

Secularist of the year award

London, March 19th, 2016

First of all, a heartfelt “Thank You” to the Council of the National Secular Society for making this award and recognising the work of Educate Together. Sometimes, when you are working for a voluntary educational organisation at a local level, doing detailed work with a small group of people, in a housing estate, a village or even a large town, the significance of what you do is not immediately apparent. Rewards are usually only personal and intimate, seen only in the smile of children, the energy of an excellent lesson, or the warm thanks of a parent or staff member. A national or international award like this, is tremendously important and empowering. So, on behalf of all our members, our board of directors, our staff, supporters, parents and children and our wide and increasingly international community of families and helpers, thank you very much for this support and endorsement. It is deeply appreciated.

Educate Together would also like to compliment the National Secular Society in its continued work to highlight the issues of intellectual and religious rights in the UK education system. In particular, Educate Together supports its advocacy on the issue of compulsory worship in schools and its persistence in shining a spotlight on the areas of public life in the UK that fail the tests for religious and intellectual rights and freedoms.

For those who don't know about Educate Together, 40 years ago, a small group of young parents and teachers got together at school gates and around kitchen tables in a suburb of Dublin to create a new model of equality-based education. Ireland at the time was a society dominated by clerical authority and its education system was staunchly conservative. Ireland was a country that was deeply traumatised by the political conflict and violence in Northern Ireland that was rapidly taking on a horrific, awful and increasingly religiously sectarian nature.

The parents of that founding group were determined to provide something better for their children. They wanted an education that would be free from religious indoctrination, was modern and innovative and would enable children from all backgrounds to grow confident in an atmosphere of respect and equality. They adopted a watchword that “No child shall be an outsider”.

The model of primary education they created was based on four simple legal principles:

Firstly of all - and a ‘prime directive’ - equality of access and esteem to children, irrespective of their social, cultural or religious backgrounds.

Secondly, that the pedagogy and curriculum would be based on the real-time educational needs of children and not restricted by a pre-defined national curriculum.

Thirdly that the schools would be co-educational and committed to encouraging all children to explore the full range of their abilities irrespective of gender, sexuality or any other form of social role stereotyping.

And lastly, that the schools would be run - as far as possible - as participative democracies, in which the voice of students, parents and staff have power in decision-making, model active citizenship and systematically grasp the role of the family and community in a child's learning.

From small beginnings with a single school in 1978, this movement fought to be able to exist and to demonstrate that it is possible to operate a successful school based on such principles.

The odds stacked against it were enormous. It took vast amounts of voluntary effort and fundraising to become the established movement that it is today.

In 2016, Educate Together is the fastest growing Irish educational body. It is providing a human-rights and equality-based alternative to an overwhelming monopoly of faith-based education in which - still - in a 21st Century democratic state in the developed world - 97% of primary schools remain owned and controlled by religious bodies and in 9 out of 10 areas of the country, a parent has no choice at all but to send their child to a religious school. This means a school in which a specific faith must permeate the entire school programme.

While this situation is rightly considered extraordinary and unacceptable in the modern world, it is unfortunately not unique. The continued legal obligation on English schools to have a "daily act of (mainly Christian) collective worship" represents a similar violation of the rights of children to intellectual and religious freedom"

However, as I am sure that you appreciate, this presents a profound human rights challenge to parents and teachers in Ireland. It affects a rapidly increasing number of young parents in Ireland who are astounded to encounter this when setting about choosing a school for their children. As a result, a number of campaigns have emerged over the past year and these are building on the tremendous success of last year's Marriage Equality referendum.

The matter has been the subject of wide international media comment and even specific recommendations from the United Nations over the past ten years. Whilst these campaigns are building up a head of steam, Educate Together has the job of providing concrete alternatives. Since the turn of the century, Educate Together has opened 60 new schools, consolidated its model and developed an internationally recognised ethical education curriculum called "Learn Together". It now operates a growing network of 81 schools with 22,000 pupils at primary and secondary level. It has a deep engagement in university courses of teacher education and educational research at doctorate level.

I have to confess that we were gratified and heartened if a little taken aback by the resonance that our work has struck in the international debates on educational innovation, for education for sustainable development and education for modern citizenship.

As a result, Educate Together has opened its first primary school in the UK and will open at least two more next year. We are also building international links and alliances. We have become convinced that developing a values proposition in education of human rights and equality and education for sustainable development is now a universal global requirement that is relevant and exciting in all countries.

In Ireland we are embarking on an ambitious plan to build a national network of 300 schools that will enable all families to access an equality-based school within 30 minutes travel in the morning. To do so we are actively seeking €2million seed investment to finance the next 20 schools. Our projections show that - with this seed support - we will rapidly approach a tipping point that will generate a self-sustaining momentum of system change that will conclusively resolve this human rights deficit in Irish education. At the same time, we are actively seeking friends, supporters, funders and like-minded educationalists in the UK to partner with us in making ethical, equality based education a real option for parents in England, Scotland and Wales.

This generation of children entering our schools this year are unique. In the developed world, about half of them will certainly see the 22nd century, and if they are girls about half of them will live to be over 100. All the indications available to us suggest that they and their children and perhaps their grandchildren - will be the generations that will either succeed or fail to ensure the survival of humanity as a species.

This generation of school children must be empowered to solve the issues of sustainable development as people, families, communities, countries and as part of a global community. We have to trust them, acknowledge that what was appropriate for education systems in the past is no longer relevant, and give them the intellectual, physical and social skills to enable them to do so.

This question of ethical education - an educational approach that is confident to uphold universal values of equality, respect for diversity, respect for the intellectual and religious freedoms of the individual is really important in today's world.

It is not neutral or unbiased, it should stand firm and proudly uphold these fundamental values. It should reject intolerance, racism, xenophobia, and all those who seek to curtail intellectual and religious freedoms. It should bring forward a generation of children who are sure of their own identity and confident to enter a civic space and a global space in which they can dialogue constructively with those who disagree with them but to do so with respect and kindness. If we can achieve this, then we are at least providing this generation with some of the key skills that they will need to resolve the history which we bequeath them.

In conclusion, I hope you can agree with me that - No child chooses their parents. No child chooses their skin colour, No child chooses their ethnicity. No child chooses any part of their genetic makeup. No child chooses their home language or the features of their birth culture. No child chooses their families' religious views. No child chooses whether they are to be born to a world of wealth or a world of social deprivation.

If we agree on this, then it is morally and educationally impermissible that a child suffers any form of discrimination, isolation or hardship as a result of the policies of our education systems. I would say this from a moral standpoint but I would also contend that it is fundamentally reckless on economic and social grounds for any modern society to do so.

Again, thank you very much for this award. I hope that we will meet and work with many of you long into the future.