

**Civic, Social and Political Education in the
New Junior Certificate Programme**

IHRC Submission, March 2012

IHRC
AN COIMISIÚN UM CHEARTA AN DUINE
IRISH HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Introduction

The Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) was established under statute in 2000 with a mandate to work to ensure that the human rights of everyone in the State are fully realised and protected in law and practice. It is recognised by the United Nations (UN) as Ireland's National Human Rights Institution (NHRI). The IHRC is tasked with monitoring and reviewing the State's compliance with its legal obligations under national, constitutional and international human rights law. Part of this mandate involves making recommendations on how the State can fulfill its obligations in relation to human rights education. The breadth and scope of human rights education in post-primary education was examined by the IHRC in *Human Rights Education in Ireland – An Overview*, a report published by the IHRC in July 2011.¹ This work informed the IHRC commentary on the reform of the Junior Cycle and in particular Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) in its input to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in August 2011.²

The IHRC welcomes aspects of the new Junior Cycle curriculum including its flexibility in terms of curriculum and assessment. The present submission addresses the proposed removal of CSPE as a compulsory state examinable subject in the new Junior Cycle curriculum. It focuses on Ireland's duty to ensure that education is aimed at strengthening human rights and fundamental freedoms and emphasises in particular the importance of CSPE to the advancement of human rights education in post-primary education settings.

At present, CSPE is the only opportunity available to every student in Ireland to experience learning that equips them for what the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) describes as "a responsible life in a free society" as active participatory citizens. Consequently, the IHRC is of the view that CSPE should remain a compulsory examinable subject in the new Junior Cycle curriculum, as otherwise the State will not be in a position to demonstrate how it is discharging its international obligations in this field.

International Standards on Human Rights Education

The obligation to provide human rights education is contained in many international human rights conventions and declarations to which Ireland is party.³

¹ IHRC (2011) *Human Rights Education in Ireland – An Overview* Dublin: IHRC

² IHRC Input to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on New Framework for the Junior Certificate Programme, IHRC Input to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, August 2011

³ International Covenant on Social and Cultural Rights; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; Convention on the Rights of the Child. For a

Article 13 of the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)** provides that:

...education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.⁴

ICESCR also provides that education should promote participation, tolerance and friendship among peoples.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has declared that human rights education is itself a human right.⁵ Several treaty bodies have elaborated reporting guidelines, general comments, or recommendations concerning human rights education, training, and information.⁶

Article 29 of the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** requires that children and young people's education should be directed to, *inter alia*,

(1)(b) development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms...

(1)(d) the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin...

The **CRC** also provides that children and young people should be able to express their views freely on all matters affecting them and that those views be taken seriously.⁷

The General Comment by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on the aims of education elaborates on the meaning of Article 29 of the **CRC**, quoted above, in relation to human rights education:

comprehensive list see No. 2 of the Series on the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004), "Human Rights Education and Human Rights Treaties". Available at <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/HRTreaties2en.pdf>

⁴ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 13

⁵ Affirmed by the Committee in Economic, Social and Cultural Rights during its Day of General Discussion on human rights education and public information activities relating to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (5 December 1994, E/1996/2, para.324)

⁶ For a comprehensive list see No. 2 of the Series on the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004), "Human Rights Education and Human Rights Treaties". Available at <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/HRTreaties2en.pdf>

⁷ *Ibid.* Article 12

Human rights education should provide information on the content of human rights treaties. But children should also learn about human rights by seeing human rights standards implemented in practice, whether at home, in school or within the community. Human rights education should be a comprehensive, lifelong process and start with the reflection of human rights values in the daily life and experience of the child.⁸

The General Comment also states that Article 29 highlights “the need for education to be child centred, child-friendly and empowering; highlighting the need for educational processes to be based upon the very principles it enunciates.”⁹

Defining Human Rights Education

Increased emphasis on the importance of human rights education was provided by the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993. The UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in December 1994. According to the Plan of Action emanating from the follow-on World Programme on Human Rights Education (WPHRE), human rights education is defined as:

[E]ducation, training and information aiming at building a universal culture of human rights through the sharing of knowledge, imparting of skills and moulding of attitudes.¹⁰

In practice, human rights are promoted through three dimensions of education programmes:

- (a) Knowledge: provision of information about human rights and mechanisms for their protection;
- (b) Values, beliefs and attitudes: promotion of a human rights culture through the development of values, beliefs and attitudes which uphold human rights;
- (c) Action: encouragement to take action to defend human rights and prevent human rights abuses, and the fostering of the skills necessary to do so.¹¹

The First Plan of Action emanating from the WPHRE prioritised human rights education in primary and secondary school settings in the first instance and proposed that the successful integration of human rights education in the education system required it to be embedded in:¹²

⁸ Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 1 on The Aims of Education”, CRC/GC/2001, para.1.

⁹ *Ibid.* para. 2.

¹⁰ UN, Revised draft Plan of Action for the first phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005-2007) A/59/525/Rev.1 (2 March, 2005), at paragraph 3

¹¹ OHCHR & UNESCO Booklet on the Plan of Action of the UN World Programme for Human Rights Education, A/59/525/Rev.1 (2 March 2005)

¹² United Nations General Assembly Revised draft plan of action for the World Programme for Human Rights Education, A/59/525/Rev. 1, pp. 3-4.

- Policy and policy implementation
- Curriculum (understood as a strand of educational policy)
- Learning Environment
- Teaching and Learning: Process and Tools
- Education and professional development of teachers and other personnel.

Most recently, UN Member States reiterated their commitment to human rights education. On 19 December 2011, the UN General Assembly adopted, without a vote, the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training.¹³ The Declaration reaffirms that States are “duty-bound, ... to ensure that education is aimed at strengthening respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” and recognises “the fundamental importance of human rights education and training in contributing to the promotion, protection and effective realization of all human rights.”¹⁴

Article 7 of the Declaration sets out States’ duty as follows:

States, and where applicable relevant governmental authorities, have the primary responsibility to promote and ensure human rights education and training is developed and implemented in a spirit of participation, inclusion and responsibility.¹⁵

The integration of human rights education in school curricula is one of the areas identified in the Declaration for action by States.¹⁶ The role of National Human Rights Institutions, such as the IHRC, in promoting human rights education is also recognised.¹⁷ Ireland thus has a duty to ensure that education aims at strengthening human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Human Rights and CSPE

In its review of the post-primary curriculum, the IHRC found that CSPE is at present the only explicit component of the curriculum that delivers on these human rights education commitments. The IHRC considers that CSPE is a foundation upon which to develop a more holistic approach to human rights education in the curriculum and the wider school community.¹⁸

¹³ UN General Assembly Resolution 66/137, 19 December 2011.

¹⁴ United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training by UN General Assembly Resolution 66/137, preamble.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Article 7, para. 1

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Article 8, para. 1

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Article 9, para. 1

¹⁸ IHRC (2011) *Human Rights Education in Ireland – An Overview* Dublin: IHRC

The Minister for Education and Skills at the launch of the IHRC's study on human rights education in July 2011 stressed the valuable contribution of CSPE:

The [CSPE] assessment arrangements ... provide for completion of an innovative action project which is designed to promote the skills of finding information, investigating a human rights or social responsibility issue, developing an action plan, implementing it, reflecting on and evaluating the experience and completing a report. These are vital skills in promoting participatory democracy and the ability to challenge authority and promote change.¹⁹

The stated aim of CSPE is to provide students with the knowledge and skills for 'active participatory citizenship' based on human rights; enabling them to critically question, have empathy and engage with the world around them.²⁰ The learning objectives and the concepts that underpin the CSPE syllabus reinforce this goal of active participatory citizenship at personal, local, national and global levels.²¹ Human rights feature explicitly as well as implicitly in all of the concepts, for example, the attitudes and values that CSPE aims to instil include a "personal commitment to the concepts underlying [CSPE] e.g. a commitment to the values of human rights, social responsibilities and democracy."²² The attitudinal objectives also include awareness and respect for the rights of all groups in society as well as fostering a commitment to oppose prejudice and inequality, and promote social justice.²³

It has been stated that "Active learning for active citizenship is the cornerstone of the teaching methodology for CSPE and the action project is central to engaging students around real issues in society."²⁴ Evidence suggests that human rights issues are among the most popular topics chosen by young people for their action projects.²⁵ The scope of the action project is limited by the time allocated for CSPE overall, which is a point of real concern raised by the IHRC²⁶ and others²⁷. However, "the evidence is clear: the nature of action projects seems to indicate that young people are engaging with the societies in which they live. The central aims of CSPE are being met".²⁸

¹⁹ Remarks by Minister for Education and Skills, Mr Ruairi Quinn TD, Minister for Education and Skills at the launch of *Human Rights Education in Ireland – An Overview*, Monday, 4 July 2011. See www.ihrc.ie

²⁰ *CSPE Syllabus : aims and objectives* p.8

²¹ *Ibid.* p.8

²² *CSPE Syllabus*, 2.2.4: Attitudes and Values, p.14

²³ *Ibid.* 2.2.4: Attitudes and Values, p.14

²⁴ Wilson M. (2008) 'The Action Project as a Teaching/Learning Tool' in *Education for Citizenship and Diversity in Irish Contexts*. Eds. Gerry Jeffers and Una O'Connor. Dublin: IPA, p. 179

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 182

²⁶ IHRC (2011) *Human Rights in Ireland – An Overview* Dublin: IHRC p. 135

²⁷ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of Visit to Ireland, November 2007* www.coe.int

²⁸ Wilson M. (2008) 'The Action Project as a Teaching/Learning Tool' in *Education for Citizenship and Diversity in Irish Contexts*. Eds. Gerry Jeffers and Una O'Connor. Dublin: IPA, p. 185

The IHRC considers that realisation of the full potential of the CSPE curriculum is supported by a whole-school approach. School councils and other such representative spaces give young people the opportunity to participate in decision-making and be able to put into practice the principles of human rights and democracy fostered in the CSPE curriculum.²⁹

The positive impact of CSPE is also revealed in international research. Ireland participated in the International Civic and Citizenship Study of 14 year olds across 38 countries. Ireland ranked 7th out of the countries studied. Ireland's final score was substantial ahead of the international average.³⁰

The New Junior Cycle Curriculum

The IHRC broadly welcomes the new Framework for the Junior Cycle, in particular:

- That the set of values that will underpin the vision of junior cycle education have a strong human rights orientation;
- Schools, teachers and students are being placed at the centre of the change process;
- Reform happening at both curriculum and assessment level, particularly the introduction of portfolio-based assessment;
- Emphasis is being placed on literacy and numeracy thus attempting to create a more level playing field and providing students with the confidence to get the most from their learning and thus achieve greater equality of outcome;
- A number of the statements of learning (9, 10, 11, 18, 20, 21, and 22) have the potential to strengthen human rights education in the curriculum, promoting the integration of human rights principles, values and standards across the curriculum;

The IHRC is concerned however that in the proposed new junior cycle CSPE will no longer be mandatory.³¹

²⁹ IHRC (2011) *Human Rights Education in Ireland – An Overview* Dublin: IHRC

³⁰ Schulz, W., Ainley, J., Fraillon, J., Kerr, D., & Losito, B. (2010). *ICCS 2009 International Report: Civic knowledge, attitudes and engagement among lower secondary school students in thirty-eight countries*. Amsterdam: IEA

³¹ The IHRC has similar concerns regarding Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), which subject is outside the scope of the present submission.

CSPE within the new Junior Cycle

Vision

The vision for the new Junior Cycle describes junior cycle education as “placing students at the centre of the educational experience, enabling them to actively participate in their communities and in society...”.³² The values of “equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom and democracy, and respect for human dignity and identity” inform that vision.³³ The statements of learning, many of which are human rights orientated, set out the desired outcomes of the Junior Cycle. Thus many of the values that had been to the fore in CSPE have been elevated and mainstreamed across the entire junior cycle curriculum. This measure is welcome and the IHRC considers that it highlights the need for CSPE to remain a core compulsory component of the Junior Cycle given that it is the only subject that explicitly deals with these issues.

Curriculum

Currently, CSPE is a compulsory examinable subject and this makes it a core contribution to the State’s duty to support human rights education and the Irish education system’s goal to foster active participatory citizenship. Under the proposed new Junior Cycle, CSPE will no longer be mandatory. The IHRC notes that a subject on citizenship has been a compulsory part of the post-primary curriculum since the then Minister for Education introduced ‘civics’ in 1966. This point was emphasised by the Minister in a Dáil debate in 1967. The Minister stated “the subject civics forms an essential part of the revised Intermediate Certificate course”.³⁴ CSPE is the only opportunity that all students have irrespective of background, to experience learning that equips them for what the CRC describes as “a responsible life in a free society” as active participatory citizens. The re-designation of CSPE as a non-compulsory subject means that there would be no mandatory citizenship education available to all students for the first time since 1966.

In the new Junior Cycle, schools are encouraged to select a range of curriculum components that reflect the learning statements, which include statements that promote human rights principles. The potential for the inclusion of human rights across the curriculum in this manner is welcome however such cross curricular inclusion of human rights will require a review of subjects and investment in further teacher education and development. The IHRC considers that CSPE is necessary as a core subject and will add significant value to the cross-curricular inclusion of human rights principles. However, the cross-curricular approach proposed in the new Junior Cycle cannot be a replacement for

³² NCCA (2011) *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle*. Dublin: NCCA p. 9

³³ *Ibid.* p. 9

³⁴ See Dáil Debates on <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/1967/11/29/00036.asp#N4>

CSPE. The IHRC notes that there is evidence from the United Kingdom (UK) that a strong citizenship education subject in the curriculum is the most effective way of promoting equality, human rights, democracy and social justice within the curriculum.³⁵

The change in status of CSPE may severely impact on its likely take up. The low status afforded to CSPE including through the number of hours allocated to it compared with other subjects and the fact that there is as yet no follow-on subject in the Senior Cycle could disadvantage the subject, making it less likely to be among the eight subjects chosen by schools.

The IHRC considers that to ensure that Ireland continues to meet its human rights education obligations and its goals to support the active engagement of young people in shaping society and the world around them based on human rights, CSPE must remain a compulsory state examinable subject.

Rationale for retaining CSPE as mandatory State-examinable subject

The IHRC considers that the following elements provide a rationale for retaining CSPE as a mandatory state examinable subject.

- **CSPE assists in Meeting the State's Human Rights Obligations**

As noted above, the State is obliged to provide for education that strengthens human rights and fundamental freedoms. The retention of CSPE as a mandatory subject will assist the State in meeting its obligations in this regard.

- **CSPE Promotes Active Participatory Citizenship**

CSPE supports young people to be active participatory citizens. It is founded on the principle of active participation and seeks to support or rekindle "young people's sense of engagement in the societies in which they live".³⁶ Evidence indicates that because of the nature of the action project young people are engaging more with the world around them.³⁷ The popularity of initiatives such as Young Social Innovators among transition year students is informed and influenced by their experience of 'the active participatory nature of' CSPE in the Junior Cycle.³⁸

³⁵ Faulks, Keith 'Education for Citizenship in England's secondary schools: a critique of current principle and practice' in *Journal of Education Policy*, August, 2006

³⁶ Wilson M. (2008) 'The Action Project as a Teaching/Learning Tool' in *Education for Citizenship and Diversity in Irish Contexts*. Eds. Gerry Jeffers and Una O'Connor. Dublin: IPA, p. 178

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 182

³⁸ "The active participatory nature of CSPE - where students, in taking up issues of social concern, learn to give opinions, listen, work as part of a group, access structures within and without school - has indeed been a major building block in the development of citizenship education in Transition Year, under the auspices of

The Taskforce on Active Citizenship also recognised the important role of CSPE in fostering active citizenship, stating that:

A crucial factor in the contribution of education to Active Citizenship is the way in which values are ‘caught’ and not just ‘taught’ in the course of learning. Schools and colleges 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.³⁹

The Task Force recommended the expansion of education for citizenship in the school system; more specifically to “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”.⁴⁰

The 2011 *Programme for Government* provides that by the end of the Government’s term “Ireland will be recognised as a modern, fair, socially inclusive and equal society”.⁴¹ Education is considered in the Programme to be central to the achievement of this goal.⁴² The IHRC considers that removing CSPE as a compulsory subject will necessarily remove the opportunity for all young people to learn these important skills, which are not present in any other element of the Junior Cycle curriculum. If CSPE is made optional, a crucial factor in contributing to making Ireland a more modern, inclusive and equal society will be removed as all young people, will not be given the equal chance to be supported to become active citizens including the access to the language and know-how needed to play their part in the democratic process.

- **CSPE Supports Responses to Diversity in Schools**

According to the CRC, education should promote greater equality and respect for different groups in society.⁴³ Since the late 1990s secondary schools have experienced a huge growth in the cultural and religious diversity reflected in their student population, mirroring a similar growth in diversity in Irish society.⁴⁴ There has been an active response to this increased diversity in education through the development of the intercultural guidelines,

YSI.” in ‘CSPE and The Young Social Innovators’ by Mary Waddell, in *ACTIVATE No. 33 May 2006, The Newsletter of the Association of CSPE Teachers (ACT)* www.actonline.ie

³⁹ Department of An Taoiseach, *Report of the Task Force on Active Citizenship in Ireland, 2007*, Dublin: Stationary Office, p. 21

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Government of Ireland (2011) *Programme for Government*, Common Purpose Section: p.2 www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Publications/Publications_2011/Programme_for_Government_2011.pdf

⁴² *Ibid.* Fairness Section: p. 9

⁴³ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 29, para. 1(d)

⁴⁴ Gannon M., ‘Frameworks for responding to diversity in schools’ in *Education for Citizenship and Diversity in Irish Contexts*. Eds. Gerry Jeffers and Una O’Connor. Dublin: IPA, p. 124

followed by the intercultural strategy and by the development of guidelines to address homophobic bullying and support Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual and Transgendered (LGBT) young people to engage with policy development in schools.⁴⁵ These efforts complement guidelines in place since the early 2000s on Traveller culture⁴⁶. There is ongoing discussion on religion in schools.⁴⁷ There has also been a strong demand by teachers for resources to address diversity and promote intercultural understanding.⁴⁸ The CSPE curriculum provides the space “for schools seeking to respond positively and effectively to cultural diversity, and seeking to help students develop into adult citizens of a truly intercultural society”.⁴⁹ It can also be a vehicle for addressing other forms of diversity and challenging perspectives, attitudes and ultimately behaviour.

- **CSPE Provides a Space to Address Sensitive Issues**

The UN Committee on the CRC states that children and young people should not only learn about the content of human rights but should also experience implementation in practice.⁵⁰ Achieving that goal often involves creating awareness, challenging prejudice, intolerance and stereotyping head-on. The IHRC considers that CSPE is a key space to do this. The syllabus provides teachers and students with:

enough scope and flexibility to select and deal with issues such as gender equity, racism and xenophobia, interculturalism, the environment, development, work and unemployment, poverty and homelessness, minorities, and conflict situations such as that in Northern Ireland.⁵¹

The IHRC considers that the active methodologies of CSPE, supplemented by continuous professional development, support teachers to address issues and confront attitudes and behaviours that conflict with human rights and equality principles and enable students to take action to challenge prejudice, injustice, inequality and violations of human rights.

- **CSPE increases ‘Political and Social’ Literacy**

The emphasis on improving literacy and numeracy in the new Junior Cycle is very welcome. An important aspect of CSPE is that “acquiring a level of political literacy is key to

⁴⁵Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) and Department of Education, *Lesbian, Gay and Bi-Sexual Students in Secondary School: Guidelines for Principals and School leader*, 2009 See www.glen.ie

⁴⁶Department of Education and Science, *Traveller Education Guidelines*, 2002

http://www.educatetogether.ie/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/traveller_education_-_guidelines.pdf

⁴⁷ IHRC (2011) *Religion & Education: A Human Rights Perspective Report*. See www.ihrc.ie

⁴⁸ Gannon M., ‘Frameworks for responding to diversity in schools’ in *Education for Citizenship and Diversity in Irish Contexts*. Eds. Gerry Jeffers and Una O’Connor. Dublin: IPA.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 139.

⁵⁰UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 1: Article 29.1, the Aims of Education, April 2001, UN Doc. CRC/GC/2001/1. para 15

⁵¹ CSPE Syllabus, p.3, para. 1.2.4

accessing democratic society...[and]...to demystify political systems and to provide both the language and the skills needed for democratic participation".⁵² Students also have an opportunity to gain a knowledge and understanding of the structural inequalities that led to inequality, poverty and social exclusion. The IHRC considers that the removal of CSPE as a compulsory subject may deprive some students of the opportunity to develop political and social literacy.

- **CSPE is a Foundation for Politics & Society**

CSPE is an important foundation for Politics & Society when it comes on stream as was set out in detail in the IHRC's submission on the draft syllabus for the subject.⁵³

- **CSPE: The Views of Young people**

The CRC requires that young people views should be heard and taken into account. In this regard, the NCCA has made considerable efforts to ensure meaningful consultation with young people. In the Report of the Consultation with Young People on the reform of the Junior Cycle, CSPE along with SPHE, English and Maths were the only subjects that the young people consulted agreed should be compulsory at Junior Cycle.⁵⁴ The participants also said that CSPE could be "restructured, taught differently and allocated more time".⁵⁵ However, the views of the young people consulted, on CSPE, do not seem to have been reflected in the reform of the Junior Cycle curriculum.

Conclusion

The IHRC recommends that CSPE should remain as a compulsory State-examinable subject in the New Junior Cycle curriculum. Ireland has an obligation under international human rights treaties it has ratified to provide education on human rights to children in Ireland. At present, CSPE is the only component of the Junior Cycle curriculum that meets Ireland's commitments to human rights education. CSPE is also the only opportunity available to every student in Ireland to experience learning that equips them for what the CRC describes as "a responsible life in a free society" as active participatory citizens.

⁵² Harrison, C., and M. Wilson (2011) *CSPE Make a Difference: Teachers Resource Book*. 3rd Edition Dublin: Folens p.20

⁵³ IHRC (2009) Submission to NCCA on Politics & Society Draft Syllabus see www.ihrc.ie

⁵⁴ Dáil na nÓg, NCCA, Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2011) *Report of a consultation with young people on reform of the Junior Cycle* Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs p.1

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 20