



Human Rights Education in Ireland – An Overview

Launch

4 July 2011

Opening Address by Dr Maurice Manning

President of the Irish Human Rights Commission

I am delighted to welcome you all here today to the launch of the Irish Human Rights Commission's Human Rights Education Report. I am particularly delighted to welcome the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn T.D., who will launch our report today.

The Commission has a mandate to work for the promotion and protection of human rights, and one of our specific functions is to promote human rights education and training. But it is not solely because of this statutory mandate that we are focusing on human rights education, but because we are convinced of the crucial importance of such education and training to build a culture of respect for human rights.

Our work in the Commission includes analysing legislation, publishing policy positions, presenting reports to the United Nations on Ireland's record of compliance with its human rights commitments, undertaking enquiries and appearing as *amicus curiae* before the courts, among other functions. Through the breadth of this work, we have

come to fully appreciate that a key method of ensuring that Irish law, policy and practice promotes and protects the human rights of everyone in Ireland is the provision of education and training. It was as a result of this growing realisation that we undertook to map the extent of human rights education across a range of sectors in Ireland.

Today's report aims to provide an overview of the current provision of human rights education and training across a diverse range of sectors: primary, post-primary, higher education, and in the community and voluntary sector, the civil and public service and the legal profession.

We did not intend nor do we claim that this report is a *comprehensive* assessment of every element of all these sectors. But we hope that by this report we have provided for the first time an overview of human rights education and training in the different sectors and identified where there are gaps and opportunities.

In carrying out this mapping exercise, we took direction from international human rights standards and from the United Nations World Programme for Human Rights Education (WPHRE), which Ireland has signed up to. The World Programme defines human rights education as, and I quote:

[E]ducation, training and information aimed at building a universal culture of human rights through the sharing of knowledge, imparting of skills and moulding of attitudes.

The definition states the *purpose* of human rights education – building a culture of human rights. Building a culture of human rights is a duty on the State by virtue of its membership of the United Nations and its adherence to a range of international human rights treaties and conventions. To do this the State must impart knowledge about human rights and their enforcement/protection mechanisms, provide skills to promote,

defend and apply human rights, and shape attitudes and behaviour so that human rights are upheld. Human rights education can help the State achieve this.

The United Nations states that successful integration of human rights education requires that it be embedded across all areas: in legislation, policies, implementation strategies, the learning environment, teaching and learning approaches, and the initial education and professional development. We used these different elements in undertaking our report. Commissioner Katherine Zappone will present more details on the findings in relation to the different sectors we reviewed.

Overall, we found that there *are* a range of education and training initiatives currently in place in Ireland that promote human rights. There are many organizations and bodies carrying out excellent initiatives. However, the scope and nature of the engagement with human rights education and training varies greatly from sector to sector. Human rights education and training is most predominant in primary and post-primary education. It is evolving in higher education and the community and voluntary section. It is at its least developed in the civil and public service.

We also found that there are a range of opportunities to improve the position of human rights education in Ireland. For example, in the formal sector, human rights education could be further embedded in initial teacher education and continuous professional development. The new Politics and Society Leaving Certificate subject has the potential to strengthen the human rights education in a considerable way and should be introduced as soon as possible. In addition, there are opportunities to embed human rights in the whole-school environment through planning, policies and ways of working including the development of strong student councils

In relation higher education over and above law courses, promotion of human rights is a growing feature of a wide variety of other courses. Particularly welcome in terms of advancing human rights education in the higher education learning environment are

initiatives such as the Community Knowledge Initiative and Campus Engage that promote active participation by students by promoting their engagement with the wider community often on human rights related concerns. There is also scope to strengthen human rights education through networking all those who are promoting human rights education in a higher education institution and between higher education institutions.

In the civil and public service, there is a timely opportunity in this era of public sector reform to place human rights at the heart of policymaking and the delivery of quality public services. Building on the work of the Commission's Human Rights Education and Training Project with the Public Service, we would welcome the opportunity to engage with the Minister Howlin in this regard.

The key message from our report is that to advance human rights education across all these diverse sectors there is a need for an overarching framework and policy. The purpose of our report is therefore to promote and support the development of a National Human Rights Education and Training Action Plan for Ireland.

Such an action plan will help the Government to fulfill its international commitments in this area and to fill the gaps and meet the opportunities that exist to ensure a comprehensive programme of human rights education and training is in place in Ireland. The development of a national action plan will also allow the State to make express at the national level the commitment it has given at the international level to promote and support human rights education and training.

The provision of human rights education and training need not be cost intensive. Indeed, with our limited resources, the Commission has already piloted a human rights training programme for the Civil and Public Service. There have been other excellent pilot projects that have been undertaken, such as Amnesty International's *Lift Off*

project, which provide successful human rights education models in the formal education sector.

Ensuring that everyone in Ireland, from school children to senior civil servants, is aware of their rights and the rights of others will help to create a society that values diversity, protects the most vulnerable, and promotes openness, democracy and inclusiveness. Human rights education is key to this. We hope that this report will be of assistance in the development of human rights education in Ireland, and the Commission stands ready to provide our full support to the implementation of Ireland's human rights education commitments.

I would now like to invite Minister Quinn to launch the report.