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**5**  
Education For Civic Engagement  
in Post-Primary Schools in  
Ireland and Northern Ireland:  
A Rights Perspective

**Briefing Paper**





# Briefing Paper

**This paper provides a summary of the fifth Report of the Children and Youth Programme which examines policy and provision for education for civic engagement in post-primary education in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The issue is topical and relevant in both jurisdictions. In Ireland, reform of the Junior Cycle has led to a renewed focus on civic education and its cross-curricular linkages. In Northern Ireland, education for civic engagement occurs within a divided society, giving rise to questions about its role in such a context. The objectives of the Report are to:**

1. to define the characteristics and purpose of education for civic engagement;
2. to analyse education for civic engagement from a rights-based perspective;
3. to outline the policy environment and policy implementation issues in post-primary schools in Ireland and Northern Ireland; and
4. to provide reflections on policy and practice from a rights-based perspective.

The Report provides an overview and definitional issues relating to education for civic engagement, analyses the intersection between education for civic engagement and a rights-based perspective, outlines key policy and provision relating to education for civic engagement in post-primary schools in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and examines the gaps in the implementation of a rights-based approach to civic engagement education.

## Key Conclusions

Drawing on the evidence the following key conclusions have been identified.

### **1. Whilst policy and provision for civic engagement education exists, its value, status and credibility within schools is not always clear.**

The fostering of civic engagement both within the school and the wider community are not necessarily core objectives within education, with the result that activities and teaching relating to it can become marginalised within the school system. Schools operate with considerable independence and the different management and ownership structures of post-primary schools often means that the value placed on education for civic engagement varies widely across different school types. In addition, the examination focused nature of the post-primary education system means a strong emphasis on academic achievement continues to dominate.

### **2. Whilst the teaching of citizenship/civic engagement education may entail a strong focus on issues of human rights and democracy at a distance, dealing with such issues closer to home may prove challenging for teachers and pupils.**

Evidence has suggested that there may be a stronger concentration on distant wrongs, rather than meaningful discussion and treatment of issues directly affecting the students. This may include, for example, a reticence to address the inclusion of minorities within the school or participation and decision-making processes within the wider school environment. Studies have demonstrated challenges in fostering a culture of rights respecting schools.

### **3. Education for civic engagement does not occur within a vacuum and strong community linkages are required in order to make it meaningful.**

Various initiatives in Ireland and Northern Ireland have fostered the creation of school-community linkages and the community and voluntary sector has provided a key role in providing opportunities for civic engagement within schools. There is, however, a danger of tokenism and a need to ensure that such linkages are meaningful and not simply viewed as an 'easy' way to

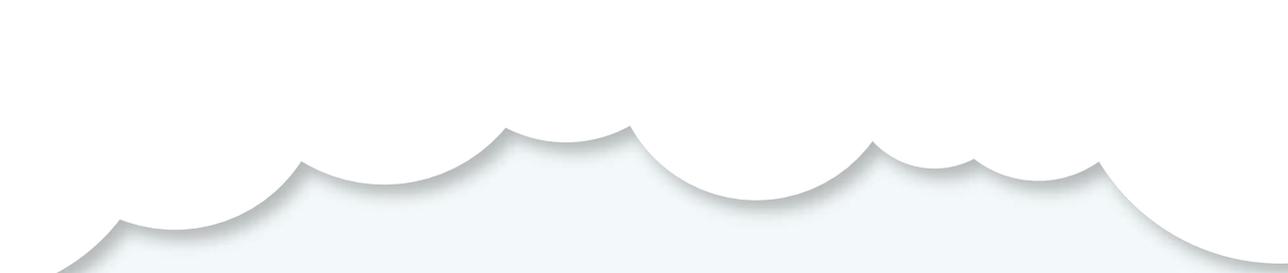
complete a particular project. Such engagement benefits from being linked strongly to curriculum content, with opportunities for discussion on the contribution of such initiatives to wider goals. Pupils also benefit when they are provided with some autonomy in relation to the issues and organisations with whom they wish to engage.

**4. The wider school environment impacts strongly on the way in which pupils are taught, perceive and participate in education for civic engagement and can limit or strengthen opportunities for engagement within the school and the wider community.**

Several authors have pointed to a democratic deficit within schools and the difficulty of promoting a rights-based and democratic approach within authoritarian school systems. Although many citizenship and civic education initiatives within the curriculum focus on democratic participation, its implementation in practice can be problematic given the limited participation of students within a hierarchical school system. The ethos or particular tradition within particular schools also impacts on the values imparted and the extent to which pupils can be actively engaged within the school environment. For many schools, participation equates with student councils and whilst these are a very important step, they are not a panacea for meaningful participation. While they should be developed in all schools, they should operate alongside other strategies that foster engagement and participation by the wider student body in school life and decision-making.

**5. Teaching in post-primary education is often compartmentalised, with limited scope for cross-curricular integration. This can hamper the development of effective education for civic engagement, which by its nature addresses many curricular areas.**

In general, education for civic engagement occurs within a limited timetable and is not necessarily linked to other curricular areas within an integrated approach. Other challenges exist in relation to resources, support, teacher pedagogies, poor perceptions of the subject and the limitations of meaningful opportunities for civic engagement within the school and the wider community.

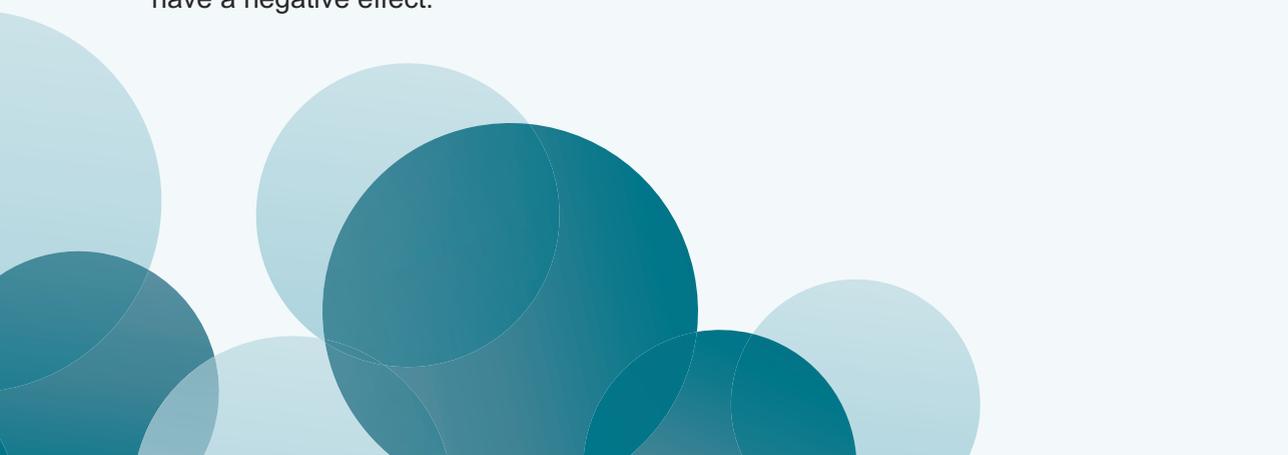


**6. In Northern Ireland, in particular, the context of a divided educational system within a post-conflict society has implications for content, delivery and participation in civic engagement education.**

Research has shown difficulties within the Northern Ireland education system in dealing with controversial and delicate issues in the context of citizenship education. An educational system, largely divided along religious lines could have implications for the way in which notions of citizenship, belonging and human rights may be imparted and understood. School ethos also plays a role in Ireland, where a continued division of schools in terms of management structure, religious (or secular) ethos and academic focus affects the emphasis on education for civic engagement and the extent to which its principles are applied across the school. More research is required on the impact of school ethos and/or the management structure on such education and the wider school environment.

**7. Teaching pedagogy and method of delivery within the classroom are essential elements of effective education for civic engagement alongside effective Government policy and support.**

There is evidence that appropriate learner centred teaching pedagogy and opportunities for pupils to be actively engaged, has a positive impact on learning outcomes and attitudes in citizenship education. Teachers, however, require on-going support, training and sufficient resources in order to become skilled in both the content and pedagogy required for effective education for civic engagement. The perceived low status of the subject, teacher turnover and lack of teachers fully specialised in the subject can have a negative effect.



## Next Steps

This Report has demonstrated that, whilst considerable progress has been made in the application of a rights-based approach to education for civic engagement, further steps are required to ensure that such education is meaningful, transformative and based within a culture that respects the rights and dignity of every young person. There are further steps that would assist in this process.

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1. Effective and meaningful **education for civic engagement should be a core and compulsory element of the post-primary curriculum** as it is integral to the notions of democracy and citizenship and crucial to the building of effective communities. In order to do so, it also needs to be within a context in which the values of democracy, rights and participation can be put into practice, and the content and delivery offer real possibilities for meaningful discussion and engagement. In Ireland, the Junior Cycle reform should be used as an opportunity to ensure that Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) or its equivalent becomes a core and cross-cutting element of the revised programme.
2. Whilst some studies have addressed the content, delivery and outcomes of education for civic engagement, there is a **need for more up to date empirical investigation of the status, content, methods of delivery, outcomes and longer-term impacts of such education**, including a focus on the fostering of community relations and the impact of the whole-school environment and ethos. In Northern Ireland, it would be beneficial to revisit the effectiveness of the subject, Local and Global Citizenship, five years after the pilot evaluation. This is necessary in light of a changed political and societal context, with embedded political institutions, compared to the early stages of implementation characterised by political uncertainty.
3. International and national **approaches/initiatives that foster a human rights-based and participatory culture within schools should be examined**, including how human rights and democratic principles can be implemented across the system. Where feasible, such approaches could be mainstreamed and included in the assessment and evaluation of schools.

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### The Children and Youth Programme

The Children and Youth Programme is an independent collaboration between the two UNESCO Chairs in Ireland at the University of Ulster and NUI Galway.



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UNESCO Chair in Education for Pluralism,  
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