

Breaking boundaries: Human rights education through the arts - Amnesty International's 'Voice Our Concern' Initiative

Karen O'Reilly

Amnesty International's 'Voice Our Concern' programme uses creative media to engage schools, cinemas, youth theatres and youth organisations in human rights education, and as such encompasses both the formal and non-formal education sectors. This article presents an overview of 'Voice Our Concern' and discusses the implications of using the arts to bring human rights education beyond the classroom.

The formal education sector incorporates the school system, its framework, ethos and curricula; the non-formal sector incorporates those forums beyond the school system through which education can be imparted. In relation to young people in Ireland, the non-formal sector includes youth organisations and drama groups, work placements, music concerts, film screenings, television, and, increasingly, Internet sites.

Human rights education and other pedagogies have been strongly influenced by non-formal approaches; the challenge has been to find space in the formal sector in which these can be accommodated. In the Republic of Ireland, this space is provided by the Transition Year system (for 15-16-year-olds) and, to a lesser extent, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programmes. However, these options are not currently available to all Senior Cycle students. The modular system proposed in the current review of Senior Cycle would go some way toward addressing this.

Transition Year, unique to the Irish education system, blurs the boundaries between the formal and non-formal education sectors. It promotes varied and creative learning methodologies, development of personal and social awareness, critical thinking skills, and 'learning beyond the classroom' through undertaking work placements and creative and community projects. As such, it provides an apt forum for human rights education, which too advocates creative and participative learning methodologies, critical thinking and empowerment.

With Transition Year in mind, Amnesty, together with an advisory committee and in particular the support of authors Maeve Binchy and Roddy Doyle, both of whom are former teachers, initiated 'Voice Our Concern', a creative human rights education programme in 2003. The programme would

bring together established artists and Transition Year students to produce creative resources, such as plays, poetry and film, that would reflect the human rights issues the young people felt strongly about. These would then be developed by Amnesty and a team of educators, teachers and students, into human rights education materials that could be disseminated to Transition Year classes, youth groups and theatres, cinema education programmes and other forums throughout the country. In this way, the creative resources exploring the young people's concerns could be used to increase awareness and understanding of human rights issues amongst young people, teachers (in particular of those subjects not traditionally involved in human rights education, such as drama, art, English, and Irish), youth leaders and the general public via both the formal and informal education sectors.

The programme began on December 10th (International Human Rights Day) 2003 with 10 playwrights, including Maeve Binchy and Roddy Doyle, visiting 10 Transition Year groups in schools throughout Ireland. In these and subsequent visits, the writers listened to the young people's human rights concerns, with a view to writing short plays to reflect these. The plays, which explored issues ranging from racism in Irish schools to prejudice towards asylum seekers, were subsequently published, together with supporting human rights and drama workshops, in a module for transition year. This module has been bought by more than a quarter of secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland and a wide range of youth theatres and other youth organisations in the Republic and Northern Ireland. Amnesty has also facilitated training for teachers and drama and youth leaders wishing to use the plays and workshops to explore human rights issues with young people.

In 2004, 10 poets met with 10 new Transition Year groups, with both writers and students producing poetry on human rights issues. This poetry, which examines conflict and the rights to food and shelter amongst other issues, was published along with supporting classroom activities on a specially-designed website, www.voiceourconcern.org.

In December 2005, 10 photographers and filmmakers, including John Boorman and Terry George, began working with a further 10 groups of Transition Year students to produce short films and photography exploring their human rights concerns. This work will be showcased in a wide range of screenings and exhibitions throughout Ireland and made available to teachers in DVD and CD format. In future years, the programme will continue with artists working with new groups of students in media such as music and art.

The promotion, production and use of the 'Voice Our Concern' creative

resources span both formal and non-formal education sectors. The project's advisory committee includes arts practitioners, arts education officers and media professionals as well as Amnesty education staff, teachers and young people, and established artists work with school groups in producing the creative resources. The Transition Year system, through which the programme is delivered in schools, itself dissolves the formal/non-formal education boundaries.

'Voice Our Concern' and Amnesty events and activities are promoted via www.voiceourconcern.org and forums suggested by the student advisory committee, such as the website www.bebo.com, and television programmes *news2day* and *TTV*. The 'Voice Our Concern' plays are performed not only in schools, but by youth groups and youth theatres, with audiences comprising the general public as well as pupils and teachers. Training on using the plays and workshops has been undergone by youth and drama leaders as well as teachers. The 'Voice Our Concern' films and photography will be screened and exhibited and made available on DVD and the Internet to the general public. The programme and resources have also received extensive coverage in the national media.

Breaking the boundaries between formal and non-formal education sectors has brought advantages to all stakeholders. Bringing artists into the classroom has been beneficial to the artists as well as to the young people with whom they work. Writers, filmmakers and photographers have long been associated with human rights work through raising awareness of global issues and campaigning for freedom of expression. Working with young people in schools enables these artists to actively influence the school curriculum and allows the artists an insight into the perspective and concerns of young people and the world they inhabit. The artists involved in 'Voice Our Concern' have expressed these benefits, with Conor McPherson, for example, stating that:

"This was a huge experience for all of us. I learned so much about myself and about these people whom I never would have met otherwise. It was unconditionally good. I cherish what we did and I'm grateful I got the chance".

The engagement in schools of well-known artists brings undoubted benefits to the school, in terms of prestige and inspiration. The artists also bring status to the human rights programme through their voluntary commitment. Feedback on 'Voice Our Concern' from participating teachers and students has been extremely positive, with students' comments including:

“This project was excellent. It couldn’t have been any better. We were asked our opinions for a change. I liked the fact that our opinions were taken into consideration”.

The involvement of high-profile figures ensures substantial, and broad, media coverage of the programme and its aims, thereby increasing awareness of human rights concerns amongst the general public. In addition, this association guarantees a wide and varied audience for the plays, poetry, photography and film, with the result that education on human rights and global issues reaches the wider public as well as schools and teachers.

The involvement of artists and development of creative human rights resources ensures not only a larger audience for the ‘Voice Our Concern’ education programme, but a more diverse one. Youth and drama groups and cinema screenings engage young people outside the school system, including early school leavers, as well as a varied general audience. Using arts-based media and participative methodologies can also stimulate young people who are less engaged by traditional top-down learning methods.

In many instances, it is precisely *because* the educational processes and forums employed by ‘Voice Our Concern’ – such as filmmaking, photography and cinema screenings – are more typically associated with the non-formal sector that they appeal to those alienated and marginalised by the school sector, its academic focus and system of assessment. This point is critical: where the formal education system alienates those who do not ‘fit’ with it, human rights education, in order not to discriminate against or exclude this group, must find other forums. In seeking to empower and educate *all* young people in human rights, a human rights education programme must use those media and forums, such as cinema, Internet and music, already used by young people, including those who are no longer in or are disaffected by the formal school system. Breaking the boundary between formal and non-formal sectors allows a truly diverse and inclusive range of young people to learn about, become involved in and empowered by human rights education.

For more information on ‘Voice Our Concern’ and Amnesty’s human rights education programmes and resources for primary and secondary level, see www.voiceourconcern.org and www.amnesty.ie.

‘Voice Our Concern’ has been funded by Amnesty International, the Department of Foreign Affairs through Irish Aid, the Arts Council and St. Stephen’s Green Trust.

Karen O’ Reilly is Human Rights Education Officer for Post-Primary at Amnesty International Irish Section.