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### Teachers' Stories of Engaging Students in Controversial Action Projects on the Island of Ireland

Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) in the Republic of Ireland and Local and Global Citizenship (LGC) in Northern Ireland keenly promote students' active participation in society. However, the purpose of this participation is not necessarily to encourage students to campaign for change in the present but rather that 'students are given opportunities to engage in actions and develop skills that will contribute to their becoming active participatory citizens in later life' (NCCA (2005) CSPE Guidelines for Teachers, p. 59). This often gives rise to a culture of passive citizenship and a tendency to focus on 'action projects' that are safe and self-contained.

This paper focuses on a five action projects carried out by a sample of teachers and students that may be considered 'controversial'. In each case students actively campaign for equality and social justice, on local or global human rights issues and in ways that may be deemed controversial. It examines how the mainstream curriculum and school structures facilitate or impede this type of controversial action and explores the potential opportunities for greater engagement in such action through proposed curriculum reform.

#### Keywords:

Citizenship education, schools, controversial issues, action projects, curriculum, Ireland

relationships in Northern Ireland and three-way cross-border relationships between Britain, the Republic and Northern Ireland (Smith, 1999).

#### 1 Introduction

The six northern counties with a majority Protestant population form part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, while in the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland 84% of the population define themselves as Roman Catholic (CSO, 2011). From the late 1960s Northern Ireland experienced a period of conflict which is often referred to as 'The Troubles'. Influenced by the American Civil Rights movement Catholics in Northern Ireland began to campaign against housing, employment and electoral injustices. The British government deployed the army in a peace-keeping capacity to support the local Northern Irish police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC).<sup>1</sup> Relations between the Catholic population and British Army personnel rapidly disintegrated, and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) began its campaign to unify Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. From 1969 republican and unionist paramilitary activity, together with state violence, contributed to the deaths of over 3,600 people. Since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of April 1998 between Britain, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the six counties region has been experiencing a 'peace process', and a consequent growth in the 'vital middle ground' which fosters the building of cross-community

#### 2 Education Context

The current formal education system in Northern Ireland resonates with the historical context in which it developed. The distinctive feature of the system is segregation which manifests itself on the grounds of religion, gender and ability (Smith, 1999). The 1,044 schools in Northern Ireland can be separated into three main sectors on the basis of religion: (1) 'Controlled' Protestant schools, (2) 'Maintained' Catholic schools, and (3) a relatively small number of 'Integrated' schools attended by roughly equal numbers of Protestant and Catholic students. 87% of Catholic pupils attend Maintained Catholic schools and 79% of Protestant pupils attend Controlled Protestant schools (McCaffery, 2015).

The first integrated school was established in Northern Ireland in 1981 but this sector still only accounts for approximately 6% of school-aged children (Duncan, 2015). Integrated schools are currently oversubscribed but despite demand for places there is substantial resistance to the growth of the integrated sector. Historical context needs to be taken into account when analysing resistance, for instance:

...the Catholic school system represented the only significant social institution of civil society over which the catholic community, through the Church, exercised a degree of control (Gallagher et al, 1993).

However, it is also the case that resistance to integration from one religious community no doubt strengthens general levels of resistance. The impact of this segregated education system is evident in the formation of politicised identities and contributes to the continuation of a culture of conflict (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000).

Religious segregation in schools is also prevalent in the Republic of Ireland, and in recent years has become the subject of much public debate, particularly in relation to the primary sector where the vast majority of schools are under the patronage of the Catholic Church. The post-primary education sector comprises secondary, voca-

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tional, community and comprehensive schools. Secondary schools are privately owned and managed by various religious trust bodies. Vocational schools are state-established and administered by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), while community and comprehensive schools are managed by Boards of Management of differing compositions. Educate Together is a multi-denominational education option that has gained much momentum at primary level, and since 2014 has also moved into the second level sector.

### 3 Citizenship Education

Both jurisdictions have a compulsory citizenship education curricula for primary and lower secondary pupils and students.

Local and Global Citizenship (Northern Ireland) and Civic, Social and Political Education, or CSPE (Republic) are both conceptually-based Citizenship Education subjects focusing on active learning and the development of skills. CSPE is a common level, mandatory, timetabled programme which is examined as part of the junior cycle. Local and Global Citizenship is examined as part of the Learning for Living and Work core curriculum at the end of Key Stage 4. These subjects are often held up as examples of how schools are equipped to deal with a diverse range of controversial issues (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2005; Gallagher, 2004).

In both Northern Ireland and the Republic the citizenship education curriculum documents refer to the local and global context, and recommend active teaching and learning methodologies and participation by young people as the way to develop sense of citizenship. Additionally, critical thinking and enquiry-based approaches to learning are crucial elements of learning about citizenship education in both jurisdictions (Niens and McIlrath, 2010).

	Northern Ireland	Republic of Ireland
Programme	<a href="#">Local and Global Citizenship</a>	<a href="#">Civic Social and Political Education (CSPE)</a>
Year of introduction	2007 (Key Stage 3) 2009 (Key Stage 4)	1997
Place in curriculum	Part of core curriculum in Learning for Living and Work	Mandatory component of junior cycle curriculum
School year/ Key Stage	Key Stages 3 and 4 (Years 8 – 11)	1 <sup>st</sup> to 3 <sup>rd</sup> year (Junior Cycle)
Age group	Key Stage 3: 11 – 14 years Key Stage 4: 15 / 16 years	12 – 15 years
Concepts	Human Rights and Social Responsibilities Diversity and Inclusion  Democracy and Active Participation  Equality and Social Justice	Rights and Responsibilities  Human Dignity Interdependence Democracy Stewardship Development Law
Time	Indeterminate –	One class period per week

allocation	could be cross-curricular or specified time or a combination	or equivalent
Examination	An element of Learning for Living and Work examination at end of Key Stage 4	Written examination (common level) for Junior Certificate at end of 3 <sup>rd</sup> year
Action Project	Optional	Assessed in 3 <sup>rd</sup> year - 60% submission of either 'A Report on an Action Project' or 'A Course-Work Assessment Book' - 40% for a written terminal examination at the end of the third year of the course

### 4 Controversial Issues

Political, social and cultural situatedness shape the categorization of issues as controversial in all contexts. The role of education in addressing these issues is controversial in and of itself. However controversial issues are peppered throughout subject curricula and particularly within values based subjects such as Local and Global Citizenship and CSPE. Informed class discussions are commonly thought to be the most effective way of engaging students in controversial issues (Oulton, Day, Dillon & Grace, 2004). Hand and Levinson (2012) offer two explanations as to why discussion is necessary when teaching about contentious topics. Firstly, they suggest that while instructional approaches are sufficient for teaching about the theoretical aspects of controversial issues, discussion encourages passion, sincerity and empathy regarding individual identity and diversity. Secondly, they contend that it is not only a case of discussion being the most appropriate way of exploring controversial issues but that 'controversial issues afford the most promising opportunities for engaging students in discussion' (ibid. p. 617). Classrooms can act as places where complicated issues are explored in 'extraordinary conversations' (Weis & Fine, 2001) and where students feel wholly safe in doing so.

'If it is the intellectual purpose of school to teach higher order thinking skills such as critical thinking and evaluation, then can the school simultaneously engender ... conformity to society's rules?' (Sadovnik, 2007, p. 5). Engaging with controversial issues leads to a type of questioning and disagreement that enables the development of critical thinking skills. The negotiated resolution of which is key to understanding social roles in democratic society. However, these very skills and roles can challenge the political order that exists within schools and beyond.

The possibility of dissonance results in 'a tendency to avoid controversial issues' for many teachers (Niens, O'Connor & Smith, 2013, p. 11). Exploring controversial issues is a key tenet of citizenship education according to the Beutelsbach Consensus (1976). It stresses how issues that divide public opinion outside of school should also be presented through the lens of diverse and divided opinion within schools. Here the teacher's opinion does not pose a problem as contrary opinions are also

considered. However, teachers often report a lack of confidence in their own ability to teach and facilitate discussion on controversial issues, particularly if the controversial issue is viewed as inappropriate for the curriculum or because teachers are expected to withhold their own political views (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). All societies contain temporally specific 'problematic areas' where 'teachers who dare broach such subjects confront the prospect of isolation, censure, and public recrimination' (King, 2009, p. 221). Teachers fear reprisals from colleagues, school management and the wider community for engaging with controversial issues (Avery, Levy & Simmons, 2013). Therefore teachers' experience, confidence and their evaluation of the consequences have a significant impact on their willingness to engage with controversial issues. While Hand and Levinson (2012) contend that controversial issues raise questions to which neither teachers nor students know the answers, they also make reference to Myhill's assertion that teachers must be 'very confident about the topics' they are discussing (p. 615). A lack of pedagogical confidence amongst teachers and the fear of reprisal from the community are identified as key contributors to the rarity of addressing controversial issues (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Teachers' decisions about whether or which controversial subjects to engage with in their classrooms are often subject to formidable external constraints (King, 2009). Teachers need to be incredibly sensitive to (in)compatibility between the practices and values espoused at home and at school (ibid). Secure job tenure and a well established teaching record make teachers better equipped to deal with a potential negative backlash. Teachers who do not have this security often experience fear and trepidation about the impact discussing controversial issues might have on job security (Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009). Resources, training and institutional support as essential for teachers taking up controversial issues (McCully, 2006). Engaging with controversial issues in schools undoubtedly provides rich and participative learning opportunities. However, it is clear that teachers must continuously negotiate their way through a myriad of micro-relational sensitivities and restrictions in order to bring these opportunities into being.

### 5 Controversial issues and educational policy

The role of citizenship education and its position to engage young people in dealing with controversial issues may be also jeopardized by the very orientation of educational policy. Current global education policy is dominated by neo-liberalism that promotes strategizing entrepreneurship and possessive individualism as ideal citizenry (Apple, 2009). Ireland's shift from an education system governed by theoretical principles to one governed by market principals was accelerated from 1997 to the present day by a succession of neo-liberal coalition governments tactically fixed on promoting marketization and privatization (Lynch, 2012). This 'neo' orientation poses key concerns for citizenship education. Aldenmyr et al suggest that it encourages a culture of

uniformity that is 'hazardous to democracy itself in that it becomes difficult to contribute to societal change in other directions than those predicated by a commitment to market values and competition' (2012, p. 259). These orientations have a significant impact the type of teaching and learning that comes to be valued in schools. The marketization of schools and the emphasis on performativity infiltrates the management of schools, but most significantly it affects what 'counts as knowledge and pedagogical practice in schools' (Lundahl & Olson, 2013, p. 204). If schools focus on a future orientated transmission of the type of knowledge deemed necessary for economic progress and are judged on this basis, then engaging students with controversial issues could be viewed as an immeasurable inconvenience. In Northern Ireland school success is undoubtedly associated with published league tables, while in the Republic it is frequently identified within the publication of third level transfer rates. School success is measured by what is visibly calculable; an 'auditable commodity' (Ball, 2003, p. 225). Satisfying the requirements of an exam focused education system becomes a key marker of self-worth and empowerment, rather than democratic participation and social emancipation (McSharry, 2008). In this marketised context, citizen 'activeness' is realized through self-making within a field 'marked out by competition and transactional assessment' (Aldenmyr et al., 2012, p. 258). Teacher and student engagement in controversial issues requires meaningful and reflective space that is frequently threatened by the demands of measurability. A culture of performativity, with its increased teacher workload (Lundström & Holm, 2011) leaves little less time for engaging with social controversy. Student' active and democratic engagement is 'cumbersome' and resource intensive by its very nature, causing proponents of lean management to 'balk at the required commitments – particularly as the conjectured positive outcomes are difficult to turn into hard metrics' (Sundström & Fernández, 2013, p. 114).

### 6 Background and methods

This paper provides an overview of controversial action projects from data collected as part of two independent studies.

1. In 2010 we received funding under the Five Nations Network Small Grants Award Programme to undertake research on controversial action projects. This network provides mobility funding for research on citizenship and values education undertaken in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales. This was a qualitative study that examined the experiences of four teachers who had undertaken student' action projects that may be considered 'controversial'. Interviews with teachers were conducted in 2010 and 2011. Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire inquiring about teacher qualifications; length of teaching experience, post and tenure; school type and ethos; and the status of citizenship studies. The four contributing teachers'

projects came to our attention through our own involvement in citizenship studies. Three teachers, who we have given the pseudonyms Victoria, Maria and Ursula were located in the Republic of Ireland and one, whom we have called Terry, was located in Northern Ireland.

2. The fifth project we present was researched in 2004 as part of a north/south Education for Reconciliation Project initiative, funded by the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (PEACE II) and involving citizenship education teachers on both sides of the border. Individual interviews were carried out with the class teacher (whom we call 'Mary') and school principal and focus group interviews were conducted with twenty year nine students in a Northern Ireland school. The reflections of teachers in 2010/2011 bore a strong resemblance to those of Mary in 2004. What is deemed controversial is often temporary and ever-evolving. However, what remains consistent in these reflections and undoubtedly remains relevant today, is the emotional investment of teachers who are committed to tackling social inequalities, even when this is questioned and criticized.

The projects bring to mind the justice sought by the students in *Schiller-Gymnasium* school in Germany in 1995. Their actions of protest and petition prior to and after the felling of an old chestnut tree on the school grounds resulted in the much reported *Chestnut Case*. Sammoray and Welniak (2012) suggest that confronted with the details of this project, teachers usually respond in three ways. The *activists* are energised by the prospect of engaging students in this way; the *carers* fear the legal implication of such actions and the *supporters of the state* condemn the school's civil disobedience. In each of the five instances in this study students actively engaged in projects focused on an equality/social justice issue. This active engagement took the forms of campaigning, lobbying, protesting, interrogating and/or developing classroom materials. Elements of the types of responses reported above to *the Chestnut Case* were found amongst parents, teaching staff and school management when controversial actions were undertaken by young people. The topics addressed within the projects may also be deemed controversial, covering issues such as war, arms, homophobia and sectarianism. In some cases the projects were undertaken as part of CSPE and Local and Global Citizenship curricula, while in others they fell under citizenship and values based components of other subject areas, or were carried out in an extra-curricular fashion. An interview guide approach was used to allow the systematic collection of data, yet to maintain a 'fairly conversational' flow (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 413). We analyse the data with cognisance of shifting political and ideological opinions on the topics and actions undertaken in the five projects. By doing so, we draw attention to the contextual and temporal nature of 'controversy'.

## 7 Summary of findings

### 7.1 An overview of Anti-War Project

Victoria was a teacher in a large co-educational school in the Dublin area. At the time of the interview she had a permanent teaching post in the school and over 16 years of teaching experience. Over the years she frequently engaged students in discussions and projects that might be considered controversial. The project she honed in in her interview related to a CSPE action project about East-Timor. Victoria invited the founder of the East Timor Ireland Solidarity Campaign (ETISC) to the school to speak her CSPE class. In 1999 200,000 East-Timorese had been massacred because they wanted independence from Indonesia. When the UN went into East-Timor they had no mandate to fire and shortly after a democratic vote in favour of independence they withdrew. Victoria felt very upset that the East-Timorese people who voted for independence had been put at risk. She felt the people were pressurized to vote and then the UN pulled out. Upon hearing this news she cancelled all her lesson plans that day. During her language class she displayed a statement declaring - 'we live in each other's shadows' and the class discussed what had happened. From there the woodwork students made placards and she told how 'it just took off'. Word was sent home that there was going to be a demonstration on the US embassy the following Saturday morning. Victoria described how most of the students came to the demonstration, as did their parents. The following Monday the UN went back into East-Timor. She believed the students felt that they had really made a difference. She explained how attending the demonstration was pretty spontaneous and it was their first time to do so, but she described how this led to her and her student actively organizing demonstrations thereafter. She detailed how the students had organized a wonderful demonstration against the use of Shannon to refuel US planes during the Iraq war. The second and third years attended an interdenominational service in Dublin and then went on to a march. They held up placards outside the school at lunchtime saying 'honk if you don't support the war' and received national media coverage for this. As a result of this action, Victoria explained how students received a letter from a young man in America whose brother was in Iraq. He thanked them for their action saying that he was due to be drafted to Iraq the following year. Since then the letter has been read aloud in her CSPE class each year.

#### 7.1.3 Controversial action enablers

Victoria explained how she could not do these types of actions without the formal support of school management. She gave details of how the hidden curriculum and school ethos are very important in hindering or facilitating this type of action. She described how the school principal tries to promote the school as a 'liberal institution'. When she informed the principal about the introduction of the new upper secondary subject *Politics and Society* (to be implemented in schools in the Republic from September 2016), he was disappointed that it is to be an optional rather than a compulsory

subject. Victoria highlighted the huge focus on experiential learning in the school. She explained how in Leaving Certificate Applied Spanish the students visit a tapas bar; in Art they go to the Gallery; they have second year exchanges, summer trips etc. The school covers the insurance and colleagues cover each other's classes, and according to Victoria 'no one ever says no'. She explained that having influence in the school was not a determining factor in engaging with controversial issues. She stated that 'in this school you don't have to have clout – it doesn't matter here because of the ethos and the fact that all staff are regarded equally'.

Victoria pointed out the importance of parental support when dealing with controversial topics, describing parents backing as very important. She indicated that 'certain parents send their kids to this school because of the school's interest in politics and they often say thanks to us for reinforcing their own values'. She felt fortunate that she had often received letters of thanks from parents for involving their children in these types of projects.

### 7.1.2 Controversial action barriers

It was Victoria's belief that the vast majority of teachers like self-controlled and self-contained projects that can take place in class time. She explained that taking students out on a march represents an entire day out of a seventy hour CSPE programme. She explained that teachers, who have no interest themselves, tend not to do things out of school time. She felt that it was different for her, as she had built up a lot of interest and contacts over the years. However, despite personal interest and stakeholder support, Victoria identified her increased workload and pressures of accountability as barriers to undertaking labour intensive action projects. She described a lack of planning time as a significant obstacle. At the time of the interview she had been acting as a year head for two years. This meant she was 'swamped – caught up in issues like discipline and pastoral care'. Victoria felt that these types of responsibilities take time away from actions. At the time of the East-Timor action project she was not in the year head role.

While Victoria felt that parents of students in the school were largely supportive of engaging in what might be considered controversial discussion and projects, she was also conscious of parents' concerns and worries. She mentioned that during the East-Timor demonstrations on the US embassy some parents were worried that their child's image would be captured by the embassy's CCTV and that this might affect future opportunities to travel to the USA. She stated that 'students don't assume there is a hidden agenda – they have great faith in teachers, but parents worry and they want the balanced view – they question whether the people we are supporting are terrorists and whether the stories we tell about their suffering are actually true'. Victoria described how she would try to reassure parents by sending home a letter with some background on topics, a participation consent form and links to further information.

Victoria told that it was unusual for the principal to raise concerns about tackling controversial issues in the school. However, a clash with parents' values was the issue that caused him to be most cautious. When students became concerned about the rights of workers in a Coca Cola bottling plant in Columbia and started displaying anti-Coke posters around the school, the principal worried that some parents might work in the local bottling plant. More recently a national scheme that benefited 10% of students in the school had been revoked by Government and made available only to students attending designated disadvantaged schools. Through the concept of *Right and Responsibilities* in CSPE Victoria and her students sought advice from senior council to see if they could take constitutional action against the change in Government policy. They organized a petition and marched at the office of the then Minister for Children. The principal was concerned that some parents may have been affiliated to this particular political party.

### 7.1.3 Impact on teaching and learning

Victoria held that raising and dealing with controversial issues had an overwhelmingly positive impact on teaching and learning and on student/teacher relationships. She felt that this was the case even when lobbying or protesting did not bring about the desired result. For instance, the students' petition to the Minister for Children was ignored and unacknowledged but Victoria felt that the students still got a feel for how they might demonstrate or lobby and they had been prepared for an unsuccessful outcome. She believed they learned that their action might have been more successful if they had targeted a weak electoral seat – 'that is the key and they grasped that political reality'. According to Victoria it is great to give students the experience of agitation regardless of topic. She felt that they experienced what it is like to stand up for something and get a taste of what they can do. She also told how students get a wonderful high from the sense of solidarity. For Victoria it did not matter if the action was a success or failure – 'solidarity is very emotional and this means that they are more likely to do something like this again. I would hope that they would continue to be agitators and to influence others'. In many ways Victoria's hopes were realised because out of the students involved in the East-Timor project alone, two students went on to work for human rights organisations, some volunteered overseas, one was elected to the local council, and many went on to study politics at university.

Victoria believed that engaging with issues that might be deemed controversial solidifies the student/teacher relationship. She described how students pick up on teachers' passion and authenticity and know when something is fake. Dealing with controversial issues helps to cement relationships once the agenda behind the action has integrity, according to Victoria. Most significantly however, she stated that 'students just love being active'.

## 7.2 Overview of small arms project

Maria had over 20 years teaching experience in a large single-sex girls' school in the Irish midlands. As well as her teaching qualifications, she held a Masters in Development Studies. Over the years she had frequently engaged students in activities related to overseas development, from fundraisers to marches. The most controversial project she and her students participated in related to the brokering of small arms. Their involvement came about at the request of TV documentary producers seeking to expose the inadequacy of Irish legislation on arms brokering. The project was not embedded in any particular curricular subject and was largely carried out by seven participating senior cycle girls in their own time. Maria explained how the students were provided with information on the arms trade and asked to supplement this information with online research. They had to identify small arms traders from all over the world and were provided with a mobile phone to call these traders to inquire about the purchasing of arms. They were also provided with a camcorder to record all research, interaction and phone calls. Maria told that sometimes the students had to make these calls at 6/7am due to time differences. The students were provided with false names, and Maria described how they soon realized that the traders were also using false names. The students stated that they were an Irish company interested in the trader's work, but Maria explained they were never asked about their age or the proposed use of the arms. The students successfully purchased three different types of small arms online. One item successfully imported into Ireland was a stone thrower concealed as a manure spreader. The documentary producers organized for the brokers of the stone thrower to fly to Ireland to demonstrate how to use the equipment. From a safe distance the students watched Maria, the producers and the brokers discuss the equipment. Finally the students were revealed as the true purchasers of the item and confronted the brokers. Maria described how the students became quite irate with the brokers for selling such a dangerous item. At which point the brokers left. Maria stated that during the course of the project students approached politicians to tell them about the dangers of brokering, but the politicians failed to respond.

### 7.2.1 Controversial action enablers

Maria felt that her long history of involvement with development issues was reassuring for students and their parents. The parents of the seven students who participated in the project were incredibly supportive and attended all the relevant meetings. Some of the participating students had obtained second place in their *Young Social Innovators* project the previous year and therefore had previous experience of action aimed at social change. Maria also had a designated room in the school that was open to the students to come and meet before and after school and during lunch-break.

### 7.2.2 Controversial action barriers

Maria encountered considerable barriers when seeking to engage students in this project. She explained that when the principal heard the project was on the Arms Trade, she was afraid that the identity of the school would be disclosed. Maria sought support from colleagues at a staff meeting. However, she felt that in general there was massive fear among teachers. They were afraid that involvement in the project would impact on students' ability to get visas to the US in the future. They were also worried about associations with the IRA and with child welfare issues. Maria felt she had to defend the project. School management and staff were also concerned about the amount of time students might miss from their 'core' subjects as a result of their involvement in the project. Parental concern was also crucial and Maria told that out of the 60 girls originally approached, many parents refused to allow their daughter to participate due to concerns over access to future US visas.

### 7.2.3 Impact on teaching and learning

According to Maria all of the students who opted to participate in the project were 'academically inclined'. However, she felt their participation opened up opportunities and further developed their skills. Following the project they were invited to attend conferences and public events. They gave many presentations to a variety of groups. Maria suggested that in spite of initial fears about the amount of time students would miss from school, participation gave them skills they would never have developed as a result of curriculum-based learning. In addition, she described all students as having done very well in their terminal school examination and all went on to third level education. It impacted on career choice with one girl opting for a course in Communications following her work on the project. Overall, Maria felt that such projects facilitate students having a much closer relationship with her as their teacher.

## 7.3 Overview of homophobic bullying project

This project was carried out in a large coeducational fee-paying school in Dublin. The school is known for success in sport and academic achievement. When Ursula was interviewed about this project she had six to ten years teaching experience, but had only been in this particular school for three years. Ursula taught CSPE and had a Master degree in Film Studies. This project emerged from discussions about stereotypes, bullying and equality within Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) class in the first year of upper second level. The students discussed the prevalence and impact of homophobic bullying and participated in 'role reversal' as an active method to explore the topic in class. Ursula described how the students thought this method was an interesting activity for highlighting stereotypes so she proposed making a satirical film based on the activity. They brainstormed and wrote the dialogue which saw students reverse accepted role and inhabit a world where everyone is gay. The narrative focused on the difficulties heterosexual

people experience when they reveal they are straight and the rejection, awkwardness and dis-comfort that can subsequently infiltrate their social circles. Ursula filmed the role-play in school and edited the footage herself. In her view 'it went pretty much unnoticed by other staff members at the time'.

### 7.3.1 Controversial action enablers

Ursula explained how she felt really supported by colleagues teaching SPHE once they became aware of the project. She identified energy, enthusiasm and time as key factors in enabling such projects, rather than the extent of teacher experience. She suggested that such projects are 'more likely to happen in the early stages' of teachers' careers when they have more energy and enthusiasm. For Ursula 'the longer you are in teaching the more responsibility you get and the less time you have'. She also suggested that the resources and time available to school management effect the implementation of such projects. At the time of the interview the school had just expanded its middle management team, which Ursula hoped might free up time from dealing with disciplinary issues to provide more support for projects such as this.

Ursula also highlighted the significance of support from parents, stating that students in the school usually proceeded to third level education and normally came from homes where parents were educated and liberal. One parent contacted her to say how positive the experience of the project had been for their child.

The twenty-three students who participated in the project had been in the same class group since first year, and Ursula felt this positively impacted on their openness and trust when exploring the topic.

### 7.3.2 Controversial action barriers

Ursula described the film as something that unfolded quite organically within the safe confines of her class. It was her opinion that the project only became controversial when the class attempted to highlight the topic in the school more widely. The class had anti-homophobic bullying posters they wished to display around the school but management refused. Instead Ursula displayed them in her own classroom.

Although Ursula previously described parents as 'educated and liberal', one parent did contact the school to say they were concerned about some of the issues being 'pushed' in SPHE. She stated there is a cohort of very religious parents in the school. She described these parents as a minority but a 'loud minority ... that can make management cautious at times'.

Ursula said that occasionally in the intervening period since making the film students ask if they can do a similar project but the modularization of SPHE in the school has meant there would be insufficient time. She also described herself as 'very busy' with other events in the school.

### 7.3.3 Impact on teaching and learning

Ursula indicated that she had a good relationship with participating students prior to the film, but she felt that exploring controversial topics inevitably leads to a deepening of the student/teacher relationship. She believed that students really enjoyed the experience and engaged with the issue. They realized that 'gay' name-calling was negative language and according to Ursula they became campaigners against this type of language. She explained that the project allowed them to talk openly about negative language and to then try to counteract it. As a result of the film, 'gay' name calling which had been prevalent in the school began to fade away. Since making the film, the DVD has been used as a SPHE resource within the school. Its creation received national news-paper coverage, being viewed as a unique attempt to tackle homophobic bullying.

### 7.4 Overview of voices from history project

Terry taught in a large co-educational comprehensive school in county Derry. He had eleven to fifteen years teaching experience at the time of the interview. Terry actively engaged with students on a wide range of action projects. However, in his interview he focused mainly on a project he had undertaken with students in one of his Local and Global Citizenship classes. Terry told how students had to consider the big events and characters that have had a significant impact on Northern Ireland's political history and to research related individuals. They then undertook to ring potential candidates, set up and carry out the interview with these people. Students videoed the interviews, and then evaluated and transcribed them. Terry described how this project allowed students to truly engage with political figures who were important for the processes of democracy and peace in Northern Ireland. They interviewed civil rights activists and people involved in voluntary organisations from the spectrum of perspectives on the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process. These interviews now form part of an interesting online collection of interviews on the Northern Ireland story. Terry explained that it was quite significant for fourteen year olds to be given responsibility for all the tasks involved in the project.

#### 7.4.1 Controversial action enablers

Terry identified 'enthusiasm' as a key factor in enabling such action projects. He felt the school's commitment to charity and equality permeated all levels of school life. He described how senior management really supported and promoted involving students in a range of projects that enhance their curriculum. He told how management facilitated staff training and planning for undertaking such projects. He also outlined the importance of staff support in the school whereby colleagues share resources and ideas.

#### 7.4.2 Controversial action barriers

Although Terry described staff as generally supportive of the project, he stated that the school is a controlled protestant school and he felt this gave rise to certain

sensitivities amongst a cohort of the staff. These colleagues did not think it was appropriate to interview one particular civil rights activist, and Terry attributed their objections to 'historic Unionist distrust' of Catholic civil rights campaigners. Management support, notwithstanding, Terry was still acutely aware of the need for risk assessment and insurance considerations when engaging students in projects of a controversial nature. Terry described such projects as extremely time consuming. Planning the learning intentions and out-comes and trying to establish funding are very labour intensive, according to Terry.

#### **7.4.3 Impact on teaching and learning**

Terry believed that projects focused on addressing controversial issues enhance students' self-esteem. He suggested students were empowered by leading the project and felt they were 'contributing to something that is much bigger than school'. Terry felt that projects such as this take teachers away from dependence on 'classic teaching methodologies' and towards 'active strategies...where relationships are vastly improved'. He was of the opinion that these projects contribute to a more positive atmosphere in the school and better relationships throughout the student body. According to Terry, they contribute to the betterment of the community through building and enhancing community relationships.

#### **7.5 Overview of 'The Others' project**

Mary taught in a medium sized all-female junior high school in county Armagh in Northern Ireland. She had over sixteen years teaching experience at the time of the interview. The school is a Catholic maintained school, but is unusual in the Northern Irish educational context insofar as it has always catered for a range of academic abilities from age eleven to sixteen. It is also relevant to note that County Armagh was the site of very contentious Orange parades through Catholic areas in the mid-to-late 1990's. The peace process lessened the level of incidents in the county, but according to Mary paramilitary groups were still active in parts of the town and 'occasionally suspicious devices are found'. At the time of the interview it was remarked that certain political developments still led to a rise in emotions, and it only needed 'one person, or one leader to say something and the whole thing could flare up again'. School management were aware that students 'know they would be attacked at the far end of the town if they went there in school uniform' and in the past some have been attacked while waiting for buses. Some students will not shop in Protestant owned premises and none would go there in school uniform. During focus group interviews with students several mentioned the word 'riot' as something that they themselves had witnessed. It was within this context that Mary worked with colleagues and students to develop an animated resource dealing with sectarianism, with a very definite plan that the end product could be used as a classroom resource for Local and Global Citizenship teachers.

Mary reported that she was motivated by her disconcertion with the fact that her students never talked about the division in their town or mentioned that it made them uncomfortable. She wanted to raise their awareness of the divisions around them and to question why these divisions existed. The process of developing the animation facilitated non-threatening conversations about why young people never crossed invisible lines in their own town.

The story of the animation is based on an adventurous day in the life of an alien family. *The Others* opens with 'Once upon a time' and a scene showing the alien family on their own planet. While out for a Sunday afternoon drive in space the family develop problems with their vessel and eventually land in a town in county Armagh. The father mends the craft while the alien children meet and explore the town with local Catholic children. The aliens cannot understand the lack of interaction between the Catholic and Protestant communities. The local young people can only answer that differences are based on allegiances and symbolised by different colours and flags. They eventually admit that Protestants are not all that different since they eat the same foods and listen to the same music.

#### **7.5.1 Controversial action enablers**

The making of the animation involved a cross-curricular approach. The script writing and dialogue recording was organised in conjunction with the English Department, the Music Department helped out with composition and the Drama Department was also involved. As student enthusiasm for the project grew other staff members also became involved. Backed by senior management, staff members also facilitated the release of students for the various activities associated with the production of the film. As the Local and Global Citizenship Coordinator in the school Mary kept colleagues updated about the progress of the animation.

Mary did not feel the need to seek parental permission since, unlike previous work she had undertaken with students where she used role-play about a local conflict issue, the process of creating an animation was less direct in its approach. She indicated that parents were aware that their children were involved in creating the animation but none objected. Mary thought perhaps this was because the creative aspect may have been more visible to parents than the actual controversial content being addressed.

#### **7.5.2 Controversial action barriers**

Mary did not mention any specific barrier to the project, except to say that part of the animation had to be re-recorded because of the use of the term 'Oh my God!' This revision was undertaken because of a perception that this dialogue could prevent the use of the film in Protestant ethos schools, as it might cause offence.

#### **7.5.3 Impact on teaching and learning**

The production of the animation was organised in such a way as to increase contact between students who are

separated on a daily basis because of streaming on ability levels. Mary mentioned the impact that the project had on the self-esteem of her students, commenting on her perception that students in the Republic seemed 'much more freer and more open and they don't care because they can speak out and say whatever they want to and no one can say anything back to them'.

The girls composed much of the music themselves, and played 'The Sash' and 'A Nation Once Again' to portray the Protestant and Catholic communities respectively. 'The Sash' is a ballad celebrating the Battle of the Boyne (1690) which is popular among the Unionist community and is often sung by the Orange Order when marching. The student who played this particular piece of music admitted to feeling 'a bit weird' but said that she didn't mind playing it because it was for a particular purpose. Those on the graphics sub-groups ensured that the backdrops for the scenes reflected the reality of the town, including the portrayal of the different colours favoured by the two communities.

The students thought that the film did manage to portray their perspective and believed this was a significant part of taking part. They felt that it taught them that 'people at the other end of the town who would be a different religion from us ... were not that different at all'. One student felt that the message of the film was 'to say that Protestants and Catholics are the same except for one difference ... they believe in different things'. Another pointed out that all the aliens in the film were different but they managed to get along, and felt that people should learn from this example. They felt that their attitudes had changed because of involvement in the project.

We realised the differences in [the town]...with the flags and stuff. We knew like, but we didn't really take an interest. (Student focus group 1)

You just look at everything in a different way. You don't really think 'Oh, I want to be best friends with them', but you know, you do...I mean, if you were heading up the town now you don't really think anything. (Student focus group 3)

As a teacher Mary reported the creation of an animation to be a less threatening methodology of dealing with a controversial issue, even despite the obvious logistical demands involved. She told that though the students seemed at times to be totally engrossed in the creative process they fully comprehended the message and appreciated both the affective and effective learning involved in the process.

#### 7.5.4 Discussion (in the context of reform)

##### *Teacher Capacity*

The projects presented in this study highlight teacher confidence as fundamental for engaging with controversial issues. The literature suggests that teachers often attribute discomfort at the idea of raising or addressing controversial issues to a range of factors, including lack

of knowledge, experience and skills; issues of confidentiality and accountability; uncertainty about their own opinions, especially when aware of divergent and deeply held opinions amongst students; fear of causing offence in situations where issues personally affect students; and fear of losing control of their classroom when dealing with these issues (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Avery, Levy & Simmons, 2013; King, 2009). For many teachers in Northern Ireland the historical context may cause particular discomfort around teaching controversial issues. During the 'Troubles' schools often prided themselves on being 'oases of peace' where students could be isolated from the conflict outside school grounds (Smith, 1999). McEvoy (2007) suggests that while some still believe that dealing with controversial issues around past conflict should be avoided in schools, there is a fear that ignoring these issues will cause them to fester and carry into the future. Hence teachers need to be sufficiently confident to address even uncomfortable topics.

The findings from this study indicate that teacher confidence in engaging with controversial issues may be connected to length of teaching experience, with all participants having spent at least six years teaching. The teachers also indicated they had undertaken training through masters programmes or in-service training to boost their knowledge and skills. McCully (2006) contends that successful teaching of controversial issues places particular demands on the role of the teacher and he highlights the importance of adequate resourcing and training in preparation for and in response to these demands. The Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (2010) clearly recognises that ongoing training and development for education professionals in the principles and practices of education for democratic citizenship and human rights education are a vital part of the delivery and sustainability of effective education in this area and should be adequately planned and resourced. Gebauer's report on teacher training within the Pestalozzi Programme (CoE) discussed in this current issue, highlights the need for Universities to embed a holistic approach to citizenship and democratic education from an influential stage in teachers' professional careers.

The Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) and the Department of Education and Skills (in the Republic) are responsible for provision of support for practicing teachers. However, in recent years these support initiatives have been increasingly hampered by limited timeframes, resources, capacity to cope with the numbers of teachers requiring professional development, and the need for in-service to concentrate on formally required elements, such as assessment. As a consequence, citizenship education suffers from marginalisation and low status, with teachers either ignoring or a minimalist approach to topics that may be sensitive or challenging. European-wide research into the operation of citizenship education in schools would indicate that these challenges are not unique to the island of

Ireland but in post-conflict societies they are in more urgent need of redress (Eurydice, 2005).

Teacher capacity has also been affected by increased workload and accountability (Lundström & Holm, 2011) at the same time as salary reductions. The teachers who participated in this study outlined the labour intensive nature of the projects they undertook. They also made reference to how the workloads of more recently acquired administrative and pastoral roles, would significantly impact on their capacity to undertake similar projects in the future.

### *Curriculum Capacity*

In the Republic of Ireland, a written account of each student's CSPE Action Project is put forward for formal certification by the State Examinations Commission. This has ushered many teachers towards uncomplicated, laconic projects that fulfil the assessment requirements without being overly burdensome. This evidences the impact of calculable metrics on what is deemed to be valuable teaching and learning (Ball 2003; Aldenmyr et al, 2012; Sundström & Fernández, 2013; Lundahl & Olson, 2013). Participants referred to colleagues' preference for such 'self-contained' projects and their concerns about undertaking the types of actions depicted in the study. Where projects on more challenging issues do take place, it is often in non-certified subjects or through extra-curricular initiatives, as with three of the five projects in this study. However, proposed curricular reform may have the potential to change this current orientation.

In Northern Ireland the key stage 3 & 4 curriculum programmes underwent a significant review in the lead up to the implementation of the revised curriculum from 2007 so there are no public plans for a further review by CCEA at this point in time. However despite ongoing industrial unrest, the Department of Education and Skills in the Republic have published a new framework for junior cycle (DES, 2015). The framework outlines that schools are required to provide students with the opportunity to achieve in relation to 24 statements of learning. Some of these are closely linked with citizenship education (e.g. Statement of Learning No 7 – *The student values what it means to be an active citizen, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts*). Once the full revised junior cycle programme has been implemented schools will also be required to do up to 400 hours of Wellbeing with junior cycle students. Wellbeing in junior cycle is defined as being 'about young people feeling confident, happy, healthy and connected' (DES, 2015, p. 22). As yet it is unknown whether the citizenship education aspect of Wellbeing will involve teaching a new 100-hour Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) short course developed by the NCCA; a continuation of the current 70 hour CSPE programme; or a meeting of Wellbeing requirements in a cross-curriculum manner through existing subjects and other areas of learning. What does seem certain however, is that student action will be assessed by schools rather than the State Examinations Commission. In the absence of the looming judgement of state certification, teachers

may be encouraged to engage with a broader range of actions and issues within citizenship education.

A further imminent expansion of curriculum opportunities to raise or address controversial issues comes in the shape of a new optional citizenship education subject for upper secondary level. The subject entitled *Politics and Society* aims to develop the student's ability to be a reflective and active citizen, in a way that is informed by the insights and skills of social and political science. From September 2016 the subject will be implemented with a small group of 41 self-selecting schools, with the potential for a wider roll out from 2018 depending on interest and capacity levels. The *Politics and Society* specification provides significant scope for investigation of contemporary and controversial issues related to topics such as power and decision making in schools and beyond, active citizenship, human rights in Ireland and the wider world, globalization, identity and sustainable development. As an answer to an argument by Niens and McIlrath (2010) about the importance of incorporating the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process into citizenship education North and South the *Politics and Society* learning outcomes include specific reference to Northern Ireland in relation to governmental processes, state bodies established to push for human rights, and most interestingly asks students to engage with research evidence about the relationship between the education system in Northern Ireland and the identities of young people living there (NCCA, 2015).

The teachers' accounts in this study draw attention to the self-perpetuating connection between the normalization of controversial issues in schools and the their categorization as 'controversial'. In the schools where student engagement with contentious issues and actions was encouraged and supported, this engagement was less likely to be identified as controversial. Subjects such as *Politics and Society* may help to normalize student engagement with sensitive issues resulting in less apprehension amongst school management, staff and parents. It may result in these stakeholders being less fearful about the ways taking action on social justice issues might impact negatively on students' future opportunities (eg visas) and more hopeful about how engagement with 'emotionally charged conflicts' (Shappard et al, 2011, p. 71) is necessary preparation for democratic life.

### **8 Conclusion**

The introduction of Local and Global Citizenship in Northern Ireland in 2007 represented an attempt to engender amongst young people a sense of citizenship based on common rights and responsibilities, rather than one located in a sense of national identity (Kerr et al, 2008). As a curriculum area it is very much a child of the peace process. A recent publication by CCEA aimed at supporting schools with controversial issues identified the potential for emotional responses from some students when discussing issues associated with the past in Northern Ireland, for example, parades, emblems, flags and commemoration, in fact anything to do with religion,

identity and culture. In this publication Local and Global Citizenship is singled out as a possible curriculum area where students could investigate the causes and effects of division on cultural identity in Northern Ireland society (CCEA, 2015). The two Northern Ireland case studies outlined by Terry and Mary both grappled with local issues of sectarianism and community conflict and division, and were both situated, at least in part, in the Local and Global Citizenship curriculum space. Their experiences demonstrate that despite the fact that their students are growing up in times of peace, the controversy or the emotional element of topics associated with the conflict in Northern Ireland remains.

Whereas the controversial aspect of the two Northern Irish cases studies lay in the fact that they were addressing local conflict issues, in contrast the controversial element of the case studies facilitated by Victoria and Maria in the Republic of Ireland, although also dealing with issues relating to conflict and peace – the anti-war project and the small arms project respectively – were situated in the action processes employed and the potentially negative consequences of these actions. In these projects the controversial element was related to teacher and parental concern about the safety and security of the students, and the possible impact involvement might have on their future life choices. The conflict focus in terms of topic was at a remove to the reality of all concerned and was not perceived as a controversial issue to deal with in the context of teaching and learning.

On May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2015 the Republic of Ireland made global headlines when it became the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage by popular vote. At least in legal terms, sexuality achieved equality. In 2007 when Ursula and her students set about making a class film to draw attention to the inequalities faced by LGBT students, this legislation was but a wishful dream. In addition to creating a class film, the students' sought to highlight homophobic bullying more widely by displaying posters around the school. This was regarded as 'controversial', with objections raised by school management and some concerned parents. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of the students' class film saw it receiving national media coverage. Less than a decade on, in January 2015 a Dublin Catholic boys' school made national news when students protested over school management's decision to cancel a planned workshop on homophobic bullying. The boys set up a Facebook page expressing their support for LGBT students and asking all students to protest by wearing a rainbow flag over their school crest the following day. On the surface it may appear as though little had changed in the intervening period, with actions to address the rights of LGBT students in schools continuing to be newsworthy. However, there was a significant shift in the 'controversial' aspects of these stories. In Ursula's story, engaging with the issue of homophobia was controversial, while the controversial aspect of the more recent story was the decision to disengage with homophobia.

All of these stories highlight the potentially local dimension and transitory nature of controversy which can arise depending on the topics addressed or from the processes and actions in which students participate. They also highlight the socio-cultural distance that can be travelled when groups of people are committed to challenging inequalities through discussion and action. Each of the teachers in this study described their investment in the cultivation of classroom discussion. They created safe spaces where students could contribute openly to topics that were often highly charged and sensitive. They created the types of classrooms where 'extraordinary conversations' could take place (Weis and Fine, 2001), and which ultimately inspired the types of remarkable actions that can cumulatively encourage social, political and legislative change.

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#### Endnote

<sup>i</sup> The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) was reconstituted as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in November 2001.