

**Human Rights and  
The Rights of Lesbian and Gay People in the Primary School  
Griffith Barracks Multi-Denominational National School.**

What follows is an outline of a module that was carried out with 6<sup>th</sup> class pupils of Griffith Barracks, Educate Together School. The focus of the module was on the rights of lesbian and gay people in the context of human rights and equality.

***Background to the Development of the Module***

The impetus to teach a module exploring homosexuality and lesbian and gay rights was primarily influenced by general comments made by 6<sup>th</sup> class children on the subject of gay people, gay rights and, occasionally, gay slurs.

It was also prompted by a meeting with the Education officer in GLEN, where those (admittedly limited) resources appropriate to the primary school were discussed and analysed.

As a result of the above, the class teacher and Ethical Education co-ordinator felt that 6<sup>th</sup> class would benefit from such a substantial scheme of lessons on gay rights and that the school had a pressing duty to address the issue as part of the Ethical Education programme, which replaces Religious Education in Multi-Denominational schools. It was also hoped that the topic would enrich other areas of the curriculum, such as Social, Personal and Health Education and History.

***Relevant Curriculum Areas***

- Ethical Education
- Social Personal and Health Education
- History

***Resources Used***

- Kari Krakow, (2002). *The Harvey Milk Story*. Two Lives Publishing
- Kieran Rose. (1994) *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Gay and Lesbian Politics in Ireland* (Cork University Press, 1994)
- Frances Hodgson Burnett. *The Secret Garden*
- Information from the internet
- Newspaper articles

### **Methodology**

1. **Class Work.** The class were introduced to the figure of Harvey Milk as a Human Rights Activist (Ethical Education; S.P.H.E.) and as someone who made a significant political contribution in this regard (History). The emphasis was on studying rights, as opposed to sexuality, although we were prepared for interest on this matter.
2. Kari Krakow's *The Harvey Milk Story* (Two Lives Publishing, 2002) was used to introduce the subject and generate discussion. While this particular novel was more suited to a younger group, we were limited by materials to draw upon. Information from the internet was also used.
3. **Project Work.** Following general discussion, the children were divided into groups and given research tasks to pursue as part of a class project. These groups were required to research areas such as:
  - Harvey Milk's family background,
  - San Francisco,
  - Harvey Milk's Political career,
  - The trial of Dan White (the man who killed Milk) and
  - Milk's legacy in the field of Gay Rights and Human Rights more generally.
4. The project was then displayed in a public part of the school building.
5. Following from this, the class explored the history of Gay Rights in Ireland. This was not only prompted by the Harvey Milk project but by the class's attuned sensitivity to media debates on partnership legislation. Kieran Rose's *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Gay and Lesbian Politics in Ireland* (Cork University Press, 1994) was useful as a teacher's resource in this respect, as was a variety of internet resources. Topical newspaper articles were also discussed.
6. The scheme of work was supported by ongoing analyses of Human Rights and Gender Discrimination. (At this time, the class novel was *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett which proved to be a fruitful stimulus for exploring issues around gender and disability, for example.
7. **Guest Speaker.** To impress the significance of our decision to explore gay rights, the school invited Senator David Norris to speak to the children.

### **Comments from some of the children following Senator Norris' visit.**

*David Norris came into our class on Tuesday last. He was very funny and interesting. He told us of the Senate, his work with Mary Robinson, his radio show on News Talk 106.9, his love of swing people and his*

*campaign for Gay Rights. We all found him very interesting and it was kinda cool to meet someone that had worked for gay rights as we learned about it in class.*

*He was really funny and put everyone at ease. I really loved how open he was and how he could go off topic without forgetting the subject. We thought he was extraordinarily interesting ...I was really pleased he came into our class because I reckon I learned more from his visit than from all the text we looked at on Human Rights. He answered all our questions and told us loads more!*

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*The day Senator David Norris came in to our school we were all very pleased to be able to talk to him. We talked about gay rights and equality rights. We all enjoyed being in his company. We also made him a poetry book made by the students of sixth class. He also sent us an email saying how much he enjoyed our company. We will remember the day that he came to our school for many years to come.*

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*Senator David Norris was very interesting and brightened up the day. We were very lucky to have him visit. I hope he goes to more primary schools because I think they would enjoy his visits as much as we did.*

## **Outcome**

- As reflected in the sample of children's responses, the scheme of work, which culminated in Norris's visit, was a great success and marked a significant step in the school's commitment to human rights education and recognising for difference.
- The school's Ethics Committee (comprised of staff and parents) decided the school should continue to make provisions to address gay rights.
- The teachers involved plan to contribute a report on the work to *InTouch*, the I.N.T.O Union Magazine.

### Notes

**Harvey Bernard Milk** (22 May 1930 – 27 November 1978) was an American politician and gay rights activist, and the first openly gay city supervisor of San Francisco, California. He was, according to Time magazine, "the first openly gay man elected to any substantial political office in the history of the planet". As the self-described "Mayor of Castro Street" he was active during a time of substantial change in San Francisco politics and increasing visibility of gay and lesbian people in American society. He was assassinated in 1978, along with Mayor George Moscone, by then recently-resigned city supervisor Dan White, whose relatively mild sentence for the murders led to the White Night Riots and eventually the abolition of diminished capacity defense in California.

**Source:** [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvey\\_Milk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvey_Milk)