

# GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING LAW-RELATED (LRE) EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

## INTRODUCTION

### Purpose of Paper

The purpose of this paper is to conduct an examination of the literature in respect of Law-Related Education, especially as that literature pertains to “at-risk” students. This was done in order to offer a set of guidelines that could be used by educators and facilitators to design and teach programs for these kinds of students in British Columbia.

Education for “citizenship” has a long tradition in both Canada and the United States, usually taught as an integral part of social studies courses, often under the banner of either “government” or “civics.” About 30 years ago, the term “Law-Related Education” (LRE) appeared, and was formally recognized by the Law-Related Education Act of 1978. Whereas government and civics courses customarily tend to rely on textbooks and didactic teaching, LRE courses are generally characterized by their use of outside resource people and a variety of interactive, inductive teaching methods.

### Literature Search Procedures

To conduct a literature search the following procedures were employed:

- (a) The use of the two major Internet search engines, Google and Yahoo
- (b) A search for relevant titles in *ERIC*
- (c) An examination of all relevant *Dissertation Abstracts*
- (d) In-person university library “stacks” explorations at UBC and SFU
- (e) Descriptors used in all of the above were: *Law-Related Education, Law-Related Education Research, At-Risk Students, Law-Related Education and At-Risk Students, Social Studies and At-Risk Students*

## LAW-RELATED EDUCATION

### Definition

Law-related education programs are designed to teach students about law, the legal system, law enforcement, and the fundamental and constitutional rights, principles and values that underpin our democratic society. In such programs, educational experiences are incorporated in order to provide students with an adequate base of knowledge, understanding, and training about the rule of law and the legal process that, as part of their general education, enables them to become more effective and better informed citizens. The intent is to provide practical applications of law as it is experienced in one’s daily living. LRE courses are characterized by their use of relevant curriculum materials, their interactive teaching strategies, their small group activities, their extensive use of local community resources, and their exploration of related media offerings.

## Objectives

The key objectives in LRE training focus on knowledge acquisition, skills training, and the influencing of attitudes. They are expressed as:

- (a) To provide knowledge about law and the justice system, about the government, and about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship
- (b) To teach analytic skills (critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, conflict resolution, values clarification) for the examining of issues and moral and ethical dilemmas; to train in civic participation; and to communicate ideas as clearly and effectively as possible
- (c) To encourage positive attitudes towards: the law and the legal system; respect for fundamental rights and dignity; social responsibility and responsible citizenship; valuing the viewpoints of others; enhancing personal self concepts; participating in the community and engaging in pro-social behavior

## Programs

Courses that are LRE-originated typically include the following three domains:

- Content: Legal concepts (such as liberty, justice, equality, freedom, due process); rights and freedoms that are both fundamental and constitutional; legal processes; the justice system; the role of law; public institutions; responsibilities of citizenship; presentation of real life issues and situations
- Teaching Strategies: Cooperative learning and small group work; simulations (such as mock trials, moot courts, model legislatures); case study analysis involving real issues; role playing; debates; community service activities; conflict resolution activities; the weighing of alternatives and their consequences; value analysis
- Curriculum Materials and Resources: Community resource people (court personnel such as judges and lawyers) as well as police officers, legislators, ex-offenders; field trips to court houses and police stations; presentations from special interest groups

## Research Findings

A review of the research literature on LRE suggests that the most successful programs:

- Focus on basic and essential knowledge (such as practical information about law and democratic values), and such skills as critical thinking, clear communication, and civic and group cooperation
- Make frequent use of outside resource people
- Utilize teaching strategies that promote positive student interactions with peers and with a variety of community resource personnel
- Use content and teaching strategies that are age-appropriate
- Use materials that present a balanced view of real and relevant life issues

Researchers report that, when compared with the usual civics or government programs, LRE programs that utilize the foregoing five strategies are found to be more effective in the teaching of:

- Knowledge of the justice system
- Legal and moral reasoning skills
- Critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, and value clarification
- Positive attitudes toward justice, law, legal processes, and the legal system

- Positive attitudes toward authority, including the police
- Respect for divergent points of view, opinions and beliefs
- Cooperation skills
- Socially appropriate behavior

## **LAW-RELATED EDUCATION FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS**

### **At-Risk Students**

Over recent years at-risk student definitions have changed and can better be seen from two perspectives, Traditional and Contemporary, as may be seen in the following definitions :

#### **Definition**

Traditional View:

- At-risk students are those students who are not experiencing success in school and are therefore potential dropouts

Two Alternative Contemporary Views:

- At-risk youth are those who are at risk of school failure, delinquent behavior, or substance abuse because of their socio-economic status, environment, friends, family situation, personal behavior, or physical or mental health or abilities; *or*
- At-risk youth are those who have been subject to a combination of interrelated biological, psychological, and social factors that result in a greater likelihood for the development of delinquency, substance abuse, or other related anti-social behaviors

#### **Characteristics**

Psychological/Learning Aspects

At-risk students, as a group, are portrayed as:

- Living in a world of concrete objects, rather than abstract ideas
- Having difficulty generalizing
- Having limited power of concentration
- Possessing a very narrow range of interests
- Having low self-esteem
- Lacking confidence in their ability to achieve in school, a defeatist attitude
- Having a self-centered, individualistic point of view
- Being inflexible, rigid, intolerant of ambiguity, dogmatic, failing to recognize that other people may think or feel differently than they do
- Seeming unable to calculate the consequences of their behavior on other people
- Seeming unable to understand the cause and effect relationship between their behavior and people's reaction to it

Educational Aspects

In both traditional and regular school programs, at-risk students may exhibit some or all of the following behaviors:

- Academic/school failure

- A lack of interest in learning, and indifference towards school subjects
- A tendency to become restless or bored with school
- A tendency to misbehave or exhibit anti-social behavior
- The likelihood of having only a small circle of friends
- An inclination to associate only with friends who also engage in problem or delinquent behaviors
- An inclination towards truancy

### **At-Risk Students and Law-Related Education**

A review of Law-Related Education literature discloses the following three fields of relevant enquiry focused on the teaching of at-risk students:

#### **Content**

- Purpose and intent of law; how laws touch our lives; law-making; judicial process; law enforcement
- Democratic rights and values, and the responsibilities of citizenship
- Society's normative expectations
- Problem solving, using age-appropriate, real-life authentic problems or controversial issues (based on life experiences of at-risk students, or experiences that can be made relevant to their lives), all pertaining to school or community
- Conflict resolution skills, and their practice
- Peer pressure and its effects on at-risk students

#### **Teaching Strategies**

- Use cooperative learning groups and/or small groups that allow at-risk students to interact and bond with each other and, as possible, with non-delinquent peers.
- Utilize an interactive, hands-on approach
- Employ simulations (e.g., role play, mock trials and parliaments); use case studies
- Make use of resource people from the community, thus providing students with opportunities for bonding with pro-social adults and adult role models. An outside resource person may be defined as a professional who provides real-life expertise to an interactive teaching strategy
- Use inquiry to teach problem-solving and critical-thinking skills
- Place content within the context of real-life, here-and-now situations
- Provide students with opportunities to achieve success or recognition in both their school and community environments
- Provide, as appropriate, opportunities for community service

#### **Materials and Resources**

- Take field trips (for example, to local courthouses, police stations)
- Use outside resource people, such as judges, lawyers, police officers, sheriffs, ex-offenders, encouraging them to present differing points of view
- Use relevant literature: newspapers, magazine articles, brochures (especially from special interest groups), radio, television, videos – in order to present all sides of any particular issue.

### **Rationale for Law-Related Education’s Content/Teaching Strategies/Materials**

In the literature of law-related education there is a current interest in the concept of “Resiliency”. Resiliency has been defined as a person’s ability to successfully adapt to stressful events. As well as the characteristics of law-related education, listed above, other factors both familial and social that put youth at risk for delinquency or other anti-social or problem behaviors include: family conflict; a family history of high-risk behavior; poor family management practices; economic and social deprivation; living in a dysfunctional community where drugs and alcohol are readily available and where high rates of crime exist.

The question that researchers examined was “How do some youth who experience these risk factors, pertaining to home and community, manage to resist engaging in delinquency or other anti-social behavior?” According to these researchers, the answer is that such youth appear to be “resilient”. That is, they have the ability to successfully overcome the effects of a high-risk environment, and to develop skills in social competence, despite exposure to severe stress.

### **Characteristics of “Resilient” Youth**

Researchers have identified four key characteristics of youth who are resilient:

1. **Social Competence:** Responsiveness to others; conceptual and intellectual flexibility; caring for others; good communication skills; sense of humor
2. **Problem-Solving Skills:** Ability to use abstract thinking, such as understanding rules and laws; reflective thinking; critical-thinking; to develop alternative solutions to frustrating problems, such as calculating the consequences of one’s actions, thus perceiving cause and effect relationships
3. **Sense of Autonomy:** Having a positive sense of independence; experiencing emerging feelings of efficacy; having positive self-esteem; being able to control impulses
4. **Sense of Purpose and the Future:** Planning and goal-setting; having a belief in the future; delaying gratification

### **Factors that Promote “Resiliency”**

As well, researchers have pinpointed four factors that clearly promote resiliency:

1. **Bonding:** This feeling of “being connected” to others is considered by a number of researchers to be the overarching protective factor in the development of healthy behaviors
2. **Opportunity for Meaningful Participation:** Teachers and facilitators need to ensure the constant presence of interactive approaches to learning
3. **High Expectations for Behavior:** Youth need to be tutored in and encouraged to hold high and promising expectations for themselves
4. **Norms for Healthy Behavior:** Youth need to practice and rehearse clear rules of conduct, while being encouraged to model desired behavior

### **Discussion**

Law-Related Education researchers, teachers and supporters argue that the content and teaching strategies of LRE are especially well suited to developing the very factors that

promote “resiliency”, and the kind of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will contribute to the development of resiliency in at-risk youth. Here are six examples to support that claim.

1. Research has shown a negative correlation between law-related knowledge and authoritarian attitudes, but a positive correlation between law-related knowledge and legal-social responsibilities.
2. Active learning that involves at-risk youth in the exploration of content focused on real problems affecting real people can be used to help at-risk students: to see issues from multi-perspectives; to tolerate ambiguities; to identify alternative solutions to problems; to assess the possible consequences of various alternatives.
3. Research has discovered that one of the most effective ways to reduce “risk” with young people is to strengthen their bond with positive, pro-social peers and adults. The use of outside resource persons provides opportunities for bonding with adult role models, while the employment of small group work and cooperative-learning strategies provides opportunity for at-risk students to interact with non-at-risk peers. In this regard, another important research finding is that “correlational analysis” of LRE practices and outcomes reveals that appropriate use of outside resource people in the classroom is more strongly associated than any other classroom practice or event with increased attachment to both the teacher and the school, and to movement from delinquent to non-delinquent peer associations.
4. Research has demonstrated that having students investigate community problems and controversial issues can be an effective and stimulating way for developing critical-thinking, problem-solving, and value-clarification skills in at-risk youth.
5. Research on cooperative learning suggests that such learning engages at-risk students in pro-social behaviors, allowing them to practice the interpersonal and social skills needed for normative behavior.
6. At-risk students participating in such simulations as mock trials and role plays are provided with opportunities to develop communication and critical-thinking skills.

### **Summary of Key Research Findings**

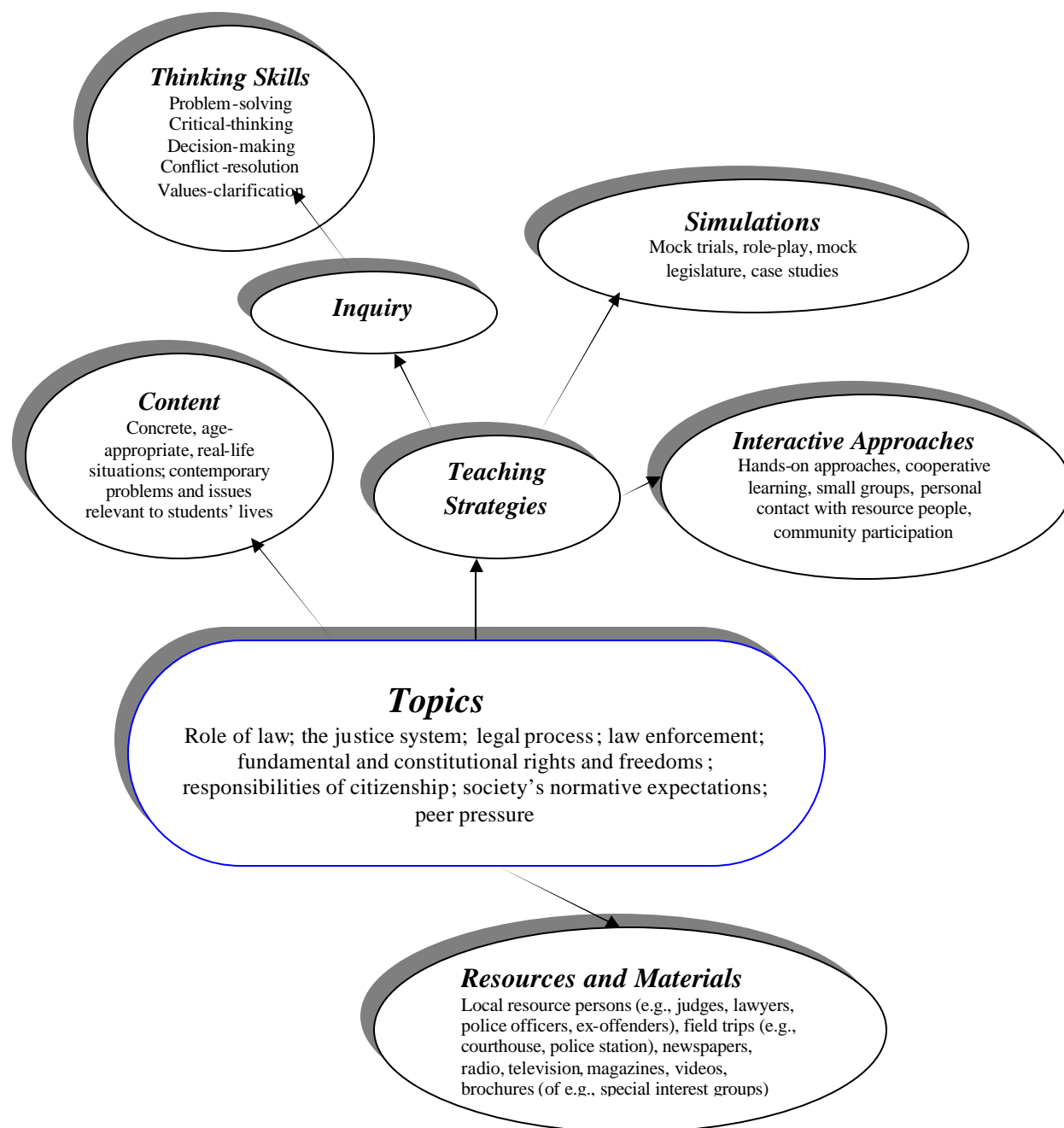
Researchers have reported the following range and variety of findings that LRE at-risk students have demonstrated after course completion.

1. A greater understanding and an enhanced appreciation of the purposes of the law and of legal processes
2. Reduced tendencies toward delinquent and anti-social behavior, and violence
3. Fewer discipline problems in school, and reduced vandalism of school property
4. Lower recidivism rates for prior offenders
5. Decreased associations with delinquent peers
6. Improved attitudes towards: authority, community, personal responsibility, and cooperation; and an increase in pro-social behavior and self-control
7. An increased commitment to school, and improved attitudes about the classroom, teacher, and other students
8. Improved school attendance, and some reduction in tardiness
9. Improved self-control
10. Greater empathy for victims of crime

11. Enhanced communication skills
12. An increased ability and willingness to tolerate ambiguities
13. Some increase in conflict-management, problem-solving, critical reasoning, and decision-making skills
14. Greater confidence in conversations with adults
15. An increased ability to suggest alternative solutions to problems
16. A more focused ability to consider the consequences of actions and choices
17. More awareness of what causes conflict
18. A greater sense of self-awareness, and of what makes them, personally, angry, and how to recognize and utilize acceptable ways of expressing anger

In concluding, here is a summary, and a diagrammatically circled presentation, of what are considered to be the critical and key guidelines for the development of law-related education programs for at-risk students.

## Guidelines for Developing LRE Programs for At-Risk Students



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