

# Perspectives

## **SENIOR CYCLE CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION: INTEREST LEVELS AND THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT REQUIREMENTS OF PRACTICING TEACHERS**

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### **Introduction**

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in Ireland is currently developing a syllabus for a new citizenship education subject provisionally entitled politics and society. This subject is proposed as a full, optional, examinable senior cycle subject following junior cycle civic, social and political education (CSPE). In order to assess the viability of the politics and society subject, the Citizenship Studies Project carried out a national survey in 2006 targeting potential teachers of the new subject. The Citizenship Studies Project is a joint Trócaire/City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (VEC) Curriculum Development Unit initiative, which supports and informs senior cycle citizenship education.

The aim of the national survey was to provide practising teachers with an early opportunity to articulate their interest in senior cycle citizenship education; to identify the nature and type of teacher education needed to enable the effective teaching of the subject; and to gather views on the appropriate subject content and teaching, learning and assessment methodologies. This article will briefly describe the current context for the development of citizenship education. It will then provide an overview of the survey's findings relating to the interest levels amongst practicing teachers and discuss some of the issues raised by respondents regarding models of continuing professional development (CPD).

### **Current context for the development of citizenship education**

A number of recent national and international policy and educational developments suggest that this is an opportune time for schools to move toward a more holistic approach to citizenship education, one which

addresses the curriculum in its widest sense and embraces both the explicit taught curriculum and the curriculum implicit in the school environment and culture.

At an international level, the Lisbon Strategy, the Council of Europe's Education for Democratic Citizenship initiative, and the current United Nations' Decade of Education for Sustainable Development all highlight the key role of education in engendering the values associated with citizenship. In the Irish context, the Taskforce on Active Citizenship stated that 'schools...are places where people learn about behaviour, dialogue, decision-making, as well as a range of skills, knowledge and attributes that enable people to act as thinking, critical, responsible and caring citizens in a democratic society' (Taskforce, 2006:21). The core values of the teaching profession include a 'commitment to democracy, social justice, equality and inclusion' and the encouragement of 'active citizenship' and '[critical thinking] about significant social issues' (Teaching Council, 2007:18).

These international and national developments have contributed to a climate that is receptive to a senior cycle curricular response in the area of citizenship education. The NCCA has been working on the full, optional Leaving Certificate subject since 2006 and plans to make the draft syllabus available for public consultation in late 2008.

## **Methodology**

In 2006 the Citizenship Studies Project carried out the aforementioned national survey of potential teachers of senior cycle citizenship education. Targeted respondents included teachers with relevant pedagogical experience in curriculum areas such as CSPE, Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), and also those with a third level qualification related to politics and society including sociology, politics, philosophy, European studies or public administration. The questionnaire was developed with advice from, and subsequently piloted by, a group of twenty-five part-time CSPE teacher trainers. The final teacher questionnaire was distributed through school principals to 765 post-primary schools/centres in April 2006, before any syllabus specific documentation was available from the NCCA. By June 2006, 436 completed questionnaires were returned.

The questionnaire was disseminated before any syllabus specific documentation was available from the NCCA. In late 2005 the NCCA announced that it would begin work on a full, optional senior cycle citizenship education subject. The Background Paper on Social and Political Education was made public in September 2006.

## Interest levels amongst practicing teachers

When asked if they would be interested in teaching the full, optional senior cycle subject, 31.9 per cent (n=139) said they would be ‘definitely interested’; 24.1 per cent (n=105) said they ‘might be interested’; 14.7 per cent (n=64) indicated that it was ‘unlikely’; 22.5 per cent (n=98) said they were ‘definitely not interested’; and 5.5 per cent (n=24) said that ‘they did not know’.

27.1 per cent (n=44) of the 162 ‘unlikely’ and ‘definitely not’ respondents attributed their low levels of interest to the systemic challenges currently faced by second-level schools and teachers, such as curriculum overload, heavy workloads and lack of time. These responses highlight the inherent difficulties associated with curriculum change, and in particular, the challenges associated with implementation of a new senior cycle subject. However, it is important to note that a low rate of interest in teaching the senior cycle subject does not necessarily indicate a lack of support for the introduction of the subject itself. In addition, since successful implementation of senior cycle citizenship education will likely be dependent on a warm reception by all connected to the school community, it is important to provide all teachers with ongoing opportunities to input into the curriculum development process.

The remainder of this article refers only to the 31.9 per cent (n=139) of survey respondents who indicated that they would definitely be interested in teaching senior cycle politics and society – these respondents are henceforth referred to as the Definites. 39.6 per cent (n=55) of the Definites emphasised that the new senior cycle subject is capable of achieving positive engagement and high levels of participation in schools and society. This emphasis is unsurprising given the discursive nature and contemporary, topical content often associated with the subject area.

The positive aspirations of the Definites may prove to be a crucial element in ensuring successful implementation of the subject. However, unrealistic expectations could place undue pressure on what is, after all, an optional senior cycle subject. The NCCA’s background paper for senior cycle politics and society states that the subject ‘should be expected to inform the broader life of the school’ and recognises the fact that ‘some of [the] aims [of the subject] would best be met through the development of a democratic culture’ (NCCA, 2006:27). To avoid the development of an isolated and marginalised senior cycle citizenship education subject, the capacity of teachers to explicitly link the subject with the wider activities and ethos of the school and community needs to be addressed.

## **Teaching competencies and models of teacher education**

Respondents raised a number of issues in relation to the competencies necessary to teach politics and society. They also acknowledged that models of continuing professional development (CPD) would be needed to ensure that interested practitioners were given flexible opportunities to develop the skills required for the new subject. A great deal of concern is currently being articulated about who will teach the subject given that successful implementation ultimately rests with practitioners. An overwhelming majority (96.4 per cent; n =134) of the Definites agreed that CPD should be central to the next stage of the development of politics and society.

Determining the qualifications necessary for registration as a politics and society teacher is the remit of the Teaching Council. A number of third level teacher education providers have recently expressed an interest in adapting their initial teacher education (ITE) programmes to provide training requirements for the new subject and also establishing CPD routes to meet the needs of teachers already in the system. The interest shown by accrediting bodies is crucial to meeting the aspirations of citizenship education, since ‘poorly provided citizenship education can reinforce the idea that citizenship and politics are not relevant to peoples’ lives’ (Harris, 2005:32).

The qualifications, teaching backgrounds and opinions of the Definites give some indication of the diverse CPD needs of practising teachers. In terms of the necessary competencies to teach the senior cycle subject, the Definites placed most stress on the importance of teacher interest and disposition, with 89.3 per cent (n=124) agreeing that teachers who are interested and possess an appropriate disposition (reflective, empathetic, self-aware, committed to dialogue, inquiring, etc.) are best suited to teach politics and society. Further competencies included, in order of importance, relevant pedagogical skills, teaching experience and academic qualifications.

For successful implementation of politics and society, teachers will require not just an in-depth understanding of subject content, but also a range of supporting teaching skills: ‘teachers need to be given the in-service and pre-service education to undertake the work not only by developing expertise on the content, but also by developing innovative and imaginative ways of teaching and assessing academic material’ (Lynch, 2000). 87.8 per cent (n=122) of the Definites agreed that teachers with relevant pedagogical skills, such as active methodologies, facilitation and research skills, and the ability to raise and address controversial issues, are best suited to teach the subject.

In 2004 the NCCA stated its belief that the ‘provision of CSPE or

a related course or courses in senior cycle would raise the profile of CSPE at junior cycle' (NCCA, 2004:14). The implementation of politics and society could undoubtedly impact on the teaching and learning of citizenship education, not just in terms of the status of the junior cycle subject, but also in relation to the levels of democratic engagement and participation embedded within school culture. However, potential impact may depend on whether teacher education programmes are put in place to ensure flexible professional development opportunities for CSPE teachers wishing to qualify to teach the senior cycle subject.

43.9 per cent (n=61) of 139 Definites are/were CSPE co-ordinators, and 55.4 per cent (n=77) attended at least one CSPE in-service event in the past five years, indicating that the number of Definites who have taught or are currently teaching CSPE is relatively high. This is further evidenced by the fact that 84.9 per cent (n=118) agreed that teachers with relevant experience (e.g. CSPE, LCA or TY) are best suited to teach politics and society, and 92.8 per cent (n=129) agreed that the senior cycle subject should build on junior cycle CSPE. Consideration of this last point, together with the fact that every post-primary student takes CSPE, highlights the importance of including these practitioners in the consultation process around development of the senior cycle subject, and providing flexible professional development pathways for CSPE teachers who express an interest in teaching politics and society.

By its very nature citizenship education is interdisciplinary and it therefore cannot be assumed that only those with existing qualifications in either sociology and/or politics will be able to seek immediate registration with the Teaching Council. What is certain is that sufficient specific knowledge of the social and political domains will be required. *The Report of the Democracy Commission* recommended that senior cycle citizenship education should be moved 'nearer to the academic disciplines of politics, philosophy and sociology' (Harris, 2005:31).

When asked whether teachers with relevant third level qualifications (e.g. sociology, politics, philosophy, etc.) are best suited to teach politics and society, 72.6 per cent (n = 101) of the Definites agreed. 13 of the 101 have politics/political science, seven have philosophy and eighteen have sociology as an undergraduate degree subject. However, the Definites also included graduates in a range of other subjects, such as history, English, economics, anthropology, Greek and Roman civilisation, etc.

Although just four (n = 4) Definites have completed a Higher Diploma in CSPE, it is estimated that 130 individuals graduated nationwide with this qualification. A Higher Diploma in CSPE was offered to practicing teachers by both NUI Maynooth and NUI Cork from 1996-2002 and 1995-



2000 respectively. Trinity College Dublin offered a Postgraduate Diploma in Educational Studies (citizenship education) from 2002-2004. Many of teachers that have completed these courses will undoubtedly be interested in the senior cycle subject and their professional development needs should also be considered.

There is a general desire amongst survey respondents to engage in professional development relating to politics and society. It is also evident that the model of accreditation is key to the success of lifelong learning opportunities for teachers, as individuals and as members of school staff. When asked to indicate the length of course in which they would be prepared to participate, 88.5 per cent (n=123) were interested in one-day workshops; 76.2 per cent (n=106) were willing to consider a short term course up to 30 hours; and 63.4 per cent (n=88) were interested in a longer term course leading to a post-graduate qualification/accreditation.

Length of course is obviously important, but so too is location: 'Most significant in enabling teachers to access routes to further qualifications has been that provided by...Trinity College, on an outreach basis through the Education Centre network' (Egan, 2004:17). This statement is reflected in the popularity of Education Centres as potential CPD venues amongst the Definites, with 77.7 per cent (n=108) mentioning them as favoured locations. School based training, together with programmes offered in universities, were also mentioned by 39.6 per cent (n=55) and 37.4 per cent (n=52) respectively.

While 79.1 per cent (n=110) agreed that teachers who have attended junior cycle CSPE in-service will need further qualifications/training to teach the senior cycle subject, the Definites highlighted the key role of the Citizenship Education Second Level Support Service in supporting CSPE. When presented with a list of potential supports/resources necessary for successful implementation of politics and society, the Support Service was ranked first by 38.1 per cent (n=53), followed by the need for practical resources such as teaching and assessment guidelines (16.5 per cent; n=23), and a subject specific textbook or reader (13.7 per cent; n=19). Ideally, participation in future politics and society in-service events offered by the Second Level Support Service, either in schools or based in Education Centres, could also contribute credits towards a recognised qualification.

## **Conclusion**

When the Teaching Council announces the criteria for politics and society teacher registration, third level institutions will need to develop and organise alignment across universities for ITE and CPD programmes.

Course development for practising teachers should address the needs of those with an appropriate academic qualification but lacking the necessary teaching experiences/pedagogical skills, as well as those individuals with the necessary teaching experience/pedagogical skills but lacking core/conceptual knowledge of key disciplines.

It is widely recognised that teacher professional development ‘is most effective when it is embedded in practice’ (Teaching Council, 2007:31). With the immediate professional development needs of the Definites in mind, it is recommended that programmes for CPD in particular are stitched as closely as possible to the senior cycle syllabus, with a focus on engendering reflective practice. The Citizenship Studies Project research findings indicate that a blended model of professional development, with a mixture of face-to-face teaching/learning, distance education and school based projects, would be best suited to the needs of practising teachers. Adequate provision, resourcing and support for these practitioners may well prove the most important factor in ensuring the long term sustainability and success of the subject.

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