oneself as an amateur when one hoped to have become an expert, and of believing too often that the "drop in the ocean" constituted by the action and message of the Red Cross will have an immediate effect on the dark side of humanity so tragically demonstrated in the senseless events that make up a conflict.

Our conviction and our hope for change must be tempered by modesty if we are to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms and stakes at play in the observance or rejection of rules, and thus refine our methods and improve the means of passing on our message, tirelessly and on target; for that message is more relevant than ever.

[9] This refers to the very large number and wide range of activities designed to promote the Red Cross spirit and institutions, together with instruction on proper behaviour in the event of conflict, which the Movement has been conducting since its inception.

A dual approach should therefore be adopted to improve our performance in promoting international humanitarian law among the young:

— preventive activities designed for young people who are not victims of violence must be improved in terms of quality and placed on a systematic basis (especially by focusing attention on the role played by the rules in conflict situations and providing for practical work), for those young people will be the decision-makers of tomorrow;

— efforts must be pursued to find programmes specially tailored for young people involved in violence or immersed in an environment conducive to violence, because they are primarily victims but might also become future perpetrators;

All this is essential because society has a duty to that half of mankind which is particularly vulnerable but which represents the world's future.

If the Movement wants to help increase the chances of the humanitarian spirit (in the dual sense of "compassion/aid" and "preservation of mankind/human community") being taken into account in a world of conflict and competition which breeds violence and sends the weakest to the wall, it must prepare the young people of all nations so that, at their own level and in their own environment, they may help build peace.

These young people must be able to:

— measure current events against the yardstick of the principles of humanity, dignity and law and not just in terms of economic or political criteria;

— develop resistance to feelings of impotence and indifference and refuse to become hardened in the face of complex and negative world events, whether near to home or far away;

— develop tangible bonds of solidarity with the suffering or needy;

— develop the strength to reject acts which take account only of the end to be achieved and not of the consequences to themselves and others;

— learn that even in the heat of a fight or a conflict not everything is permitted, and that the dignity — or justice — of a cause can never be defended by acts of barbarity, any more than a worthwhile win at a game can be achieved by cheating or humiliating the opponent;

— incorporate the minimum standards of behaviour which nations have undertaken to respect in the event of conflict in the values handed down by their official educational establishments, their families and their social authorities and in the rules of their local society.

Annex 1

ICRC schools project in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

While conflicts were breaking out in several parts of the former Soviet Union, the authorities there often lacked the means for producing new teaching materials. The ICRC suggested the inclusion in secondary school curricula of a programme focusing on the humanitarian principles underlying international humanitarian law and those which guide and inspire the activities of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

From the outset, local specialists recruited by the ICRC in each of the countries concerned worked in close cooperation with their Ministries of Education to define the form and content of programmes adapted to the circumstances in each context.

Used in literature courses and drafted in the national language of each country, the books produced contain texts by local and foreign writers, together with exercises designed to stimulate debate about proper behaviour in violent situations. The teachers have a methodological handbook and are given introductory seminars.

The first trials started in 1994 and led to a pilot programme which was introduced during the 1995-1996 winter semester in the Russian Federation (northern Caucasus, Moscow and elsewhere), and also in some parts of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Tajikistan. In all, it reached 100,000 students.

For the school year 1996-1997, the programme was extended to students in the last year of all secondary schools throughout the Russian Federation, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia (a total of roughly 2.5 million students). At the same time trials are being carried out in the countries of Central Asia and feasibility studies are under way in other countries of the former Soviet Union.

The ICRC's aim is to extend the benefits of such teaching to all seven years of secondary schooling in the above countries, with emphasis in the top classes on international humanitarian law as a component of national civic instruction.

Annex 2

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