

## ***Democratic Citizenship Education in Ireland***

by  
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### **Introduction:**

The independent Democracy Commission was set up in June 2003 by two think-tanks, TASC in Dublin and Democratic Dialogue in Belfast to consider the capacity of Irish Democracy to be inclusive, participatory and egalitarian in the twenty first century. Seeking to engage with a broad cross section of audiences, particularly the under 25s and the marginalized, the Commission acts as a channel for dialogue. It has engaged in extensive information gathering processes namely written public submissions and public consultations.

In its inquiries the Commission has been informed by a variety of groups and individuals on a number of occasions of the need for democratic citizenship education. This paper will address this need by defining what it means by democratic citizenship education, assessing its current status in the Irish education system; and contributing to debate for its effective incorporation into adult and community education.

### **Democratic Citizenship Education – a definition:**

Democratic citizenship education focuses on the rights, responsibilities and roles of the citizen, locally, nationally and globally and on the concept of human interdependence. In its examination of education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools, the British Advisory Group on Citizenship defined one of their aims as *'for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and public service, and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves'*. (1998:7)

The Democracy Commission, when it speaks of citizenship education, takes its definition from Kymlicka who states that

*'Citizenship education is not just a matter of learning the basic facts about the institutions and procedures of political life; it also involves acquiring a range of dispositions, virtues and loyalties that are immediately bound up with the practice of democratic citizenship'* (Kymlicka, 1999)

Political literacy, a critical understanding of democracy and democratic political institutions and systems, is a key component of citizenship education. However in addition to strengthening knowledge of political systems, citizenship education should ‘foster respect for law, justice, democracy and nurture common good at the same time as encouraging independence of thought. It should develop skills of reflection, enquiry and debate’ (British Advisory Group on Citizenship, 1998:11). It should favour ‘mutual understanding, intercultural dialogue, solidarity, gender equality and harmonious relations within and among peoples’ (Council of Europe, 2004:3).

### **Democratic Citizenship Education in Ireland**

Since the foundation of the Irish state citizenship education has been a contentious issue. The Catholic Church did not favour the creation of a separate single school subject on citizenship as it believed that moral education and personal development were best taught through religious education. (Gleeson and Munnely, 2004:3). In 1966 the establishment of free second level education coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising of 1916 and introduced a new mandatory but non-examined secondary school subject, Civics. Its primary aims were ‘to inculcate values such as civic responsibility, moral virtue, patriotism, and law abidingness’ (Gleeson and Munnely, 2004:3). In a document entitled *The Rules and Programme for Teachers*, the Department of Education in 1967 described Civics as ‘teaching the young citizen to recognise and obey lawful authority, to help preserve law, order and discipline, to respect private and public right to property and to be ready to defend the national territory should the need arise’ (Gleeson and Munnely, 2003:3)

After an enthusiastic start, Civics was by the end of the 1970s a dying subject due to: a shortage of trained teachers in the subject; a lack of teaching and learning resources; a perception that it was less important than other subjects as it was unexamined and only given one hour a week in the school timetable. (Gleeson and Munnely, 2004:4). Attempts in 1984 by the Minister for Education, Gemma Hussey, to replace it with ‘Social and Political Studies’ met with resistance at the political level as was noted by Granville, Deputy CEO of the Interim Curriculum Examinations Board at the time ‘*This was a sensitive issue. An early draft of the programme was criticised as being CND driven. I’d say the most contentious areas have been predictably enough civic, social, political which has an enormous tangle of ideological and other hang-ups and social, personal and health education ..... In the past certain moral, ethical and cultural values were handled by religion and by the family and the schools didn’t enter into that domain*’ (Gleeson and Munnely, 2004:4)

When the Government fell the issue of citizenship education fell with it. In 1993, however, at the request of the then Minister for Education Mary O’Rourke the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment introduced a pilot programme on Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) to Junior Certificate.

CSPE was introduced as a mandatory subject in the junior cycle in 1997, replacing Civics. Its aim is ‘*to prepare students for active participatory citizenship... through*

*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. It should produce knowledgeable pupils who can explore, analyse and evaluate, who are skilled and practised in moral and critical appraisal, and capable of making decisions and judgements through a reflective citizenship, based on human rights and social responsibilities. Such pupils should be better prepared for living in a world where traditional structures and values are being challenged, and where pupils are being confronted with conflicting interests, impermanent structures and constant questioning'* (CSPE syllabus). The course's central concepts include Democracy, Rights and responsibilities, Human dignity, Interdependence, Development and Law and Stewardship. The course is allocated one class period per week or around 70 hours total teaching over the three year junior cycle.

At present neither democratic citizenship nor political education is taught as an independent subject to senior cycle. In this regard Ireland has been seriously out of line with most of its European neighbours. For instance in the UK it is possible to take sociology, media studies and politics A levels. No such offerings exist in the Leaving Certificate (established) in Ireland at present. This situation is currently under examination as part of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) review of senior cycle post primary education. In current discussions on the review of the senior cycle three options have been posited by the NCCA for extending social and political education, the generic term allocated in Irish education circles to democratic citizenship education. Firstly it could be offered as part of a 40 hour Transition year unit. Secondly it could become a short course of 80 teaching hours in one year which could be examined at the end of fifth year (year before the leaving certificate) (2004:16). Unlike Transition year units, short courses would be examined externally by the State and would be allocated points for entry to third level institutions. Finally social and political education could be offered as full optional leaving certificate subject.

Social and political education should be offered in all three. To make it available in transition year alone would be insufficient as not all students take the transition year. Similarly to offer it solely as a short course would not be acceptable as under the NCCA's proposals the two year route to leaving certificate will not have a short course as a minimum requirement. In keeping with good practice elsewhere social and political democratic citizenship education should be a full leaving certificate subject.

With regard to social and political education the Commission favours the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) of the City of Dublin VEC's proposal for the leaving certificate (established). This proposal, written and researched by Dr. Eilis Ward, develops a model of citizenship studies which extracts the 'best of theory and practice' from citizenship education and the academic disciplines of politics, philosophy and sociology (Ward, 2002:15). Bringing citizenship education into academic inquiry the proposal rejects the notion that values themselves become learning outcomes.

### **Adult and Community Education**

Responsibility for democratic citizenship education should not rest entirely on the shoulders of teachers, school principals and students. Schools should *'consider the relation of citizenship education to whole school issues including school ethos, organisation and structures'* and *'everyone directly involved in the education of our children – politicians and civil servants; community representatives; faith groups; school inspectors and governors; teacher trainers and teachers themselves; parent and indeed pupils – be given a clear statement of what is meant by citizenship education and their central role in it'* (British Advisory Group on citizenship, 1998:23)

Looking at this from another angle democratic citizenship education shouldn't be solely confined to second level students. The current debate on democratic citizenship education is taking place within the context of the review of the senior cycle and while this debate is both desirable and necessary, what of those who have opted out or are no longer in formal secondary education in Ireland.

While most Irish adults, depending on their age, have received citizenship education either through Civics or through CSPE the 'never-ending' nature of citizenship which is both 'lifelong and lifewide' and 'in permanent construction' means that democratic citizenship education should not stop at 16 or 18 (Keogh, 2003:11).

Citizenship along with consciousness raising, cohesion, competitiveness, cultural development and community building is identified as a priority area for adult education in the White Paper. Yet there have been no explicit moves towards the development of citizenship in Adult Education. The White Paper on Adult Education (2000) in its introduction mentions a role for citizenship in adult education but makes no other reference to it (Keogh, 2003:29). It would appear that the development of democratic citizenship education has been left to the 'usual agents of socialization' adult education, community education, community involvement, the media and other sources (Keogh, 2003:7).

In Ireland Community education has provided a forum for 'listening to the voices of otherwise silenced people' and has 'supplied the wherewithal for disparate groups to engage with empowering processes and become active agents in their communities' (Connolly, 2003:9).

Community education has been defined as *'education and learning which is rooted in a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness. It is within the community and of the community, reflecting the developing needs of individuals and their locale. It builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational and structural disadvantage and to take part in decision-making and policy-formulation within the community. It is distinct from general adult education provision, due both its ethos and the methodologies it employs'* (Aontas, 2004:18-19). It provides the ideal forum for the introduction and/or enhancement of democratic citizenship education. It differs from adult education to the extent that it *'enables participants to emerge with more than new personal skills and knowledge..... a strong capacity for social action, a sense of collective empowerment*

*and an ability to tackle issues of social justice'* (Aontas, 2004:19) Although Aontas supports this ideological definition of Community Education it recognises that it sometimes 'fails to reach this level' (Aontas, 2004:19).

Keogh states that 'all institutions should aspire to becoming learning environments where learning for democracy as well as other types of learning will take place' to this end she suggests the development of a civil charter (Keogh, 2003:33). This ties in quite closely with the British Advisory Group on Citizenship's recommendation of a clear statement of what is meant by democratic citizenship education and everyone's central role in it. One step in this direction would be the development in Ireland of a document similar to 'Life in the UK, a journey to citizenship' published by the Home Office for teachers, mentors and others helping immigrants to integrate. This publication details the UK's history, its society, how it is governed, its legal system, its public services and centres for further information and help in a manner that is easily accessed and understood.

A similar Irish document would not only benefit educators of immigrant communities but would be of use to educators in the adult and community sectors. The development process itself through a system of public consultation would be one method through which issues such as 'public virtues, the common good, the future of our society and how citizenship and learning it and/or for it are to be understood' (Keogh, 2003:32) could be put on the national agenda.

This document and the process behind it would be one way of opening debate and a creative way of engaging the 80% of the population not in structured learning in democratic citizenship education.

## **Conclusion**

One of the biggest challenges to democratic citizenship education in the adult and community sectors is the limited reference to citizenship in the general discourse in Ireland and its almost complete absence from most discussion and writings on adult education. One of the notable exceptions to this was the citizenship referendum in June 2004. However the discussion on the matter at that time focused on who was and was not legally entitled to Irish citizenship rather than a discussion of public values, the common good etc. Implicit reference may be made to citizenship through reference to skills and dispositions for participation in civil society and for challenging the existing system, but it rarely goes beyond that (Keogh, 2003:28) and even when it does in the case of the national active citizenship network it is operating in an environment of tight resources. Another challenge is that under 20% of adults engage in any form of structured learning in any one year (Keogh, 2003:29).

The European year of citizenship through education 2005 endeavours to 'bridge policy and practise by empowering policy makers and practitioners at all levels to set up and develop sustainable programmes' for democratic citizenship education (Council of Europe, 2004:4) and is furnishing practitioners with a framework and concrete tools to achieve this objective.

More significantly, perhaps, it provides Irish educators with a timely opportunity to put issues such as: the future of democratic citizenship and democratic citizenship education in Ireland; 'public values' and the 'common good' on the national agenda.

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The Independent Democracy Commission is chaired by David Begg, General Secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and has twelve members acting in a voluntary capacity from across the spectrum in Ireland. It is funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and is due to present its final report in the autumn of 2005. Further information on the Commission can be found at [www.democracycommission.ie](http://www.democracycommission.ie)

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