



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

Senior Cycle Developments

Report on Consultation on 'Social and Political
Education in Senior Cycle, A Background
Paper'

May 2007

Introduction

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 in 'Social and Political Education' was put in place.

The first stage in this process was the commissioning of 'Social and Political Education in Senior Cycle: A Background Paper', which was published in September 2006. Following on from this publication, an invitation for submissions or observations on the background paper was issued to stakeholders in the field. The purpose of the consultation was to allow those who have contributed to the developments in social, political and citizenship education over the last decades to feed into the process of developing a social and political education subject at senior cycle at an early stage. The background paper was circulated to individuals and groups who have been active in the fields of citizenship education, to those in higher education with an interest in political and social sciences and in teacher education, as well as to the range of bodies who are represented through the NCCA. The background paper was also made available in electronic form on the NCCA website.

In total, eighteen submissions on the background paper were received from individuals and bodies in Ireland and the United Kingdom. While some submissions were quite short, a number were quite detailed, with one running to over 8,000 words. External bodies that made submissions included governmental bodies and intergovernmental bodies such as the UK's Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the European Commission and the Combat Poverty Agency, educational groups and individuals such as the Citizenship Education Support Team of the Second Level Support Service and the National Coordinator of Leaving Certificate History and non-governmental organisations such as the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network and Amnesty International.

The background paper was primarily intended to provide a broad overview of the context and issues that provides a backdrop for developments in senior cycle social and political education, and, as such, to support the thinking of the Course Committee and the Board of Studies. In parallel to this consultation process these bodies also continued work on the development of senior cycle social and political

education and developed a brief for senior cycle social and political education. This brief addressed a number of issues (such as its links and potential overlaps with other senior cycle subjects and teacher education) that were specifically related to the development and implementation of a new subject and as such were outside the purview of the background paper.

In general, the background paper was welcomed, in terms of the core proposal for the development of a senior cycle subject in social and political education, in terms of the broad thrust of its content and in terms of the openness of the process of consultation in which the NCCA engaged. A number of the submissions that were broadly welcoming also contributed questions and suggestions for further development in the thinking outlined in the background paper. A number also highlighted areas not addressed in the background paper but considered important for the on-going developments in the field. A minority of submissions were significantly more critical in relation to the broad thrust of the background paper. One of the most notable findings from this process is that the Course Committee and the Board of Studies had already considered a number of the issues raised in the consultation process as part of their deliberations.

General responses

Sixteen of the eighteen submissions broadly welcomed the thrust of the background paper, with only two submissions identifying significant concerns in relation to its broad thrust and outline. Examples of the general response to the background paper include:

The background paper on Social and Political Education at Senior Cycle is to be welcomed as an important tool to help education stakeholders build a consensus on the nature of this subject. It provides a very useful outline of the background for a curricular intervention that is much needed at the higher level of the secondary school (Amnesty International, Irish Section).

This background paper succeeds in charting the development of Citizenship Education both in Ireland and internationally and sets the context for the development of this new subject (Citizenship Education Support Team of the Second Level Support Service).

The paper provides a very useful overview of the current national and international contexts which support the argument for the development of Social and Political Education in the Senior Cycle. It also usefully outlines insights from these contexts which can inform the future development of this area of education (Combat Poverty Agency).

Those responses that were more critical highlighted the lack of reference to areas of overlap or common concern with existing senior cycle subjects, particularly History, and raised concerns about the impact of the development of a new subject on such existing subjects.

Most of the submissions explicitly welcomed the development of a senior cycle subject in social and political education. For example the Political Studies Association of Ireland note that it “very much welcomes the current moves towards developing a Leaving Certificate subject in social and political education”, while the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network note that it “very much welcomes NCCA’s intention to develop this subject area as we recognise that there is a gap in provision at senior cycle”. Two submissions suggested that alternatives to the development of a new subject be explored, arguing instead for a model where “the elements of citizenship education has not been hived off into a new subject area, but has been incorporated into a number of subject areas, including history” or for the development of a non-examined senior cycle social and political education subject (National Coordinator, Leaving Certificate History).

A number of specific aspects of the background paper were broadly welcomed, including:

- the recognition and acknowledgement within the background paper of the many bodies and organisations that have been active in relation to citizenship education
- the recognition of the role of a democratisation of the institutional structures of the school in enabling young people to learn democracy, along with the clear recognition of the limits of one subject to effect such democratisation
- the recognition of the centrality of the concept of democratic deliberation as a methodology, content and outcome for such a course

Name of the subject

A number of submissions made reference to the name of the proposed subject. One submission questioned the use of the term ‘Social and Political Education’ as being insufficiently distinguishable from a number of areas currently addressed in History and Geography syllabi. The author noted: “I am unclear as to why the paper is inclined to drop the term ‘civic’ or ‘citizenship’ from its title, considering that it proposes to follow on from Civic, Social and Political Education”. Two submissions (Political Studies Association of Ireland and the Citizenship Studies Project)

proposed that the title 'Politics and Society' be used. The Citizenship Studies Project submission identified that its consultations and research:

...suggests the wisdom of having a name that cannot be confused with SPHE or even abbreviated and is more in keeping with the titles of existing Leaving Certificate subjects (Citizenship Studies Project).

Active citizenship

A number of submissions made reference to the understanding of active citizenship that informs the background paper. The Political Studies Association of Ireland, for example, highlights their belief that the "idea of human agency is central to our thinking of active democratic citizenship – without an emphasis on how each of us is able to engage in public life, a Leaving Certificate Course would still be able to produce students with a clear academic knowledge of the political process, but at a very passive level". This focus on an action orientation is further endorsed by a number of other submissions, and was further developed in the submission of the Citizenship Education Support Team which argued that "the idea of action as exemplified by the Action Project in CSPE be built into the new subject where students are provided with real opportunities to engage with local community issues perhaps through actual involvement in community service/volunteering...". The submission from Trócaire noted that young people are often more active in social and political life than an exploration of traditional measures (such as voting or political party membership) might indicate. It notes that such participation may be taking place in part through 'new' media and virtual networks.

A number of submissions argued for greater focus on specific aspects of active citizenship. In the context of research evidence which highlights considerable levels of homophobic bullying in Irish schools, the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network noted that it:

...welcomes the introduction of a full subject at senior cycle which will provide the space for students to explore 'a person's ability to take responsibility for the consequences of their action' (page 25) in the context of developing awareness of social and political systems. Exploring 'traditional' notions of identity and equipping students with the 'skills to be able to effectively interrogate traditional notions of identity and value, as well as policies and practice in order to ensure that they acknowledge and cater for diversity' (page 8) will be a positive and constructive addition to an array of approaches and initiatives to nurture respect for diversity in all areas of human life.

The need for a 'development' and 'development education' perspective was highlighted in the submission from Irish Aid, and from Audrey Bryan and Sheila Drudy of UCD, while the need to address a range of issues associated with

globalisation, and the particular need to “link human development to an awareness and appreciation of the environment, other species and sustainable development” was noted by the Sociological Association of Ireland.

The Amnesty International submission, argued that a number of these issues can be usefully seen in the context of a richer understanding of Human Rights concepts. It argued that the background paper did not:

... adequately explore how this subject area can be fully informed by human rights and how it contributes to Ireland fulfilling its obligations under International Human Rights Law... Active citizenship should also be underpinned by the human rights framework. We would argue that instead of human rights being seen as one theme of many in Social and Political Education a rights based approach should underpin the content and methodology of the subject.

They make a number of suggestions following on from this. The need to include a commitment to Human Rights and Responsibilities and Equality and Justice within the values base of the course was identified in the Combat Poverty Agency submission.

One submission also identified, however, that it would be a mistake to expect the education system to be held responsible for changing social and political processes disengagement and a loss of social capital that are rooted in broader society.

Overall then, the consultation reemphasised the need for active participatory methods in social and political education and for a focus on learning beyond the classroom, which includes a broader democratisation of schools as well as an engagement beyond the school in community-based learning. A strong argument has been made for locating a range of perspectives (on identity, on globalisation and on sustainable development) within a human rights framework. There is, however, also a need to recognise in this the limits, as well as the possibilities, of such education in effecting social change.

Values-base of the subject

It was identified in submissions that the values base of the subject should include a clear reference to Human Rights and Responsibilities, and to Equality and Justice. The need for balance between the skills of recognising and being open to diverse positions, while at the same time avoiding a moral relativism was identified. The need to avoid moral relativism was also identified in relation to valuing cultural

diversity. A number of submissions identified that not all aspects of all cultures are positive, and that we should value cultural diversity within the parameters of a commitment to human rights.

Social and political education and CSPE

A number of submissions welcomed the proposed continuity identified with junior cycle Civic Social and Political Education, in terms of the key concepts, the proposed active learning methodologies, and the values-base of the subject. One submission, however, viewed the list of topics identified in the background paper as being addressed by social and political education as suggesting “a powerful downflow from academic disciplines at 3rd level tending to overwhelm the upward development from CSPE” (Gerry Jeffers, NUI Maynooth). Another, however, identified the need for caution in building too much on the CSPE experience. The submission of Audrey Bryan and Sheila Drudy of UCD, drawing on an analysis of CSPE textbooks, highlights the possibility that Irish / or European identity and might be identified in an uncritically positive way and that structural and systemic dimensions of racism may be ignored. As such, the need to learn from both the successes and difficulties of CSPE was highlighted in submissions.

Social and political education and other senior cycle subjects

While the majority of submissions welcomed the proposed introduction of a full senior cycle subject in social and political education and while a number of submissions identified that the proposed development of a new subject was welcome because of what one referred to as “a gap in subject provision at senior cycle at present”, two submissions took a different view, arguing that social and political issues are currently dealt with in existing subjects. Both submissions focus primarily on the existing senior cycle History programme, though both also make some reference to Geography also. They note that the background paper does not make reference to History, and that this is a considerable omission given the role that History plays in citizenship education internationally. These submissions felt that the subject, as described in the background paper is too close in aims, content and teaching methods of History. Both also raise questions as to whether the introduction of such a subject will affect the take-up of History at senior cycle level, and the question as to whether or not existing history teachers (many of whom teach CSPE) will be willing to teach such a subject is also raised. As a result of this, both submissions question

whether or not a short course in social political and civic education (which might be non-examined and compulsory) might not be more appropriate.

It is important to note that this was a minority view within the submissions received, presented by only two of the eighteen submissions. Some other submissions did, however highlight the need for care and attention to be paid to protect the integrity of all subjects, but specifically to History, Geography, Home Economics and Religious Education. The submission from the Political Studies Association of Ireland cited research that was explicitly critical of the view that citizenship education can be best catered for in relation to History. They cite the work of Strachan *et al.* (2002, p. 7), who have argued that that, "...civic education in established democracies such as the United States often focuses primarily on history, constitutional principles and individual civic duty. And, these are precisely the types of traditional appeals that do not work in mobilizing American young people". Other submissions highlighted the need to ensure that citizenship education is not seen as the preserve of a single subject, but is dealt with across a range of subjects and within the life of the school as a whole.

A number of submissions highlighted the value of the subject being grounded within social and political sciences. The submission from the Sociological Association of Ireland identified that, in its view, the "importance of students developing a sociological perspective is not highlighted sufficiently" in the background paper. The Political Studies Association of Ireland submission identified that the subject should be developed with a clear focus out of which interdisciplinary connections would arise, rather than one based on diverse units drawn from different social sciences. This is compatible with the use of a concept-focussed approach as identified in the background paper.

Teacher Education

The area of teacher education was identified as important by a number of submissions, indeed some submissions identified that the issues relating to teacher education and qualification were pressing ones that could help to determine the success or failure of any new programme. Three submissions argued that the criteria which are to be laid down by the Teaching Council regarding the teaching of the new subject should be informed by on-going research and development work being carried out by the Citizenship Studies Project and St Angela's College, Sligo. The need to ensure that a flexibility in the delivery of both initial and in-career teacher

education, in order that teachers from a range of backgrounds with an interest in the subject area can be enabled to become qualified to teach it, was also identified. As the submission of the Citizenship Studies Project noted:

Initial and continuing professional development programmes would need to address the needs of teachers who have an appropriate academic qualification (e.g. degree in sociology/politics) but lack the necessary teaching experiences/pedagogical skill; those individuals who have the necessary teaching experience/pedagogical skills but lack core/conceptual knowledge of key disciplines and also those teachers who have a Higher Diploma in CSPE.

The Political Studies Association of Ireland identified that it felt it had a role to play in the provision of pre-service and in-service training of teachers.

Other recommendations made within submissions

A number of specific points were made with respect to the process of developing senior cycle social and political education:

- The European Commission welcomed the recognition of the European dimension to identity and citizenship and identified the need to ensure that the new subject contains a strong European dimension. The Department of Foreign Affairs submission also identified as need for a strong European dimension.
- The Gay and Lesbian Equality Network recommend that the values base of social and political education at senior cycle should be broadened to include reference to 'education, which respects, celebrates and recognises the normality of diversity of all areas of human life'.
- The Citizenship Studies Project notes that the capacity to make explicit links between what goes on in the subject and the wider activities and ethos of the school and community beyond the school should be built into the subject syllabus.
- The submissions from Trocaire and from the Citizenship Studies Project note the role which ICT can play in learning approaches, and as a communicative resource. The Citizenship studies project notes that "ICT could, with appropriate resourcing and support, be an invaluable source of active teaching/learning and assessment methodologies. It is strongly recommended that the use of ICT together with the various assessment options suggested in the background paper ('portfolio support oral examination, open written assessment etc', p.29) should be further explored and piloted in schools".

Commentary on Consultation Findings

As was noted above, one of the main findings of the consultation process was that the deliberations of the Course Committee and Board of Studies broadly reflected the concerns of the wider community. This can be seen in relation to a number of the issues identified above.

Name of the subject Both the CSPE Course Committee and the Arts and Humanities Board of Studies have identified that the use of a title that is susceptible to becoming an acronym (such as tends to occur with Civic Social and Political Education/ CSPE) can lead to confusion with other subjects (such as SPHE) and can have the effect of obscuring what the subject is about. In this context, the Course Committee and the Board of Studies have, like a number of the submissions, favoured the use of the title 'Politics and Society'.

Active citizenship: In its discussions, the Course Committee has noted that the idea of non-traditional engagement by young people in politics was important, and that the identification of such political engagement in the document was welcomed. It identified that the processes of greater democratisation of schools and the engagement between schools and the wider community provides an important context which allows students opportunities to engage with politics and societal issues. As such, the subject can add a thoughtful dimension to the activism in which many young people already engage.

Social and political education and CSPE: The Course Committee has also identified the value of the concept-focused model for the subject (as is the case in CSPE) and has highlighted that that the articulation of such concepts should be done in a way that is clear and unambiguous. It has also noted that, while the organic connections to junior cycle CSPE should be clear, the academic base of the new subject is of crucial importance in order to establish the credibility of the subject. In this context it has proposed the 'foregrounding' of sociological and political studies content, and has noted, however that this would need to be done in a sensitive and pedagogically appropriate way.

Social and political education and other subjects: The Course Committee and the Arts and Humanities Board of Studies have explored possible overlaps for senior cycle social and political education with subjects such as History, English,

Geography, Home Economics and Religious Education, with Economics (in Economic Systems and Economic Thought) and Technology (in relation to Technology and Society). They have identified that such correspondences are a natural part of educational planning and arise from the fact that different disciplines share an underlying concern with common aspects of human life. Where subjects differ is often in the methods and modes of analysis that they bring to bear. They have agreed that, in planning the development of a senior cycle social and political education subject, it is important to be aware of where such correspondences and overlaps exist in order that the subject should be complementary where possible, and should avoid overlaps where necessary. With particular reference to History, it has been identified that social and political scientific subjects are informed by a tradition of systemic analysis and a conceptual frame of reference that is different to that which characterises the study of History. They are also characterised by a subject matter, which, although complementary to that found in History, remains quite different in its focus. It is eminently possible, therefore, to develop a senior cycle social and political education subject that does not cover the same material or develop the same skills as those addressed by History. Once more, the identification of appropriate sociological and political studies content has been identified as important in such developments.

Appendix I: Bodies and individuals that made submissions

- Amnesty International, Irish Section
- Audrey Bryan and Sheila Drudy, UCD
- Association of CSPE Teachers
- Citizenship Education Support Team of the Second Level Support Service
- Citizenship Studies Project, CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit
- Combat Poverty Agency
- Department of Foreign Affairs (Irish Aid and European Union Division)
- European Commission, Representation in Ireland
- Gay and Lesbian Equality Network
- Jerry Geffers, NUI Maynooth
- Kevin McCarthy
- Niamh Hourican, UCC
- Pat Callan, National Coordinator, Leaving Certificate History
- Political Studies Association of Ireland
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
- Robert Elgie, Dublin City University
- Sociological Association of Ireland
- Trócaire