



National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta

Research on young people's areas of interest in Politics and Society

Draft report

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Executive Summary

- International research on the practice of social and political education has highlighted that one common problem in such subjects is a content-base that seems to often consist of teachers addressing their own interests or interests that are deemed 'worthy' by society, but fail to engage with the interests of students
- The purpose of this research is to identify a range of topics, concepts and approaches which are related to the study of politics and society and which are seen by young people to be relevant
- Focus groups were used, since they provided a secure environment within which young people were able to discuss issues in their own language. The Nominal Group Technique was used in addition to focus groups to provide an opportunity for participants to clarify and 'own' their perspective before engaging in the focus group
- Participants identified three broad issues as relevant to their experience of politics and society: active and participatory teaching and learning; current, useful and local content; and the need to be challenged.

Active and participatory teaching and learning

Participants made clear that the approach should be based around class discussion and engaged activity (such as through the action project). They were less positive about the use of textbooks (which were described as going out of date quickly) and about didactic classes. A number noted the need for teachers to be trained and supported in how to handle such approaches.

Current, useful and local content

Participants highlighted that they engage best with current issues, with issues that are relevant to them and their lives. Some were less keen on national and international political issues, however others identified that national and international politics was important insofar as it was made relevant to their lives. They noted issues around representation of their views, around law and justice, racism and discrimination, and around leisure.

The need to be challenged

Participants identified that subjects should not be treated in a 'superficial' or 'politically correct' way, but that they should have an opportunity to really get into issues, to discuss them honestly, and to have their opinions heard and challenged.

1. Research on young people's areas of interest in Politics and Society

1.1 Introduction

It has long been recognised that the lack of a social scientific/ philosophical subject at senior cycle level is a weakness within the Irish education system. In 2005 the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) presented proposals for the future development of senior cycle education in Ireland. Arising from these proposals and from the response of the Minister for Education and Science to them, the process of developing a new subject called Politics and Society has now been put in place.

It is proposed that the subject will place an emphasis young people learning the skills of contestation and debate, of working with data to arrive at logical conclusions, to engage in reasonable discussions, to recognise the systemic in the everyday world, and to problematise familiar ideas and concepts. Underlying these core skills is the practice of 'democratic deliberation'. This term is defined as being both a skill and a core value of modern democracies and focuses on a willingness by the learner to express and contemplate their own opinions and those of others, by the use of non-violent methods in resolving conflicts and by a set of underlying procedural norms within which such deliberations take place. This focus on democratic deliberation is reflected in the methodological approaches used and in the formulation of the concepts from which learning outcomes will be derived.

It is proposed that the learning environment for Politics and Society will prioritise participatory, process- and solution-oriented educational methods, which would include, among other things, discussions, conceptual and perceptual mapping, philosophical inquiry, simulations, scenarios, modelling, surveys, case studies, excursions and outdoor learning, learner-driven projects, good practice analyses, workplace experience and problem solving.

Starting with the real interests of the pupils is a fundamental educational principle. In planning for Politics and Society, due attention must be paid to the need to start with the interests and experiences of the learners, using familiar experiences in the first instance as a means of building to an understanding of social and political theories. It is envisaged that once a level of familiarity with foundational concepts and ideas in

social and political education has been achieved students will be in a position to utilise these to see new phenomena in their environment that will, in turn, enable a deeper engagement with concepts and ideas.

International research, on the practice of social and political education has, however, highlighted a number of difficulties. A study based on the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) data set by Mintrop (2002), drawing on data from seven countries spread across Europe, Asia and the Americas, highlights a number of problems with social and political education internationally. One of these recurrent problems is a content-base that seems to often consist of teachers addressing their own interests or interests that are deemed 'worthy' by society, but failing to engage with the interests of students. Mintrop describes the 'modal' civic education classroom in the following terms:

In this classroom, students are not all that interested in the content, the teacher is not particularly well trained, and civic education as a subject...is of secondary concern for the "assigned" teacher. The type of knowledge dispensed is heavily weighted toward facts and the common every-day wisdom of the instructor... The atmosphere in the class is on the dull side due to the students' lack of interest and the teacher's uncertainty over the advisability of holding discussions on lively and controversial topics (2002: 76-77).

One way of addressing this issue is through engaging with pupils to identify what relevant concepts and topics are 'real' and important for them. As such, and drawing on the results of numerous pieces of quantitative attitudinal research carried out with Irish young people (National Youth Council of Ireland, 1999; Irish Marketing Surveys, no date [2000]; National Youth Federation, 2004; DG Education and Culture/ European Commission, 2005; Gleeson et al., 2007), a number of focus groups were carried out with senior cycle students in selected schools in order to identify the range of concepts and topics of interest. Schools and participants were selected in order to ensure representation of diversity in terms of social class and gender. Focus group research is often identified as suitable for developing an understanding of 'emergent' realities and understandings among groups, and as such is appropriate in this context.

This report will review the existing quantitative research on young people's areas of interest in relation to areas of social and political education, describe the focus group (Nominal Group Technique) methodology used in the research, present the findings of

the research and briefly summarise the main conclusions that can be drawn from the data. It highlights that the young people which we engaged with were by and large very positive about the possibility of a subject like Politics and Society enabling them to develop critical thinking and social interaction skills, but also pointed out a number of issues that would need to be taken seriously in any programme design.

1.2 Existing Data on Young People's Interests in Politics and Society

Numerous pieces of quantitative attitudinal research have already been carried out with Irish young people (National Youth Council of Ireland, 1999; Irish Marketing Surveys, no date [2000]; National Youth Federation, 2004; DG Education and Culture/ European Commission, 2005; Gleeson et al., 2007). These outline young people's attitudes towards a range of issues related to politics and society themes. The difficulty with survey research is that, by definition, the areas that are deemed to be important (i.e., those worthy of questioning) and the terms in which questions that are asked, are set by the researcher rather than emerging from the research participants. The main findings from such research will be summarised.

Research by the National Youth Federation has identified that there is a substantial level of political interest among those in the 16-18 year old age group. 85 per cent of this age group identified that they would like to have a say on local political issues and 55 per cent indicated that they had an interest in politics (2004: 1-3). At the same time, data from the CSO (2003), from the National Youth Council of Ireland (1999) and from the National Youth Federation (2004) has highlighted that there is a notably low voter turnout among young eligible voters. In relation to the 2002 General Election, for example, just over 40 per cent of 18-19 year olds and 53 per cent of 20-24 year olds indicated that they had voted (CSO, 2003: 1). The National Youth Council of Ireland has dubbed such low turnout of young voters "*the greatest threat and challenge facing Ireland's democratic system as it enters the new century*" (2004: 6). It should be noted that the most substantial proportion of those not voting identified that they did not do so because of procedural obstacles (such as not being registered or being away at the time of the election). Nonetheless, of those not voting, 37 per cent indicated that they had no interest, were disillusioned, felt the vote would make no difference or felt they lacked sufficient information. In a context in which 45 per cent of young people do not identify that they have an interest in politics it would be helpful to have a clearer understanding of what 'politics' means to young people.

Young people's engagement with politics at a European level has also been assessed in attitudinal type surveys. Evidence from Eurobarometer surveys, for example, suggests that young people in the EU do see the Union as important in their lives, with its role in facilitating freedom to travel, study and work being particularly important for them. While almost two-thirds identified that they felt a sense of European citizenship as well as national citizenship, only four in ten felt that their voice counted in the Union (DG Education and Culture, 2005). The issues of a sense of European (and of national) identity and its relationship to a sense of belonging to a polity which this survey raises may also need to be explored in more detail to identify what such ideas mean to young people.

A 1999/2000 survey conducted by Irish Marketing Survey and commissioned by Development Education for Youth (DEFY) surveyed young people and older groups on a range of politics, justice and development issues. The results suggest a number of interesting findings in relation to young people's engagement in political and social issues. First, when asked to identify what were the main issues facing the local area and the people/government of Ireland as a whole, the responses of those aged 12-17 differed to some degree from those of older people. Although many of the topics (Drugs, Crime, Traffic, Unemployment) featured heavily in both lists, the single biggest issue for younger people was *lack of recreation/ sports facilities/ playgrounds/ facilities for youth* (29 percent of respondents), whereas this topic was came below *drugs* in importance for other groups (23 per cent of those aged 18-24 and 19 per cent of those aged over 25 mentioned such facilities). Secondly, it is notable that the issues identified as local issues differ to some degree from those identified as issues for the Government and people of Ireland. While lack of facilities was top of the list of local issues it did not feature at all on the 'national' list. There is some overlap between the issues identified as important at 'national' and at 'local' level, however, with drugs, crime and unemployment featuring as major issues for young people on both lists. Also of interest is the fact that 21 per cent of young people identified that they did not know what were the main issues or problems facing the Government and people of Ireland (more than double the figure for the 18-24 age group and triple that of the over 25 age group). There were also significant differences between the priorities of young people and older groups, with housing and corruption in government/ tribunals

featuring higher on the list of priorities for older groups than for young people (the planning tribunal heard the evidence of James Gogarty during late 1999, something which received massive media attention). This does suggest that for younger people there is a greater focus on the local and immediate dimensions of political issues rather than on the national political issues.

When asked to identify the main issues facing the Governments and people of the world, the list provided by young people was in most respects similar to that of older groups. It included wars, starvation/famine/hunger, poverty and a broad mention of the Third World (the wars in Kosovo and Chechnya were in the news during 1999). Young people showed a high degree of interest in the problems of poor countries with 49 per cent of people indicating that they thought about the problems of poor countries either 'a lot' or 'a fair bit' and only 14 per cent indicating that they almost never thought about the problems of poor countries. 70 per cent indicated that television was their main source of information about the issues and problems affecting the Third World as compared to only 20 per cent who identified education as their main source. When asked were there any other ways they found out about such issues 31 per cent mentioned educational institutions.

Overall this study (although now slightly dated) seems to suggest that young people's sense of the important political issues differ in a few important respects from those of older age groups. It also seems to suggest to some degree a sense of dislocation between the issues identified as local issues and those identified as issues for the Government. This may suggest in a broader sense that the issues of the Government/national politics are not always those of most interest to young people, however this certainly requires further research exploration. Perhaps more important than the international issues identified as important is the high degree of interest in developing world issues suggested by the data.

The study by Gleeson et al. (2007) provides some more up-to-date data on young people's engagement with developing world and globalisation issues. It highlighted again the strong interest of young people in developing world issues, with over three-quarters of students surveyed identifying that they are either concerned or very concerned with poverty in the developing world. Over 60 per cent of second year

students and around 50 per cent of fifth year students identified that they take actions that make a difference to the future of developing world countries. This drop in level of self-reported activism for those in the senior cycle is notable and is consistent with some other findings from this research. When measuring the social distance felt by students between themselves and a number of minority ethnic groups it was notable that students' sense of social distance from minority ethnic groups increased significantly from the second year cohort to the fifth year cohort. More generally over 80 per cent of students from both the second and fifth year cohorts identified that they were interested in Global Warming and Environmental Destruction, a similar percentage identified an interest in Racism, Refugees and Migration (with the figure being almost 90 per cent for the fifth year group) and between 60 and 70 percent identified an interest in Fair Trade and Debt. Overall, the Gleeson et al. report highlights a high level of interest among young people in Ireland on development issues.

The same restrictions apply, however, in relation to this survey as applies in relation to all such work. The questions asked reflect to some degree the areas that the researchers have identified as being important rather than those which emerge from young people themselves. The meanings that are ascribed to concepts like 'local' 'people of Ireland as a whole', and 'issues/ problems' – all of which play a key role in framing the research findings – needs further exploration. Such surveys do suggest a need to explore with young people what issues are emergent for them as important in their own engagement with their political/ social worlds, and how they understand these issues. It is these areas that this research sought to address.

2. Methodology

As MacPhail (2001) has noted, the voices of young people are rarely heard in curriculum reform projects and interventions. Indeed, this reflects a broader context in which children are talked about - but less often listened to - in educational and public policy (Devine, 2004). MacPhail also notes that where the case for including young people in educational research has been accepted, group techniques for data collection are often popular among researchers. There are a number of reasons for this. MacPhail, following Krueger (1994), identifies that group interviews can provide a more relaxed setting than one-to-one interviews, and that the presence of others may be reassuring for both young people and gatekeepers. Morgan and Krueger (1993: 15-16) develop on this and suggest that a group technique (such as the use focus groups) is useful when there is a power differential between research participants and research practitioners. They agree that, in such a context, there may well be a tradition of the voice of the less empowered not being listened to. In such cases, the use of a one-to-one interview would be of limited value, as communication across this power differential is unlikely to be generated in the space of one short interview. Having the security of being among others that may share some of the same feelings and experiences however, means that group techniques can provide participants with a more secure basis for sharing their views. Morgan and Krueger go on to argue that similar issues arise when professionals are trying to research their target population.

As the language of and logic of professional groups is often quite removed from that of the groups they work with, there may be problems in phrasing questions appropriately and understanding the meaning of responses: *Because the interaction in focus groups provide a clear view of how others think and talk, they are a powerful means of exposing professionals to the reality of the customer, student or client* (1993: 16). The issues of power differentials and of professional – non-professional relationship both arise when adults attempt to gather data from young people. Robson (2003: 284- 285) identifies a number of other benefits to focus groups, some of which are relevant to data collection with young people. He identifies that focus groups are often enjoyable experiences for participants, and that there is a ‘natural’ quality control built in, in that

participants provide checks and balances that tends to ensure that extreme views do not become taken to be representative.

One potential difficulty with focus groups is that, unless skilfully handled, it is possible for a small number of participants to dominate the group. As Fontanna and Frey have identified, the “...*emerging group culture may interfere with individual expression, “group think” is a possible outcome, and the requirements for interviewer skills are greater because of group dynamics*” (1994: 365). MacPhail suggests the use of the nominal group techniques (NGT) as a means to address this issue. In focus groups the interaction between participants is central to the process and it is often data on this interaction that is sought by the researcher; the researcher is often interested in the way in which understandings are constructed in interaction (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 85). NGT, on the other hand, sees the group as a group in name only (hence the use of the term ‘nominal’). In such models, people work in the presence of others but do not verbally interact.

MacPhail does not claim that NGT is superior to focus groups, only that the two methods have different strengths and weaknesses. Since NGT would limit the amount of participant-to-participant interaction, it would certainly lessen the extent to which the interaction between participants might help to address the issues of power imbalance and of differences in language register between interviewer and interview participants. Given that language and meaning is central to this research, a more traditional focus group context would seem to be valuable, however, though facilitating participants to write first, as in NGT may also provide them with a more secure platform from which to voice their own perspective. The Evaluation of ‘Action for Life’ with senior cycle physical education students took this approach, beginning with NGT work with classes as a whole, before moving on to focus group work. This is the approach that is to be taken in this research.

The Irish National Children’s Office has provided guidelines to support focus group researchers (2005: 50 - 53). It suggests that the skill and experience of the facilitator in working with young people is crucial. In the case of this research, the work was facilitated by two people, both experienced facilitators and teachers. In addition it notes the following:

- At the start of the discussion set ground rules, including those about confidentiality;
- During the discussion remain focused but flexible;
- Give everybody an opportunity to contribute.

These guidelines were followed in this research.

In order to enable young people to gain entry into the topic by addressing something familiar to them, we began by asking them in the NGT session to brainstorm up the positive and negative elements of their experiences with CSPE. A number of elements emerged clearly from across the groups as central to a positive experience of CSPE.

The brainstorming activity around the strengths of CSPE led on to the NGT activity in relation to Politics and Society. Students were invited individually to complete the following sentence “If I were designing a Politics and Society course the most important thing I would include is _____ “. Their responses were then prioritised by themselves and listed on the board (which at the end of this process had up to 10 issues listed). This list was then discussed by the group as a whole, before students were given the opportunity to choose their own top 2/3 priority areas. Since the categories to be voted on emerged organically from the NGT groups, they differ from school to school. Still, clear patterns can be discerned, and the NGT activity reinforced the findings from the brainstorming session.

Finally students worked in smaller focus groups of 6 students. This allowed space for discussion and elaboration of the issues identified in the brainstorming and NGT activities. These focus groups were not recorded; however notes were taken by the facilitators. In reporting on focus groups here, we have tried to relay not just the content of what was said, but also the way in which it was said, based on these notes. Again, as one might expect, the issues raised were similar, however the opportunity to discuss these issues allowed for much greater nuance in opinion to emerge.

2.1 Selection of Sites

In his work on case study research Yin argues:

Every case should serve a specific purpose within the overall scope of the inquiry. Here, a major insight is to consider multiple cases as one would consider multiple experiments - that is, to follow a "replication" logic. This is far different from a mistaken analogy in the past, which incorrectly considered multiple cases to be similar to the multiple respondents in a survey (or the multiple subjects within an experiment) - that is, to follow a "sampling" logic. (Yin, 1994: 46).

The logic of qualitative research, like that of case studies, is not a statistical logic. The multiple sites were not meant to be a representative sample. They were a number of sites chosen from slightly different contexts which, in comparison, told us more about what processes are specific to a particular site or situation and what processes are found more generally. Their logic is that of replication and comparison, not of randomness. The lack of random selection does mean that one should be slow to draw conclusions from this data to the level of the population as a whole. Indeed, the extent to which both schools (initially) and students were self-selecting may give rise to a question as to whether or not there is a possibility of bias built into the research. The point here is to be clear as to what the research can and cannot do: while we cannot draw conclusions from this data which can be applied to the population as a whole, we can identify emergent ideas and themes from the young people who participated. This in turn can be used in conjunction with the large and representative surveys described above in order to flesh out and illuminate the data they contain.

This research is based on four sites. There are a number of rationales for this. For Hakim, (1987:64) the experimental logic of case studies can often be best served by choosing a number of cases that are thought to cover the range of situations, starting with the extremes. Sudman (1976:26) notes that the confidence in the general significance and robustness of research findings increase with the number of sites. He also claims that the single largest gain occurs when the number of sites is increased from one to two.

There are a number of different factors that inform the selection of case studies. These include the sex make-up of the school (Single-sex Boy's school, Single-sex Girl's school, and Co-educational school), the social class make-up of the school and the rural or urban location of the school. Taking four school sites, it was possible to select schools based largely on the range of factors identified below. Unfortunately, a single-sex, largely working class school was not included in the research, due to difficulties in

making suitable arrangement with such a school. The school names given in Table 1 are pseudonyms.

Table 1: Selection of Sites

| | Single Sex | Mixed |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Significant Working Class intake | | St. Geraldine's (Urban) Jamestown Community School (Rural) |
| Largely Middle Class intake | Mathewstown Sec. School (Boys' Urban) | Thomasville Community (Urban) |

A second issue that arises is the size of the focus groups. Bryman suggests that focus groups typically have something less than 6 – 10 members (2004: 351). Although it is sometimes suggested that smaller groups should be used where more in-depth discussion is required and larger groups where a greater spread is required, Bryman suggests that this is misleading in that it may be difficult to generate a critical mass of engagement where the numbers are too small. The relationship between depth of engagement and number of participants is also related to the amount of time taken for the focus group. In this research, focus groups of 6 participants, lasting 35 to 45 minutes were chosen. Two focus groups were completed in each of the 4 schools. In total we had 79 young people participating as part of the NGT exercises, and of this group, 48 participated in 8 focus groups across the 4 settings.

They broke down as follows:

| Name | Number for NGT | Number in focus groups |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|------------------------|
| Mathewstown Sec School | 18 | (2 groups) 12 |
| Jamestown Community School | 18 | (2 groups) 12 |
| St. Geraldine's Community College | 18 | (2 groups) 12 |
| Thomasville Community College | 25 | (2 groups) 12 |
| Totals | 79 | 48 |

3. Findings

The findings of the research can be grouped under three headings:

- Active and participatory teaching and learning
- Current, useful and local content
- Need to be challenged

3.1 Active and Participatory learning

Students said that CSPE was regarded more positively when the methods of teaching used were active and participatory. Those students who were very positive about CSPE tended to describe active learning approaches, based around class discussion and engaged activity (through the action project). Those who were less positive about their experience in CSPE identified that there had been significant amounts of reading, and limited amounts of active participation in discussion or activity. The use of textbooks was criticised by students in a number of schools, in part because it provided a focus for rote learning, “*so many lists of names to remember*”, said one student in Thomasville School, in part because it promoted a passive approach to learning, “*we read from the book then filled in the workbook, it was really boring*”, said a student in Jamestown, and in part because it interfered with the desire for current material, “*the info in CSPE becomes out of date very quickly – need to be able to work with issues that were current*”, said a student in Thomasville. In this context, a number of the groups identified the action project as a particularly useful part of CSPE.

The NGT provided an opportunity for students to prioritise their overall responses. Students again showed a strong preference for a focus on active and participatory approaches to teaching and learning. 16 of the 18 students in Jamestown school, for example, identified “*lots of interaction/ clear explanation of terms/ fun/ action*” as a high priority, an additional 7 votes prioritised “*Project work, not all book work*” and a further 6 prioritised “*active participation*”. In Mathewstown, “*Dynamic, working with other schools*” was prioritised by 8 of the 18 students (and was second in popularity there, behind only “*specifically trained teachers*”). Students in Thomasville school made “*action project*” their top priority (12 of 25) and “*practical work*” their third ranked priority (8 of 25). Students in St. Geraldine’s school prioritised “*bigger practical component/ projects/ trips/ less text book*” (13 of 18). In this context, it is notable that a number of the groups put an emphasis on teachers being trained in specific ways to teach politics and society.

Focus group findings

Some of the focus group conversations focussed as much on how to teach politics and society as on what should be covered. Students in the focus groups placed an emphasis on the need for participatory, active approaches to teaching and learning, and on the need for teachers to be appropriately skilled in order to carry things off. They said

This subject is stuff you need for life, not like maths, but in Biology learning is more active, they use group work. The same in Construction studies, there is more interactive learning; the class go out to town to look at construction and stuff. It is easier to learn if you have real life examples. Last year the newspaper articles we used in CSPE made learning easier. It is good too when people come in and talk about their work. But you need to learn in different ways, all bookwork gives you a headache. You could go from class to class reading in all of them.

Focus Group Participant in Jamestown School

I don't want to work directly out of a book – it only provides one side of the debate, and it gets outdated, we should use the Internet...

We could have lots of debates, they're more active. Those who don't like debates could write reports or they could listen to the debates and make up their own minds.

Focus Group Participants in Thomasville School

3.2 Current, useful and local content

Students also noted that CSPE was better when the material engaged with was current, useful and local. A local focus was identified as important in all of the four schools, with some students noting that they felt there was not enough focus on local issues in their experience of CSPE and with others noting that there was too much focus on national politics and politicians which often seemed remote to them. Allied to the focus on local was focus on *useful*: the discussion in two of the four schools highlighted that the knowledge-base in relation to CSPE (such as information about the operation of human rights in the local and national context) could be eminently practical. Students also identified that relevant material in relation to CSPE goes out of date quite quickly, and that it is more interesting when focused on topical issues.

This focus on current, useful and local context was evident in the NGT responses. In Jamestown school this was seen in the relatively high ranking given to “*relating theory*

to real-life issues” (9 out of 18 students) and in Mathewstown “local projects” (5 out of 18) and “up-to-date materials” (4 out of 18) were ranked joint third and fifth respectively. In Thomasville school “current affairs” was prioritised by a number of students.

Focus group findings

In the focus groups, as in the NGT groups and the brainstorming activities, students repeatedly talked about the importance of providing them with a space to make sense of the issues that were real, local issues in their lives. A common thread in this was that they wanted a space in which they could talk out, debate and come to understand real and current issues – often local issues – that were of interest to them. Here is a selection of the sort of things they told us:

*We should talk about communication, phones, computers, I-Pods ... we should do a bit about that. Like, they want to ban Bebo [in this school]. Bebo is nothing bad. If it is banned, we'd probably do it more. If we can't do it here [in school], we will do it at home. But it can be dangerous too.
You can lie about your age on the internet*

If I lost my phone, I'd be lost

Focus group participants, St Geraldine's School

Look at the media and how it deals with issues, like, for example, Romanians selling flowers got a very bad press and yet what is the true story about them?

Young people are stereotyped too. It happens here that the Guards take all our names – they think we're up to something. Now they are talking about ASBOs.

True, there were cars and houses broken into, but they cannot just blame young people...skaters – where they do skate? They get the boards taken off them

We need to hear representatives of different groups and their side of the story. There is not a great mix of social groups in this school

Focus group participants, Thomasville School

We need to look at what is happening around here. There are shootings in this area, cars getting robbed and burnt out, drug dealers. They are stupid and they are going to get caught.

Bush drinking is an issue. It's dangerous for older people

There are unprovoked attacks...

Focus group participants, St Geraldine's School

They say there are high pitched noises in a street in town that only young people can hear – it's to keep us away. [Because our hearing range is wider when we are younger], only young people can hear the noise – young people are being discriminated against. It is all linked to the lack of facilities. Only some sports have facilities, and there is no recreation facilities, like skate parks or places to play music

Focus group participant, Mathewstown School

While the NGT and the focus group confirmed the interest in current, local issues, they also provided an insight that did not arise in the initial brainstorming; that is, a focus on national and international politics as an important issue. While the brainstorming activity tended to down play young people's interest in national and international politics, a notable group of young people used their opportunity within the NGT setting to identify their interest in these topics. "*Understanding Irish politics*" was ranked joint-third by students in Mathewstown, while "*National/ European and international politics*" was also prioritised by a number of students in that school. A number of students in Thomasville school (5 out of 25) also prioritised "*political issues*".

Students also provided lists of areas or topics that they felt should be included in the study of politics and society. These include

- racism
- social issues
- rights of children and young people
- wars, war in Iraq
- foreign and international policy
- fair trade
- Third World
- inequality
- the law and how it works
- Travellers
- child abuse

- discrimination
- animal rights
- democracy/ dictatorships.

Some of these issues (e.g. Animal Rights) came up for only one school group. However others (e.g., Third World issues and Racism) were mentioned in more than one.

Why Politics is Important

We asked focus group participants if they thought it was worthwhile to study politics and why. Initially, it appeared as if many of them had little interest in politics, however, when they started to talk out their views, it was evident in their responses that they showed a high degree of complexity and political interest. It was notable that it was in Matthewstown school (a middle class, single sex school) that our participants were most comfortable in talking about national and international politics. However, it was also notable that in other schools there was an interest in debating and discussing how politics and representation could be relevant to them and their lives. Here is a selection of the sort of things they told us

The word 'politics' turns people off. We need to think outside the box ... to make it active, have debates... It's not about the government but rather about how young people can have a say

Focus Group Participant, Thomasville School

We need to encourage young people to vote...understanding about why every vote counts. They should understand how politics affects them

Focus group participant, Matthewstown School

I don't think everyone's voice counts, at the moment. People about 25 - 35 [are listened to]. They have a vote. They're out of school; it's like they know what they are talking about. But young people aren't mature enough, old people are religious and don't know enough, so they are ignored. And there is way less women in politics. We need more women [in politics]. They shouldn't be punished [by being kept out of politics] for having a child.

Focus group participant in St. Geraldine's school

Everything in our daily lives is affected by politics, but sometimes a lot of politics just goes over your head.... It gets monotonous if you don't understand it. I'm glad I won't be old enough to vote in the coming election coz I would not have a clue... Politics is not something that young people naturally talk about so young people need a forum to discuss it in school.

Focus group participant in Matthewstown School

3.3 Need to be challenged

A number of the groups identified a need for politics and society discussions to be appropriately challenging. Although this perception was not raised in the brainstorming activity across all groups it was raised in some of the groups. Students in Mathewstown school, for example, highlighted that CSPE can sometimes appear to have no content to learn and, as such, might not be taken seriously. This issue was raised, in a number of ways in the focus groups.

Focus group findings

In the focus groups, students often identified the need for politics and society discussions to be challenging, both in the sense that they moved beyond simplistic and trite observations, and in the sense that they often identified a need to get into challenging or controversial issues and to take them seriously. They showed a high degree of complexity in their analysis and recognised that things could be seen from different sides. It was important to them that issues were not presented simplistically. Sometimes they honestly talked about their own prejudices and recognised the value in talking about them and having them challenged.

Be more up to date with local politicians and TDs, but go more in-depth into the subject and be more interesting

Don't just skim the surface but take a closer look at what is happening [for example, in the courts]

Jamestown School focus group participants

The Polish get a bad time here...there was a rumour that they killed the swans in the river. It was supposed to be a delicacy in their country and they had killed them and ate them. It wasn't true. People say that they are taking our jobs, but I think the Polish are good to work

I'd be interested in why asylum seekers can't work, why they come here, where they come from, what their rights are, what their story is

I don't like Africans. They don't work

Well, if I was going to get killed here in Ireland, I would be going to Africa to ask for asylum there. Anyway, I don't think they are let work. Why is that?

Exchange between focus group participants, St. Geraldine's school

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

It is clear from the research that the student participants have an appetite for engaging with politics and society. It is clear that they view such a subject as having the potential to enable them to develop thoughtful responses to issues that are important ones in their life and in their world. However it is also clear that the participants in this research would value such a subject if it was grounded in active and participatory methodologies, and was based around the opportunity to engage in a challenging and rigorous discussion of issues that were real, live and contemporary issues.

While the quantitative data had led us to expect that there would be some separation noted by young people between local issues and 'national politics', it was evident that for our participants their perspective was quite nuanced and complex. While many had little time for national politics as they understood it, many also highlighted that national politics was of interest where it was seen to address issues that were real issues for young people: crime, security and justice, racism and discrimination, new forms of communication and 'the politics of leisure'. The issue of 'representation' and 'voice' for young people was also raised.

It is also worth noting that there were significant differences between schools in the issues that were deemed to be of interest. This is most evident in the way in which the students in Mathewstown School expressed a strong interest in national and international politics, while those in other schools often did not. However it was also seen in the way in which, for some young people, skate parks and recreation facilities were a major issue while, for others, drugs, crime and violence stood out. This, again, places a significant responsibility on any proposed subject, to be careful not to dictate too precisely the issues to be studied, in order to allow for real, local and current issues to be raised by young people for discussion.

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