



Forum for Peace and Reconciliation

Sinn Féin Submission to the Forum on the role of Education and Reconciliation

6 October 1995

"Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace." - Article 26.2 of the United Nations Charter

From an early age it helps to mould how we think and therefore it effects us in all manner of ways; how we interact with each; how we relate to institutions which in their own way depend on us and shape out lives; how we view the world at a social and cultural level.

It is therefore essential that the principles which underpin the educational system are designed to ensure that the person is developed to his or her maximum potential. There are universal principles governing education and some of these are outlined in the quote from the U.N. Charter. We support these rights.

We would also support the views expressed from the Teachers' Unions which argue for multi-denominational schools and we would specifically support the T.U.I.'s call for education to be free, co-educational, multi-de-nominational, and non selective. We would also support the argument that education should be regarded as a public service, a service open to all and accountable to the elected representatives of the people, as well as to parents.

We believe the people of Ireland require an education system which is secular and non-sexist and that children should be educated together irrespective of their class, creed or sex. It is in this direction we believe the education system should be going.

Historical Ignorance

There are obvious difficulties in pursuing these objectives, not least of which is the fact that Ireland has two education systems. Both have many problems, some proving more difficult to resolve than others.

We are firmly of the opinion that many of these problems cannot be resolved satisfactorily until the British government leaves Ireland and allows the people of Ireland to decide their own future and to apply themselves to the important task, one of many, of constructing an education which meets their needs.

If anything within the schools can be accused of having contributed to the conflict it is surely the absence of the teaching of Irish history in the schools in the North. The situation is gradually improving. Irish history is now an optional subject at GCSE or 'Leaving', while it is now compulsory at Junior or Key Stage 3. Irish history will, hopefully, become compulsory throughout the secondary school curriculum in the North, before long. At the moment Irish history in the North stops at 1920, just as it did in the South up to the late 1960's. Northern Protestants, in particular, have been

denied a knowledge of the place in which they live.

How can a people learn from the mistakes of the past if they do not even know what they were? Far from being obsessed by the detail of history, many in the North suffer from ignorance of the facts of their historical identity.

Integrated Education

As we said earlier, Sinn Féin believes in secular education and in multi-denominational schools. However, we believe it would be mistaken to confuse these norms with how the British government handles integrated education in the Six Counties. We have no quarrel whatever with those parents who choose to send their children to these schools, nor with those teachers who teach in them. They do so for the best of reasons. We can see some advantages and we are in favour of their being there as an option for parents.

We would like to see the same resources now being given to integrated schools also being given to Irish language-medium schools.

Central to any discussion of integrated education in Ireland, and indeed of education generally, is the issue of the curriculum: the assumptions underlying it, who controls it and its goals. A shared curriculum must acknowledge our common Irishness and celebrate the diversity which enriches us all.

The past absence of Irish history teaching and the banning and neglect of the Irish language in the school curriculum has been at least as responsible for contributing to the problems of society in the North as the absence of integrated education. One of the reasons for the support for the Catholic Maintained Sector in nationalist areas is the fact that, historically, the authorities in the North tried to turn education into a weapon which reinforces the 'Britishness' of the State.

The right-wing educational ethos of the British authorities, which is based on elitism and privilege, is anathema to the vast majority of teachers on this island, North and South.

Would it not make sense to integrate the two state-systems of education on this island, as part of the process of bringing about true integration?

Class Inequalities

Within the education systems there are issues which educationalists should urgently address; the inequalities that arise from class difference; the streaming of young children at an early age; the damage done to children branded as failures at 11 years of age; the total emphasis on examinations in the education systems in both states; and the burdens placed on children and teachers because of too many children in the class.

Sinn Féin supports the creation of a secular education system. We believe this is now possible in the 26 Counties and we believe the government should face up to its responsibilities in this regard. Public ownership of education is the hallmark of a modern, forward looking society. There is no justifiable excuse why children in this state of all religions and persuasions are not educated together. There is too much church involvement in the running of schools in this society.

The British Tory government is obsessed with perpetuating elitism in society and want to introduce it into the school curriculum as early as possible - thus inculcating a sense of superiority and inferiority in the population as early as possible.

A system which brands a child a failure at 11 years of age is a disgrace. This and the issue of class sizes are every bit as divisive as the question of segregated education and deserve to be seriously addressed.

Irish-medium Education - Parity of Esteem In Action

If integrated education has been officially encouraged, the opposite is the case for Irish-medium education in the North. The treatment of Irish-medium education in the North is an example of 'Parity of Esteem' inaction.

In recent years we have heard much talk from the British government about their desire, after years of discrimination, to recognise the rights of Irish language speakers in the Six Counties. Yet, we have not seen them follow through in any significant way. The Irish language in the Six Counties is not officially recognised. The state

banned the teaching of Irish when it was set up. Twenty-five years ago, the first Irish language school was set up in West Belfast. The organisers were threatened with imprisonment.

Today, the British government continues to fight against funding the many bun scoileanna set up since. Until recently they refused funding to Meanscoil Feirste. They have allowed limited funding but still refuse to permit the Education Department to fund this project. British civil servants candidly inform language enthusiasts they don't have a development policy for Irish language schools. Patrick Mayhew, in his must vaunted Coleraine speech, informed us that he has no plans for a bi-lingual society. Mayhew had the gall to claim that Awe have been active in facilitating the promotion of the Irish language, and we are anxious to remove any structural barriers to its use by those who wish to do so. Nationalists in general regard Irish as their national language, whether they speak it or not. The treatment of the language by the British government amounts to racism and stands in stark contrast to the way they fund and promote the Welsh and Scottish languages.

Sinn Féin calls for Irish to be treated on the same level as English in the North - at every level of society. Irish language speakers must have the right to express themselves in their native tongue, without hindrance, and parents must have the right and opportunity to have their children educated in or through Irish. We call for Irish-medium education to be available as an option in every school in the North. In other words, if parents choose Irish as part of the educational curriculum of their child, it should be available as of right on their school's curriculum.

The Education Department in the North must immediately develop an Irish language curriculum for English-medium schools.

Because of the hostility toward the Irish language shown by the British authorities, Sinn Féin calls for the immediate setting up of an all-island Board of Education in relation to Irish-medium education.

In relation to the INTO's suggestion that educational qualifications become transferable as between North and South, we agree. We further agree that absence of knowledge of the Irish language should not be a barrier to obtaining a

post in the South - with one proviso. All holders of teaching posts in the South must attain a level of competence in Irish by a specified period after the taking up of a post within the educational system. In other words, those who enter the system from the North, who have been denied a knowledge of Irish, should be allowed to take up a post in the South but should then be provided with an Irish language learning course and be expected to attain a level of proficiency in a specified period. Irish language learning should be available to all teachers within the system