

Lift Off: A Cross-Border Primary Human Rights Education Initiative

Name of organisation:
Amnesty Irish Section

Lift Off

Cross Border Primary Human Rights Education Initiative

Developing a Curricular Framework for Human Rights Education

Background

The Cross Border Primary Human Rights Education Initiative is a partnership between Amnesty Irish Section, Amnesty UK, Irish National Teachers Organisation, Ulster Teachers Union and Education International. It enjoys the financial and practical support of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Education for Northern Ireland, and of Irish Aid at the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. Formally established in 2001, the Initiative had as its primary aim to support the development of a human rights culture on the island of Ireland by promoting and supporting the mainstreaming of Human Rights Education in the primary education system of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The initiative was established at a time when human rights were increasingly being seen as the vehicle and means through which positive social change could occur on the island of Ireland. Under the terms of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998, priority was given to the advancement of human rights in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement also made provision for a number of cross border bodies, one of which focused on education. At St. Andrew's, Scotland, in 2006, both governments again reaffirmed their commitment to the 1998 Agreement. Both States have also made commitments particularly under the Convention on the Rights of the Child to ensure that children are enabled to develop a respect for their own cultural identity, language and values and for the culture, language and values of others. The education systems in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland were therefore challenged to address the aims, content and organisation of education to ensure that it is in tune with these changes.

In the light of this social and educational context, it was felt that there was a critical need to support teachers and schools in delivering these changes from a human rights perspective. Although primary curricula could be now seen to implicitly embrace human rights, human rights had not been an explicit part of primary school curricula in either jurisdiction and many of the processes associated with Human Rights Education including school democracy, active pedagogies, linking projects and whole school practices had been introduced with various degrees of success and overall impact.

In education, the Republic of Ireland had seen the launch of a primary curriculum which represented a holistic vision of education based on principles of active participation of the learner, collaborative learning and the symbiotic link between education and society. In Northern Ireland, the CCEA had begun to undertake a review of the curriculum in Northern Ireland. Central to the review was a recognition of the values which underpin curricular objectives. Included in these values are "each individual's unique capacity...equality, justice and human rights and our capacity as citizens to resolve conflict by democratic means, the environment as the basis of life and the need to sustain it for future generations and each individual's right to work and to earn a living."

The working methodology of the initiative involves education personnel working together to develop curriculum materials and educational approaches which would reflect the various perspectives in Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland. The project set itself objectives in the following key areas:

- Curriculum Support Materials
- Human Rights and Whole School Practice
- Promoting and Developing Human Rights Education at primary level
- Professional Development of Teachers

By far the most significant dimension of the project's work to date has been the development of curriculum support materials which would enable teachers in Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, whatever their personal and professional background and context to implement human rights education with relative ease and confidence. Before the process of developing the curriculum began, guiding principles were put in place which have been followed closely ever since. These were:

- The materials should be fully consistent with the approaches and content of the primary curricula in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
- Teachers from different perspectives should work together in writing the materials in consultation with human rights educators and curriculum specialists.
- The materials should be carefully piloted in a range of schools which, as much as possible would reflect the social, cultural and economic context of primary schools in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.
- The final materials should reflect the views of the teachers and children involved in the original pilot as well as the views of educators with expertise in child pedagogy and human rights education.
- The steering committee of the project, (representative of key human rights and education stakeholders) should be fully consulted and have final approval of the materials.
- The materials should enable teachers and children to develop a critical awareness of key human rights documents, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- The programme should as much as possible adapt and maximise the potential of existing material in human right education rather than setting out to develop completely new ideas and strategies.

The process and context in which the materials were produced have been core to their success, reflecting principles of participation, transparency, equality and empowerment. In 2001, the steering committee of the project decided that the first set of materials should be designed for use with 8-10 year old children. This group was chosen as it was felt that at this age, children would be receptive to the language and pedagogies of human rights. Another important factor was the sense that teachers of this age group, would have the time and space to invest in developing new curricula with children. (For 11-12 year old children in Ireland, there has been a particular emphasis on academic testing which has put pressure on teachers and schools to focus on literacy and mathematics.) For purpose of exemplar, the process which led to the development of the Lift Off Primary Curriculum for 8-10 year old children is described below

Process of writing the material:

A panel of 6 teachers was recruited through advertisement in the magazines of the teacher unions and subsequent interviews. The final panel of teachers chosen was mixed in terms of age, gender, teaching experience, religious and political perspective and teaching environment. With the exception of two teachers, none of them had worked together before. The teachers were paid according to the daily basic substitute teaching rate for the professional time and commitment they gave to the project. The teachers were asked to commit to three residential weekends over the course of three months and to give up to ten working days to the writing work. A facilitator with experience in human rights education at primary school level was appointed to work with the teachers.

From the beginning, great emphasis was placed on the team getting to know each other personally and professionally. The presence of the leaders of their teacher unions to welcome the teachers gave the process fantastic legitimacy and credibility. Through discussion, familiarisation and team building exercises, they began to understand each other's professional and personal background and values. Together they learned about the basic principles and tenets of human rights and reflected on the challenges of producing educational materials in human rights which they would all be equally able to use in their own communities and to recommend to their professional colleagues in their different contexts. By the end of the first weekend they had agreed team rights and responsibilities, a skeleton structure for the materials, a curriculum setting and core concepts. They each took specific concepts for which they would individually develop lesson ideas. They agreed to develop a programme together which would enable teachers to develop key knowledge, skills and attitudes in children, using active and participative pedagogies.

On each of the subsequent weekends, ideas were discussed and developed, and placed in a sequential and curricular framework. As practising teachers, the team were very aware that to be an effective teaching aide, the materials would have to be very accessible to teachers. A consistent lesson format was agreed, outlining the core concept being addressed in the lesson, key learning objectives in relation to knowledge, skills and attitudes, curriculum links, the introductory, developmental and concluding activities. **(Note: Would suggest including sample lesson as illustration here)**. It was also agreed that the programme could not be effectively taught unless due attention was paid by the teacher to the school and classroom climate. A substantive introductory chapter, offering teachers guidelines on how to create a human rights friendly classroom was developed. **The final materials included lessons on the following:**

Who Are We?

What are Our Rights?

Rights and Responsibilities

Rights in Conflict

The Convention on The Rights of The Child

All Equal?

Refugees..Home is Where the Heart Is

Perspective...Many Sides to The One Story

Human Rights Promoters

Working for Human Rights

Piloting and Evaluation of Materials

21 primary schools, divided between each jurisdiction were chosen to take part in the piloting of the programme. The teachers committed to implement the programme between January and May in the context of their regular curriculum delivery. In some schools, this was delivered in a cross curricular frameworks while most schools chose to deliver it in the context of their Social, Personal and Health Education Programme (Rol) or Personal Development (NI) Some of the schools had responded to publicity in the teacher journals about the project and others were invited to ensure that agreed criteria regarding the schools involved were met. These criteria were put in place to ensure the range of schools was a representative sample of primary schools in Ireland in relation to location, gender mix, ethos, size and experience in human rights education. A day long **forum** was organised to introduce schools to the project materials and Human Rights Education and a review meeting was also held to evaluate teachers' experience of Human Rights Education in the classroom. In order to reflect the reality of most schools, it was most important to include schools which had little previous inclination to do this kind of work. In addition to piloting the materials schools also engaged in **IT Activities** and were **linked** with schools in their wider area and the other jurisdiction. In the course of the term, participating teachers and principles come together with their colleagues from other schools on at least two occasions organised by the initiative. The project employed two co-ordinators, one based in each jurisdiction to oversee the pilot and liaise with teachers and schools. Participating teachers were given special log books (I can

provide samples) which were filled in after they taught each lesson. These logs proved immensely helpful when the materials were being revised. When all the logs had been compiled and reviewed, an evaluation forum was held for all teachers in which they could come to a consensus on what aspects of the programme should be maintained and which aspects needed to be improved. The materials were subsequently revised and reviewed by an editorial committee. The writing team of teachers met on one final occasion to approve the final materials.

The Lift Off materials have since been distributed free of charge to 4,500 primary schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in cooperation with the statutory education services and teacher unions. The initiative has gone on to use the same framework to develop curriculum support materials for 11-12 year old children and 4-8 year olds, forming a comprehensive curricular programme. The materials have been translated into Irish, Danish and Italian and been supported human rights education interventions in several countries including Denmark, Mauritius, Sierra Leone, Italy, Israel and Jordan.

A summative evaluation of the project to date has been carried out by Dr. Mark Morgan, Head of Education at Ireland's largest College of Education, St. Patrick's College, Dublin. He found that while schools who have engaged in human rights education are keenly aware of its benefits, there is a lack of awareness of the added value of human rights education in the wider education system. Therefore, there is a need for increased awareness raising about the added value of such an approach among policy makers, statutory support agencies and schools. Some of the benefits of using the Lift Off series of curriculum support materials documented in the evaluation report include increased self-esteem in children, children taking increased responsibility for including other children in games and decreased conflict and bullying in the school. As one teacher put it: "Lift Off gives me time, because I don't have to spend a half an hour after break time sorting out fights between the children". Or as one principal said: "Where teachers and children use the language of human rights, there is less likelihood of bullying and conflict".

Moreover, the teachers who have included and practised human rights education in their school have become convinced of the need for human rights education as an essential component of everyday school life: "Having experienced the benefits of the programme and the difference it made to certain children's attitudes...it became obvious that there was a great need for this in the curriculum".