Chapter 2

Some challenges for citizenship education in the Republic of Ireland

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The 1990s is increasingly described as a decade of curricular change when imaginative and innovative programmes were introduced in schools in the Republic of Ireland. Greater attention to 'education for citizenship' can be identified as one of the common strands running through the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) component of the revised curriculum for Primary Schools (DE, 1999), the Transition Year Programme (TYP) (DoE, 1993) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) (DoE, 1994). Above all, the arrival of the new subject Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) as a compulsory feature of the Junior Certificate marked a significant breakthrough. Indeed, in a school system that rates examination achievement very highly, the first ever assessment of CSPE as part of the Junior Certificate Examination in 1999 - particularly the 'action project' component - can be seen as a landmark event in curricular developments in the Republic of Ireland. At the end of the century there were indicators to suggest that, eventually, the State was adopting a more considered and committed approach to education for citizenship.

However, while undoubted progress has been made in citizenship education in recent years, there are also signs that the dominance of certain attitudes within the formal education system continues to marginalize the subject and disconnect it from a broader community-based citizenship education. Welcoming a more focused and structured curricular provision should not preclude a realistic appraisal of the challenges that continue to face those involved in education for citizenship. While

many challenges arise from the social changes occurring within the wider society, some emanate from the education system itself.

This chapter seeks to explore some of these challenges, especially as they manifest themselves within schools. The urgency of the discussion arises partly from the perennial concerns that surround notions of national identity, partly from the impact of a new economic prosperity and partly from the increasingly visible diversity among the citizenry. For those working in classrooms the overt and covert manifestations of xenophobia, for example, as well as undoubted confusion about living in a rapidly changing society add to the immediacy and centrality of ensuring that there is meaningful and relevant education for citizenship and diversity.

Ambiguities

Official attitudes to education for citizenship have been characterised by a certain ambiguity. One of the first lessons this young teacher of civics learned in the 1970s was that there was an obvious mismatch between the formal Syllabus (DoE, 1966) and the pamphlet *Notes on the Teaching of Civics*. (DoE, undated) The structure of the former implied a vision of citizenship education that involved accumulating knowledge about various state organisations and institutions and, not unreasonably, was seen by many – students and teachers - as dull, boring and conformist. The latter document, by contrast, with its insistence, for example, that 'the teaching method we use must be essentially an active one' was liberating and empowering. One was never quite sure who believed in which emphasis, though the fact that the pamphlet remained as a set of poorly duplicated pages is probably significant.

There seems to be general acceptance that the old Civics syllabus was a major disappointment if not a total failure. Hyland (1993:.4) noted that 'in many schools, Civics gradually came to be ignored…' and former Education Minister Martin (1997: 5) described the subject as 'a token and an inconvenient add-on'. Against such a backdrop, the CSPE syllabus with its emphasis on key concepts, on active participation and on a 'comprehensive exploration of the civic, social and political dimensions of their lives at a time when pupils are developing from dependent children into independent young adults' (DoE, 1996:1) offers scope and hope. Furthermore, the Leaving Certificate Applied (DoE, 1994) includes a module on

'Social Education' and within Transition Year programmes many schools avail of the flexibility offered (DoE, 1993) to explore numerous strands of education for citizenship and diversity. Within initial teacher education programmes, citizenship education has become more established, usually with distinct methodology classes, a significant indicator of being mainstreamed. And yet there are reservations.

Research

Three pieces of research in particular suggest that citizenship education continues to struggle in many schools. Shannon (2002) looked at the implementation of CSPE in twelve schools, including the views of 72 students and 37 teachers and the relevant school leaders. Murphy (2003) charted the attitudes to the subject's implementation in five schools. Redmond and Bulter (2003) conducted a baseline postal survey for the NCCA that elicited 188 responses from principals (63%) and 530 from teachers (33%) (sometimes referred to in this chapter as the NEXUS report). Among the many insights to emerge from these three investigations are:

- CSPE has a low status in many schools
- Teachers with little interest in the subject are often conscripted to teach it
- There is a very high turnover rate of CSPE teachers from year to year
- Many teachers express discomfort with 'active methodologies'
- Where leadership shows interest and commitment to the subject and where teachers volunteer for and participate in in-service education, the subject can flourish.
- 70 hours over 3 years is regarded as insufficient time to do justice to the subject, especially when timetabled on the basis of a single period per week.
- Teachers are often confronted with negative attitudes to, among others, Refugees, Asylum Seekers and members of the Travelling Community and unsure about educationally appropriate responses.
- The lack of a sufficiently structured follow-up into senior cycle further weakens the subject's status.

In its commentary on the Redmond and Butler report, the NCCA (2003b) highlights six major areas of challenge to CSPE. They are:

- the allocation of teachers to CSPE
- the amount of time allocated to the subject
- the level of assessment
- teacher support and professional development
- resourcing of the subject
- management support.

Despite indicators that there are very particular problems for the 'new' subject, the NCCA stated: 'It is not envisaged that the survey would lead to significant review of CSPE at this early stage of its implementation. (NCCA, 2003b:2). Some

encouragement can be taken from the Task Force on Citizenship recommending 'the expansion of education for citizenship in the school system', in particular

> Strengthen the status and role of the CSPE programme in the junior cycle and introduce a citizenship programme as an exam subject at senior cycle[1] (Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007:21)

Emerging challenges

CSPE does need to face, imaginatively, the six areas of challenge set out by Redmond and Bulter if it is to thrive as a subject. The proposal here is that, in addition, such challenges need to be located in a broader context and so five, specific interrelated challenges are presented. Furthermore, some attempts are made to point to creative responses to these challenges. These challenges can be described as

- The syllabus challenge
- The time challenge
- The turnover challenge
- The cross-curricular challenge
- The community challenge

The syllabus challenge

If politicians have traditionally been wary of citizenship education, there have been occasional exceptions. Garret FitzGerald (2003) described the CSPE syllabus as 'remarkably timid in relation to its political component' and suggested that 'it is a fair bet that this document must have been written by an exceptionally cautious civil servant.'

It appears that the former Taoiseach may have missed the concept focused nature of the syllabus, even if he was more complimentary about some of the CSPE textbooks. But the accusation that the syllabus may err on the side of caution is worth exploring. Back in 1987, there was a widespread expectation that the Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) was going to give citizenship education a much needed boost. A syllabus was drafted (CEB, 1987) and its fate is an instructive lesson in educational policy making. The draft syllabus proposed framing students' learning around key concepts. As this approach is also a distinctive feature of the current syllabus, a comparison between the two sets of concepts does indicate a shying away from overtly political components.

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[1] The NCCA, to its credit, had already published a valuable background document (Tormey, 2006) on a proposed new subject. Following public consultation, the thrust of the responses, albeit relatively few, were positive and encouraging. (NCCA, 2007)

1987 Draft Syllabus	1996 Syllabus
Interdependence	Interdependence
Peace/Conflict	Law
Development	Development
Power/Participation	Democracy
Human Rights/Justice	Rights and Responsibilities
	Human Dignity
Environment/Culture	Stewardship

In particular, the omission of explicit reference to 'power' as a key concept may be seen as a serious weakness within the current CSPE programme. In practical terms, one cannot help wondering, for example, whether action projects involving fundraising would be so popular if students were exploring the concept of power. At a broader level, the question has to be posed whether the absence of 'power' in the syllabus is part of what Lynch (2000) refers to as a 'deepening consensualism governing political discourse' in Ireland. This she sees as a thinly disguised mask for the perpetuation of the political status quo and the inequalities and silences that go with it' (Lynch, 2000:8).

The incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into Irish law prompts important questions for CSPE. Discussions at meetings of the Dublin-based Citizenship Education Network (CEN) focused on how well equipped the syllabus is to incorporate such important legislative changes. To some it appeared that the concepts of 'Rights and Responsibilities' and 'Law' are sufficiently flexible to mean that the Convention has effectively become part of the syllabus. Others were less sure. This brings us close to the heart of a major tension: as a broad, almost skeletal framework for exploring issues of citizenship and diversity the flexibility of the syllabus is a major strength because it offers the potential for responsiveness, growth and development; at the same time its broad conceptual nature may be read as vague and general and lead to practitioners taking a minimalist view of its demands.

Trends in action projects identified by Mairín Wilson in Chapter 16 give some indication of how this tension manifests itself in practice. She notes that a growing popularity of projects directed towards visiting speakers and fundraising. While potentially empowering activities, the trend may be indicative of a tendency to adopt a safe, minimalist approach to the syllabus rather than a creative, developmental one.

Such an approach, what might be labelled as a 'we have cracked the formula' one, is perhaps partly inevitable given the kind of school culture that results from an examination dominated school system. At the same time there is also evidence each year of new, imaginative interpretations of action projects where students respond to issues that have arisen in the classroom and teachers 'facilitate the provision of real opportunities for involvement and participation, seeing this not only as a logical outcome of the learning process, but as a significant means of reinforcing new knowledge, skills and attitudes' (DES, 1998:10)

Hence, effective education for citizenship and diversity requires teachers to develop further not just the potential of action projects, but of the total syllabus. To realise this teachers need courage, confidence, imagination and support.

Furthermore, the current syllabus can be thought of as a foundation on which the senior cycle subject 'Politics and Society' (NCCA, 2007) can be built. As Lynch (2000:10) remarks when commenting on the three basic models of curriculum development – the academic, the utilitarian and the pedagogic – '…it would be almost impossible for CSPE to survive within the traditional Leaving Certificate System without a core academic dimension'. As already evident in the responses to the NCCA background paper, (NCCA 2007 and Tormey, 2006) the CSPE syllabus will come under further scrutiny with its strengths and weaknesses identified through analysis of practice rather than potential.

The time challenge
Student-teachers of CSPE as well as more established enthusiasts come back, time and time again, to the flawed thinking that implies that any subject can flourish within the present Junior Cycle curriculum with a single class period per week. 40 minutes of CSPE time per week, they point out, offer insufficient time to engage seriously and systematically with active methodology. Such provision creates, they say, an impression that, no matter what the rhetoric, the subject can't be very important. This is a major source of frustration among interested students and teachers. Within this debate, policy makers and administrators point to an already overcrowded curriculum. In the context of the review of the Junior Cycle, subject specialists, perhaps understandably, tend towards a territorial perspective, a 'what we have, we hold!'

position. The voices for increased time provision for citizenship education, when not silent, tend to be occasional and muted. And yet, if one was to embark on a fresh start - on an imaginary *tabula rasa* -devising the most appropriate core curriculum for 12 to 15 year olds, then citizenship education would command, I suggest, a centre stage position with at least three and probably four or more periods each week[1]. However, trends in public discourse about living 'in an economy' rather than 'in a society' often resonate with educational practice. For example, it is worth noting that 60% of Junior Cycle students now opt for the subject Business Studies within Junior Cycle (SEC, 2007). Typically these students spend about four class periods per week over their three years studying 'business' and its values. The message about what is perceived to be really important is not lost on them as they contrast this experience with the single period provision for CSPE. This and other tensions between the aspirational rhetoric surrounding 'education for citizenship' and actual practice prompts questions about how strongly policy makers in the DES and the NCCA actual value CSPE or the wider citizenship education agenda. The time challenge also extends to teacher education, both initial and on-going; citizenship education needs dedicated time and resources during initial teacher education, during the induction stage, especially within schools and as a central feature within continuing professional development. While the emergence of 'Politics and Society' at Leaving Certificate level will enhance that status of citizenship education, CSPE will, in future, find itself also competing for time with its 'more grown up' sister/brother.

The cross-curricular challenge
The CSPE syllabus states that 'the Civic, Social and Political Education course provides unique opportunities and greater potential for cross-curricular work in schools'. There is little evidence yet of any such cross-curricular thinking, planning or implementation in schools. The NEXUS report and the accompanying NCCA commentary barely refer to it. Yet, as the syllabus asserts, each day, across a range of subjects, pupils study topics and issues, encounter concepts and practice skills which are common both to those subjects and to CSPE. Hence, it can be argued, every teacher is a citizenship educator. For example, there are clear links between the CSPE

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[1] The subject focus here is to highlight the marginalisation of CSPE. The case for moving away from a subject focus on curriculum construction is desirable. The competency approach advocated by RSA (Bayliss, 1999) and the emphasis on key skills currently being promoted by the NCCA offer attractive possibilities for education for citizenship.

concepts of Development and Interdependence within parts of the JC Geography syllabus. Stewardship as a concept resonates loudly with aspects of the Science syllabus. Teachers of Religious Education devote extensive time to issues close to the CSPE concepts of Rights and Responsibilities, Human Dignity and Law. Much of what is studied in English and other languages can be read as developments of the concept of Human Dignity. The core concepts also link in various ways with subjects such as Art, Materials Technology (Wood) and (Metal), History, Home Economics. It can be more challenging to make direct links between CSPE and Business Studies, mainly due to the lack of a critical social awareness perspective in that particular syllabus. Furthermore, the general organisation of the school and specific structures such as Students' Councils present powerful opportunities for students to appreciate concepts such as Democracy and Law. And yet the coherence is not there. In many schools, the price of a strong ethos of teacher autonomy can be a culture of teacher isolation. Similarly, emphatic subject identities and independence can contribute to curriculum fragmentation. The strength of such traditions is encountered even in programmes that ostensibly aim for greater cross-curricular coherence than the Junior Cert. Despite encouraging guidelines, the Transition Year Programme continues, in many schools, to be a collection of individual subjects and modules rather than one that displays coherent cross-curricular themes and links (Jeffers, 2007). It appears that the lack of cross-curricular work is primarily a cultural issue within schools and within the teaching profession. Perhaps school leaders and subject co-ordinators fear that the amount of time and effort that would be required to bring about genuine collaborative, cross-curricular work could be better spent. While not wishing to impose unnecessary further demands on already stretched teachers of CSPE, the case for such teachers forging alliances with colleagues in other subjects is strong. Indeed, a more explicit citizenship focus on the whole Junior Certificate programme could both extend the learning opportunities for students and enhance the status of CSPE. Such cross-curricular collaboration requires CSPE teachers who have a strong commitment to citizenship education, see its possibilities across a number of subjects and have the confidence to invite colleagues to work collegially.

The turnover challenge

The NEXUS study discovered that a large number of teachers do not choose to teach CSPE but often find it like an uninvited guest on their timetables at the start of the

school year (Redmond and Bulter, 2003:24). If one was setting out deliberately to undermine a subject, this would seem like a good starting strategy. School leaders will, in their defence and with justification, point to the NEXUS finding that 41% of principals report 'difficulty in finding staff willing to teach CSPE' (Redmond and Bulter 2003:6). The NCCA (2003b:7) acknowledges the high turnover of CSPE teachers as 'a significant indicator of the problematic nature of current provision'.

A range of responses is required to improve this situation. Giving a school subject status should start within the DES and has to be followed by agencies such as the State Examinations Commission and the NCCA. Teacher unions and the subject association (ACT – Association of CSPE Teachers) can also play their parts in profiling CSPE positively. The active pursuit of 'good news stories' relating to citizenship education in the media would also help. Following the withholding of CSPE results by the DES in 2002, there was what some saw as 'negative' press coverage. Headlines in newspapers of 12th September 2002 included:

- Some results in CSPE withheld to allow for copying checks (The Irish Times);
- Department launches exam cheat investigation (The Examiner);
- 600 JUNIOR CERT KIDS IN EXAM CHEAT PROBE (The Irish Sun)

However, as an enquiry into the suspected plagiarism revealed, one can hardly blame the media:

> A free press is a feature of democratic societies and most of those interviewed accepted the media's right to report on exam results etc., even though in some cases such coverage brought unwelcome attention to the subject and to certain schools. There was a marked similarity in the newspaper reports of 12th September with identical phrases occurring in *The Irish Times, The Sun, The Star,* the *Irish Independent* and the *Examiner*. Having spoken with some of the journalists who wrote the stories, it appears that the newspaper reports were all based on a press release from the Department of Education and Science. This was confirmed by the Department's communications office.
> While one can appreciate the need for the Department to highlight the rigorous standards associated with public examinations, what might be called the 'collateral damage' done to CSPE as a subject by focusing on the 'cheating' dimension has been considerable.
>
> (Jeffers, 2003:15)

As with other curricular initiatives of the nineteen-nineties, the DES has provided on-going support for CSPE implementation with a dedicated support team of seconded teachers. Undoubtedly, such teams, made up of practitioners who are familiar with classroom practices and highly committed to change, carry credibility with colleagues

and the strategy has the potential to support real change. But, invariably, these teams get stretched to the point of trying to service unrealistic numbers of schools. Perhaps, in addition to supporting individual teachers, the identification and development of a 'citizenship education co-ordinator' who would be an unapologetic advocate for citizenship education within each school, is needed. Building a cohort of such leaders within schools should serve to reduce the high turnover rate.

Initial teacher education programmes also has a key role to play in strengthening citizenship education, and while many such programmes now offer specific courses for those wishing to teach CSPE, the inclusion of a more explicit emphasis on 'education for citizenship' throughout these programmes is a bigger challenge. A reduced turnover of CSPE teachers is more likely when the status of the subject rises and teachers teaching the subject are adequately prepared for such work. The arrival of 'Politics and society' may enhance CSPE's status.

The community challenge

CSPE presents schools with opportunities to connect with local communities in new ways. Unit 2 of the course is entitled 'The Community' and community involvement is a strong thread running through the thinking on action projects, which are among the most distinguishing features of CSPE. This emphasis is effectively challenging many schools' traditional isolation and lack of meaningful connections with their immediate local communities. In practice, there is the possibility that schools will work with a plethora of local organisations, seeing them as partners in a wider process of community development, bringing schools closer to the hearts of communities. While collaborative links with sports clubs, credit unions, citizen information bureaus, heritage centres and others are worth forging, the potential of schools and youth organisations working together seems particularly promising. Many young people already encounter significant experiences that contribute to their sense of citizenship through youth organisations. In fact, some youth organisations have a distinguished track record in citizenship education. Two examples will illustrate this. Firstly, many CSPE teachers find their classes greatly enriched by using development education material developed by Johnny Sheehan and his colleagues in the National Youth Council and available at www.youth.ie . Secondly, even a cursory analysis of Foróige's philosophy and programmes should enable teachers to realise that schools

do not have a monopoly on education for citizenship. The Foróige mission statement is

> The purpose of Foróige is to enable young people to involve themselves consciously and actively in their own development and in the development of society. Foróige challenges young people to develop themselves, to be more self-reliant, to seek ways to help others and to improve their communities.
>
> (Foróige website)

In relation to a specific programme on citizenship, one can see how that youth organisation's vision resonates how CSPE teachers might see their task.

> Citizenship is also about creating what ought to be rather than adapting to what is. The present world with its justice and injustice, its love and its lack of love, its strengths and its weaknesses is what people have made it. The future world is not predetermined. The essential task of citizenship is not to predict the future, it is to create it. (Foróige website)

The possibilities of new partnerships between schools and other groups – community groups, youth organisations, other non-governmental organisations - spearheaded through citizenship education need greater exploration. In the first instance schools need to see the local community as a resource. Enriched by such experiences one would hope that the school would emerge as a vital centre for the development of civic society. The Taskforce on Citizenship tends to underplay such possibilities though, as already stated, does advocate expanding education for citizenship within the school system. It also suggests that

> … better use should be made of schools at evening and weekend time to act as community hubs – facilitating for example, adult education, literacy programmes, various community activities and services. (Government of Ireland, 2007:20)

The disappointment here is with the implicit assumption that outside 'the evening and weekend' time all is well with schools' relationships with their local communities.

Conclusion

The introduction of the new subject of CSPE into Irish schools in the final stages of the 20th century presents challenges and possibilities. Without wanting to minimise the restrictions that arise from the syllabus, the chronically limited amount of time, the rapid turnover of teachers, the almost absence within schools of a cross-curricular approach or school's traditional isolation from their local communities, we do need to focus on what's possible. The vision of citizenship as genuinely active and participatory, the vibrant emphasis on active ways of learning, especially though

action projects, the course structure that highlights concepts and so gives a flexibility that invites everyday social and political realties into classrooms, the consistent openness to young people's own experiences all offer great possibilities for meaningful learning experiences. The realisation of such possibilities and visions depends greatly on the quality of the interactions in CSPE classes up and down the country. That, as we well know, hangs on the commitment and competencies of teachers, the common strand running through all the challenges mentioned here.

There are also some specific structural initiatives that schools might take to strengthen this education for citizenship and diversity. Designating a Citizenship Education Co-ordinator, preferably with dignity and status, could bring greater coherence. Specifically, such a staff member might work in five main areas:

- as a teacher of CSPE and as a co-ordinator of CSPE teaching within the school;
- as a leader who would work with colleagues in advancing the capacity within the school to promote education for citizenship and diversity –continuous professional development and resource gathering being two obvious areas;
- as a designated link person with responsibility for promoting cross-curricular links in relation to citizenship and diversity;
- as the staff member with primary responsibility for promoting and liaising with the Student Council;
- as the school's main link person with local youth organizations, NGOs and community organizations.

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Websites
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Student Councils: www.studentcouncil.ie
National Children's Office: www.nco.ie
Joint CRA, CPA, EA and SVP site www.cspe.ie
Citizenship teachers: www.act.ie