

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

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At A Glance

This paper provides an ‘at a glance’ 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.
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.
3. Education for civic engagement does not occur within a vacuum and strong community linkages are required in order to make it meaningful.

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.
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.
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.
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.

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.

1. Effective and meaningful education for civic engagement should be a core and compulsory element of the post-primary curriculum.
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.
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.

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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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