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Human Rights Education as Part of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland

In a society emerging from decades of political conflict, the role of human rights education in Northern Ireland is of particular importance as a tool to preventing violent conflict and to promoting a culture of peace. More generally, a rights-based approach to education might refer to three dimensions; access to education, educational content and educational processes. This article aims to explore the effectiveness of a specific human rights education project that has been piloted in Northern Ireland's post-primary schools as an example of a project that addresses educational content and processes in a flexible manner. Conclusions are drawn relating to factors facilitating the successful development of a rights-based approach to education and of human rights education projects.

Keywords:
Human rights education, peace process, Northern Ireland, human rights education, Northern Ireland conflict

1 Introduction

The concept of a rights-based approach to development has evolved as part of the UN Programme for Reform that was launched in 1997, when the Secretary-General called on all entities of the UN system to mainstream human rights into their various activities and programmes[1]. Gradually a number of UN[2], bilateral agencies[3] and international NGOs[4] have made a rights-based approach to development programming a priority and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has developed draft guidelines for the integration of human rights into poverty reduction strategies, including targets and strategies for education (OHCHR 2002). Essentially a human rights-based approach to programming draws attention to the legal commitments of 'duty bearers' to 'rights holders' (Theis 2004) and provides a stronger focus on accountability, and the participation and inclusion of poor, vulnerable and minority groups.

Arguments have also emerged that a rights-based approach to education is not only about access to education, but also about access to a quality of education that is based on human rights principles and processes. Whilst

the right to education is properly concerned with universal access to free and compulsory education on a basis of equality, inclusion and non-discrimination, it is also concerned with the right to a quality education where the content and processes are consistent with human rights and fundamental freedoms.

"Although opinions about quality in education are by no means unified, at the level of international debate and action three principles tend to be broadly shared. They can be summarized as the need for more relevance, for greater equity of access and outcome and for proper observance of individual rights. In much current international thinking, these principles guide and inform educational content and processes and represent more general social goals to which education itself should contribute.

Of these, the question of rights is at the apex. Although, as indicated earlier, most human rights legislation focuses upon access to education and is comparatively silent about its quality, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important exception. It expresses strong, detailed commitments about the aims of education. These commitments, in turn, have implications for the content and quality of education" (Education For All Global Monitoring Report 2005, 30).

In terms of access to education inequalities may be experienced on the basis of ethnic, linguistic, religious, social, cultural and political differences. Minorities are especially vulnerable and may be defined differently within different national and social contexts. Economic status and the existence of school fees or other charges for education may also be a reason for inequality. Disability may be a further reason for unequal access to education and in many societies, girls have no access to education or there are inequalities based on gender.

From an educational content point of view this suggests attention needs to be given to matters such as language of instruction; how diversity is represented within the curriculum; the content of curriculum and textbooks in areas such as language, literature, art, history, geography, culture, religion (where included), gender representation and how the needs of minority and vulnerable groups are represented and included in the curriculum.

From an educational processes point of view attention needs to be given to the extent to which the learning environment operates according to human rights principles and practices; to the nature of teaching and learning methods; and the extent to which there are adequate processes for participation, inclusion and freedom of expression at all levels of the education system. From a rights-based perspective a key tool for implementing these features is through human rights education.

2 Human Rights Education

The World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993 reaffirmed the importance of promoting respect for human rights through education

and recommended a framework for action.[5] In 1994 the UN General Assembly officially proclaimed 1995-2004 the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education and produced a Plan of Action for the Decade (OHCHR 1996).

According to the Plan of Action, human rights education is about the imparting of knowledge, skills and attitudes directed to:

- The strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- The full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity;
- The promotion of understanding, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples and racial, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups;
- The enabling of all persons to participate effectively in a free society;
- The furtherance of the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

The UN High Commissioner of Human Rights was requested to coordinate the implementation of the Plan of Action, in cooperation with UNESCO and all Member States. A key part of the Plan of Action was that "governments should play an active role in the implementation of the programme of the Decade through the development of national plans of action for human rights education" (OHCHR 1996, paragraph 11).

Subsequently, Guidelines for National Plans of Action for Human Rights Education[6] were developed and the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights and the Director-General of UNESCO addressed a joint letter to all Heads of State encouraging the establishment and implementation of national plans of action for human rights education. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights compiled a compendium of national plans that have already been developed as a means of sharing information among countries.[7] The compendium includes examples of national plans from Croatia, France, Japan, Philippines, Portugal and Turkey with excerpts from the national plans of Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Indonesia, Latvia, Malawi, Mexico, Norway and Venezuela.

Most national plans emphasise the importance of an integrated approach to human rights education, that is, through school-based programmes and through youth and community programmes outside school. The role of the media in human rights education is also a common feature. There are some examples of specific human rights programmes being included in the curriculum, but it is more common to advocate multiple actions in a number of areas, so that human rights education is integrated into all teaching subjects and modelled through the values and practices that operate within the classroom and the school. A significant challenge in all countries is to make the language and concepts of human rights accessible, relevant and applied to real life situations, especially for younger children.

At the conclusion of the decade the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution[8] for a World Programme for Human Rights Education to start on 1 January 2005. A Plan of Action[9] has been prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) in cooperation with UNESCO and will focus on primary and post-

primary school systems in its first three years (2005-2007).

3 Human Rights Education in Northern Ireland

A rights-based approach to education may also be regarded as a tool for conflict prevention by addressing access and equality issues within an education system and by encouraging rights-based educational content and processes, including human rights education. Developments as part of a peace process in Northern Ireland provide one example.

When the Republic of Ireland was established in 1921, a substantial population in the six counties in the north of the island (mostly Protestant descendants of English and Scottish settlers from the 1600s onward) wished to retain the union with Britain. The island was partitioned and the northern part became part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Although the territory was established with a majority of 'subjects' loyal to Britain, it also contained a significant minority who would prefer to be citizens of a unified Ireland. British and Irish national identities are further underpinned by religious and cultural differences between these two groups. These differences became a basis for discrimination that led to economic, social and political inequalities, and gave rise to civil rights campaigns, which started peacefully but developed into a violent conflict in the late 1960s (Fitzduff, O'Hagan 2000). Several attempts to reform Northern Ireland's political landscape were made since the outbreak of the violence, including the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights, which was established in 1973 to advise the British government on human rights legislation and policies. Though riddled with problems relating to its independence, powers and remit (Livingstone 1999), the Commission published two influential reports on religious and political discrimination and equality in the late 1980s (Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights 1987 and 1990). After many years of violence in Northern Ireland, a declaration of cease-fires created the opportunity for a peace process that led to a political agreement in 1998 supported by the British and Irish governments. The agreement replaced direct rule from Britain and established new political institutions in Northern Ireland so that local politicians would be elected from different communities to share power. Crucially, both governments also recognised 'the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both'. Through the agreement the UK and Irish governments accept that the future constitutional status of the territory will be determined by 'the wish of the majority of the people who live there'.

Alongside constitutional matters the peace agreement identified a number of 'confidence building measures'. These included arrangements for the decommissioning of weapons, demilitarisation and changes to policing, prisoner releases and support for victims of the conflict (Smith 2003). However, the agreement also left unresolved key issues, such as decommissioning, demilitarization and policing (Darby 2003). Most prominently, the agreement resulted in the establishment of a devolved and power-sharing government in Northern Ireland, which is currently

suspended. An Equality Commission was established with statutory responsibilities related to anti-discrimination legislation concerning Equal Opportunities (gender), the Race Relations Act, Fair Employment (religion) and disability.

The British government also agreed to incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law through the Human Rights Act. This took effect from 2 October 2000. A Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) was established and, as part of the Agreement, the Commission has consulted on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. The NIHRC replaced the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights and was given extended powers (Harvey 2001), including a remit to investigate human rights violations and to assist individuals; to advise the government on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland; to review legislation relevant to human rights; and to research and to educate about human rights. Nevertheless, the NIHRC has from its inception been beset by difficulties, ranging from limited resources to public controversy over resignations of Commissioners and ,more recently, protests over the appointment of a new Chief Commissioner.[10]

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission undertook extensive consultation on the establishment of a Bill of Rights (NIHRC 2001) and the proposals included a commitment that the State 'undertake to include human rights in the school, youth service and training curricula, as well as in the training programmes for all those working for, in connection with or on behalf of children' (NIHRC 2001, 126).

4 The Bill of Rights Project

Partly in response to this challenge and partly in response to other developments, the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) initiated a pilot project in social, civic and political education in 25 post-primary schools to develop a citizenship education curriculum (Smith 2003; Arlow 2004). The Northern Ireland programme of local and global citizenship is an inquiry-based curriculum involving the exploration of concepts in four core areas, including Diversity and Inclusion; Equality and Justice; Human Rights and Social Responsibilities; and Democracy and Active Participation (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment 2003). Young people are required to investigate these concepts through case studies and resource materials related to local and global issues. Many of these case studies having been developed specially by local voluntary organisations. This approach involves deeply controversial and practical issues such as how to achieve a policing service that has the confidence of all sections of society or how current conflicts over cultural expression might be resolved. A similar form of citizenship education is being developed within non-formal education, through youth and community education programmes.

For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on a specific educational project on the proposed Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. This project was

initiated as a collaborative effort involving the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Department of Education and the Education and Library Boards and additional consultancy from external agencies specialised in human rights education.

The Bill of Rights in Schools (BORIS) Project aimed to promote awareness of human rights issues among pupils and teachers in Northern Ireland. The project was implemented in 22 selected post-primary schools across Northern Ireland in two phases from September 2002 to January 2004. While it was planned as a stand-alone scheme, the close collaboration with various educational agencies made it a unique project which was designed to build upon and to enrich the post-primary curriculum and to produce a resource for post-primary schools that would be of value to teachers of Local and Global Citizenship in post-primary schools and, more generally, to other subjects (NIHRC 2004). The project benefited from a team of development workers who were involved in developing the resources, teaching the project in schools and assisting teachers in schools to become involved in delivering the project. The project thereby focused on both educational content and educational processes. As part of the project, the teaching materials, which provided a consistent framework but allowed teachers to explore topics of particular relevance to their pupils, were piloted and the teaching was evaluated in regards to teachers' perceptions of human rights education. In line with the Plan of Action for the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (see above) the evaluation also focused on the impact of the project on pupils' knowledge, attitudes and participatory behaviours (Reilly, Niens 2004).

The evaluation across the two phases employed a range of research methods. These included a pre- and post-test pupil survey with about 300 pupils in each phase and a control group in phase 2. The questionnaire was designed to highlight learning experiences and changes relating to knowledge and information-seeking behaviour; attitudes relating to the law, nationality and racism; and confidence in participation. In addition, pupil focus groups were conducted in each phase of the project and semi-structured interviews were conducted with four teachers from participating schools and three Education and Library Board officers who had acted as line mangers for the six project workers, who were also interviewed. The consistency of results over both phases of the project, across the range of research methods and across participant groups can be interpreted as clearly supporting the overall findings of the evaluation.

The following provides a summary of results emerging from the evaluation of the BORIS project. Teachers, project workers and ELB officers emphasised that the project was perceived as very timely given the proposed introduction of Local and Global Citizenship Education into post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, which highlighted the key role of institutional support in engaging stakeholders in a project of this nature. Human rights and responsibilities represent one of the four themes on which Local and Global Citizenship Education is based, and as such, human rights and citizenship education were seen by these groups as inextricably linked. Given the history of political conflict in Northern Ireland, interviewees perceived it to be particularly appropriate for pupils to learn about human rights and to establish a human rights culture in the schools and among their peers, which, through the emphasis on tolerance and social justice,

was hoped to foster peace and harmony between communities in future generations. Teachers' knowledge about human rights issues and their confidence in using active learning and teaching methods were perceived to have improved as a result of the project.

This was attributed to a variety of factors, but especially to the opportunities afforded by the project for teachers to learn by observing project workers and/or by teaching. Teachers stated that they enjoyed the close collaboration with the project workers and having the necessary space and time to learn how best to teach human rights issues in the classroom.

Results from both the pupil surveys and the focus groups indicated extremely low baseline levels of pupils' knowledge about human rights issues in general and in relation to Northern Ireland in particular, which emphasises that teaching about human rights and the proposed Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland is exceptionally important in the current post-conflict context (Niens, Reilly, McLaughlin, under review).

The pupil surveys and focus groups indicated a positive impact of the project on knowledge, attitudes relating to human rights issues and behaviours relating to information seeking and participation. Pupils acquired knowledge about human rights as a result of the project, and this knowledge was perceived by pupils to be relevant and potentially useful. Moreover, pupils' interest in human rights issues also increased dramatically throughout the project, which was facilitated by the development of relevant vocabulary with which they could discuss and engage with complex human rights related issues (Reilly, Niens, McLaughlin 2005).

While there was evidence of some pupils applying their learning to their own contexts, others appeared to struggle with the distinction between moral values and legislative frameworks. This conceptual ambiguity appeared to be due to the project addressing human rights as part of both reference frameworks, without explicitly explaining the basis for these. Finally, while knowledge gains could be identified in all cases, the impact of the project on human rights related attitudes and behaviours was slightly less clear-cut but was positively influenced by the number of lessons they received. This last finding is consistent with the notion that attitudinal change is difficult to achieve; the academic literature generally acknowledges that long-term projects are required to affect attitudes (Allport 1954). In Northern Ireland, this view has been voiced especially in relation to cross-community contact programmes, which have been criticised as ineffective if run in the short-term (Trew 1986).

Interestingly, results from the pupil surveys indicated significant differences between maintained (mainly Catholic), controlled (mainly Protestant) and integrated schools (similar proportions of Catholic and Protestant pupils) in regards to interest in human rights, attitudes and levels of confidence. This might be a result of school differences relating to school ethos (Montgomery, Smith 1997), which the evaluation did not take into account. However, it might also reflect a perception that human rights are more closely linked to the Catholic community as the historical minority group. Additionally, evidence from the pupil focus groups suggests a link between knowledge and attitudes in this area. In one controlled school, pupils' attitudes to human rights appeared to be indifferent to hostile, consistent

with their historical majority group membership. However, at the end of the project not only had these participants acquired relevant knowledge and a language with which to engage with human rights issues, but they were interested in learning more about human rights and the proposed Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, and saw these as having direct relevance to themselves and their own community.

As human rights are often portrayed as protecting minority communities, attention needs to be paid to ensuring that the human rights agenda appeals to both majority and minority communities. Especially in the case of societies emerging from political conflict involving communities that (traditionally) held positions of political power and those which did not, human rights violations might almost inevitably come to be perceived as affecting the relatively powerless to a greater extent than their political counterparts. The inclusion of all communities into a human rights agenda that strives for peace is therefore particularly important in such situations (Reardon 1997) and it might require different approaches to human rights education for different communities.

In general, given pupils' low levels of knowledge about human rights and the general enthusiasm to engage with human rights issues, there is clearly an unmet need for human rights education in the Northern Ireland post-primary school sector, which could be partly met through the integration of human rights education into the post-primary curriculum or through stand-alone human rights education projects and programmes.

5 Conclusion

Generally, a rights-based approach to education in Northern Ireland appears to be essential to address historical inequalities between communities, to promote peaceful relationships between communities and to encourage social participation using peaceful means. In regards to access to education, educational policies in Northern Ireland have been implemented with the aim to achieve equal access to education for all communities in Northern Ireland and, in the early 1990s, strategies have been put in place to address funding inequalities that affected different types of schools (Osborne 1993).

Regarding educational processes and educational content, the Bill of Rights in Schools project was used as an example of an educational project which addressed both aspects. The low level of pupils' knowledge about human rights clearly indicated a need for human rights education in Northern Ireland. One of the strengths of the project from the perspective of teachers and project workers was that it allowed teachers to decide the extent to which they required support from project workers at any given time, thus encouraging a progressive sense of confidence and ownership in teachers who had relatively little experience in this area. Another strength of the project was its flexibility in relation to educational content but that it nevertheless employed a consistent curricular framework. This enabled pupils to develop an understanding and a vocabulary appropriate to

engagement with issues they were formerly ill equipped to address.

More specifically, the evaluation of the Bill of Rights in Schools project clearly highlights the importance of several factors in the successful implementation of educational schemes aimed at raising awareness of human rights and at developing a culture of human rights in schools and beyond. Institutional support provided by not only the school's senior management, but, perhaps most importantly, through governmental institutions and curricular policies appears to be crucial to introduce and sustain the project in the long-term as indicated by the interview results. With regard to teacher training, continuous external support which provides opportunities for putting teaching methods and strategies into practice will facilitate teachers' increasing confidence in engaging in debates about controversial issues relating to human rights and in employing active teaching methodologies. Even though short-term projects might appear attractive to practitioners because they are easier to fit into tight school timetables, it is crucially important that time is allowed to establish a human rights culture that impacts on attitudes and behaviours.

In post-conflict Northern Ireland, both the formal and informal educational sectors have adopted the ideas of citizenship and human rights education, supported by decisions made at policy level. While it is recognised that an optimal approach to human rights education should include both the formal and informal educational sectors as proposed in most national plans, there often are specific difficulties related to each of these sectors. In formal education such difficulties may include lack of time, lack of space in a tightly packed curriculum, competition for resources, and institutional support. It is therefore essential that education initiatives in the area of human rights should be flexible in order to maximise their sustainability in the long-term. We believe that in this way, human rights education as part of a rights-based approach to education provides an opportunity to promote peace and to prevent future conflicts.

Notes

[1]Reform at the United Nations. UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan.

[2]For example, UNICEF statement on a rights-based approach.

[3]See, DFID.

[4]E.g. Amnesty International, CARE, OXFAM.

[5]Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, paragraph 33, part I.

[6]UN Doc. A/52/467/Add.1.

[7]Compendium of National Plans of Action for Human Rights Education, OHCHR, Geneva, February 2001.

[8]Resolution A/RES/59/113 adopted 10 December 2004 (http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/ga10317.doc.htm).

[9]UN Doc. A/59/525.

[10]BBC, 16 June 2005

(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4099882.stm).

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