



Submission to NCCA Consultation on 'Politics and Society' Post-Primary Subject

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1. Introduction

EAPN Ireland welcomes the opportunity to make this submission as part of the National Council on Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) consultation on the draft syllabus for a new Post-Primary subject 'Politics and Society'. EAPN Ireland also appreciates the work that has already gone into bringing the draft syllabus to this stage of development.

EAPN Ireland

EAPN Ireland is a national community organisation and a member of the European Anti-Poverty Network. Its aim is to put poverty at the top of the EU and national policy agenda. It has about 150 members in Ireland who are mainly from national and local groups representing people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and groups and individuals who support the aims of EAPN. It works through the provision of information and training, policy work and working closely with other organisations. EAPN Ireland is committed to promoting the participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in decisions that affect their lives.

In 2007 16% or 79 million people in the EU were at risk of poverty. In Ireland in the same year it was 16.5% or over 257,000 people. Addressing poverty, social exclusion and most policy related to public services is the role of EU Member Governments including Ireland but at EU level Members have agreed that the EU can coordinate a process to address policy on Social Poverty and social exclusion.

EAPN was very active in getting the EU to put in place its Social Inclusion Strategy and the 2010 EU Year. It is involved in ongoing lobbying to ensure that it is as effective as possible in reducing poverty and social exclusion. EAPN also works to influence and strengthen other areas of EU policy and have them implemented in Ireland including employment policy and the Treaties including the Lisbon Treaty. EAPN Ireland was successful in getting 'addressing social exclusion' included in the Lisbon Treaty as part of the objectives of the EU. EAPN Ireland lobbies the Irish MEPs and the Irish Government as well as being in regular contact with the European Commission.

An essential part of the work of EAPN Ireland is to ensure that its members, including people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and their organisations have a better understanding of the EU and actively contribute to its policy making at both EU and national level.

See www.eapn.ie for more information.

2. Context for Submission

In 2007 there were 16.5% or about 257,000 people in Ireland were at risk of poverty with the rate for children 19.9%. The at-risk-of-poverty rate for the European Union was 16% or 79 million people. Consistent poverty¹ rate is 5.1% (EU Survey of Income and Living Conditions, CSO, 2007). Certain groups in society such as those living in households headed by a lone parent or someone who is unemployed experience higher levels of poverty as do migrants and those who leave school early. Also discrimination is a common experience for people from many groups. In 2008 the Equality Authority dealt with 736 case files under the nine grounds (Equality Authority, Annual Report 2008).

EAPN believes that there are structural causes to the poverty, inequality and social exclusion experienced by many people and groups at national and on a global level. The political, social and economic systems which exist have been shaped by human beings who have made particular decisions and policies. These can therefore be changed. The issue of power and who has access to and controls it is key to understanding the types of decisions that get made and who they benefit.

It is essential that this understanding is at the core of the 'Politics and Society' syllabus.

Through the 'Politics and Society' syllabus students must be able to understand how poverty is measured but more importantly the real causes of poverty, social exclusion and inequality and how they can be addressed. Students should be supported to critically look at the strategies and infrastructure that is in place to address these issues. The subject should also support students to understand the role of civil society organisations in representing those experiencing these issues and in working to change the structural causes. It is important for students to understand the role of local and national government but also international political structures such as the European Union and the United Nations, can play in creating a more equal and fair society.

Finally, the subject can support students to investigate how they can play a role in influencing change. Therefore, key learning outcomes should include the attitudinal development of students in relation to the issues they are studying.

¹ People are at risk of poverty if they are living on less than 60% of the median income. In 2007 this was €228.65. People are living in consistent poverty if they are both at risk of poverty and experiencing poverty deprivation which means not being able to afford two of 11 agreed essential items such as two pairs of strong shoes, a warm waterproof coat etc. See CSO, EU Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2008, www.cso.ie

3. General Comments

EAPN Ireland wishes to make some introductory general comments on the value of the new syllabus and its application.

i. Development of students as citizens

The new subject has the capacity to play a positive role in the development of students in a more holistic manner and support them to become more active and socially responsible citizens. As the draft syllabus stated, the subject matter has the capacity to provide knowledge and skills which students can apply to all areas of life and it has the potential to support them to engage in a positive way with the society and the world in which they live. The subject can support them to participate in a way which promotes and supports more equal and fair communities and society more broadly. It can give them the personal skills to analyse how society operates and key decision making structures and policies.

ii. Participation

EAPN Ireland believes that people should play a key role in decision making and the development and implementation of policies that affect their lives. This results in better and more effective policy making. This principle of participation is also very relevant not only in informing the development of this new syllabus but also in how it is delivered at a school level. There are suggestions later in the submission as to how this might be addressed.

One key way for students to develop an understanding of participation, while also more deeply understand the topics they are studying and the realities of politics and society is through actively engaging with those who make and implement policies and those who are impacted on by these decisions and the groups that represent them in trying to influence these policies.

Participation is an overall element of the draft curriculum that needs strengthening. Students need to greater opportunities to engage with organisations representing and working directly with people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. There is currently a broad range of geographical and issue based groups throughout the country that could be engaged with through practical projects developed with the students. Depending on the location and circumstances in the schools there may be challenges of developing these projects but these can be overcome in consultation between the schools and community groups with guidelines developed to outline how engagement will take place. It is the experience of EAPN Ireland that our member organisations at a local level would welcome an increased opportunity to engage with schools.

From 2002-2004 the Combat Poverty Agency carried out a project under the auspices of the Curriculum Development Unit entitled 'Poverty, the Curriculum and the Classroom'² which piloted the development of local partnerships between students from post-primary schools and local community groups. While challenges were identified the project evaluation concluded that the project benefited both the students and the community organisations. From a student perspective it stated that 'student responses emphasised the impact of their involvement in terms of educational and personal development'. The evaluation also highlighted that their engagement in the project also resulted in a greater level of motivation in relation to their education generally.

The Active Citizenship project is an essential element of this approach and there are specific comments on this below. However, EAPN Ireland would recommend that the current draft curriculum be revised to strengthen the project element and in particular the engagement with people experiencing poverty, social exclusion and equality through the groups representing them.

iii. Balance between academic and non academic learning

Drawing from the above EAPN Ireland would also recommend that the curriculum be revised and rebalanced to put a greater emphasis on non-academic or more active learning methodologies than are currently contained in the draft. While having an understanding of the theories and perspectives that are behind different political, economic and social approaches is important this knowledge should be delivered in an accessible and understandable manner as it relates to their own lives and experiences. While theorists addressing gender are included others addressing issues such as race could also be suggested. The overall emphasis should be less on acquiring knowledge and more on developing skills and attitudes. This approach can also draw on the experience of the students and should be reflected in the assessment of the subject with greater emphasis on the ability of the students to apply the learning through projects, in debates etc. The syllabus should include more reflective and discursive methods of teaching.

This is recognised in the overall approach outlined for the draft curriculum but need to be more integrated into the curriculum itself. The current approach could result in more academic students opting for it and could potentially exclude students who are less academically inclined, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

A practical point related to the academic side of the curriculum is the choice of theorists proposed to be studied by the students. While an understanding of the opposing theories is important and relevant it could be useful to also identify more contemporary writers and texts which can develop students understanding of the issues. One recent book that could be included is 'The Spirit Level:

² Phylis Murphy "Opening Doors: The School and Community in Poverty Awareness Education - evaluation of the Poverty, the Curriculum and the Classroom Project 2002-2004, Curriculum Development Unit, City of Dublin VEC, 2004.

Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better' by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. Students could debate such texts through their experiences and understanding and also do some research using the internet and other means to develop a critical understanding.

iv. Flexibility

In order for schools and students to gain the most from the subject of 'Politics and Society' it must be possible to deliver it in a manner which facilitates a more creative engagement with the subject matter. This should allow the schools to draw to a greater extent on the local circumstances and issues and on the experience of the students and teachers.

v. Link to whole school environment

It is essential that due to the nature of the course it has to be linked to the development of a whole school environment which is based on equality and respect for the whole school community, which promotes equality, respects diversity and addresses the issue of disadvantage. These can be built into the policies and procedures of the school with the active participation of the wider school community including the students, teachers and parents or guardians.

vi. Building the capacity of teachers

It is clear that one challenge facing the implementation of the new subject is the capacity of different teachers to deliver it, recognising the sensitive and controversial nature of the topics which are being discussed and which may impact directly on the students in the classroom.

This is one of the challenges identified in the Combat Poverty Agency pilot project 'Poverty, the Curriculum and the classroom'. It identified the need for teacher training in relation to poverty so that they can have an adequate level of conceptual knowledge about poverty and how best to teach to subject. This also applies to the linked issues of inequality, including racism and discrimination, and social exclusion. The project evaluation clearly stated that 'throughout the lifetime of the project, the importance of an acknowledgement of the sensitive nature of the subject of poverty has been evident'.

The pitch of the syllabus as being overly academic could pose difficulties for teachers in communicating it to students, in making it accessible and in supporting students to draw learning from it for their lives.

The development of the capacity of the teachers to understand, engage and deliver the curriculum will have to be addressed through the Higher Diploma in Education and other preparatory courses for post-primary teachers as well as through in-service training for teachers already in the system. This will have to be planned into the academic year as the curriculum is introduced.

Resources need to be developed to support the implementation of the curriculum. This can draw on the wide range of existing materials.

EAPN Ireland and other organisations working in the broad area of social justice and equality **could** support the development and possibly the delivery of this training.

4. Response to Consultation Questions

This section includes more specific responses to the questions posed in the NCCA consultation document although not in the same format.

i. Syllabus Layout, design and readability

In general the syllabus is well laid out and clear. There are however some specific comments.

The first chapter 'Senior Cycle' clearly presents the context for the syllabus. The last paragraph of the Introduction section is essential as assessment generally determines the delivery of subjects and equity with regards to this is essential. This submission will return to the issue of assessment later. The section on the experience of the senior cycle presents the vision. This is closely linked to the overall aim of post-primary education as outlined in the 1995 White Paper on Education which is *'to provide a comprehensive, high quality learning environment which enables all students to live full lives, appropriate to their stage of development, and to realise their potential as individuals and as citizens. It aims to prepare students for adult life....'*

It might be useful in this section to also present the principles which inform the State's role in education as outlined in the White Paper. These include the State's obligation *'to protect and promote fundamental human and civil rights... and .. the articulation of a statement of broad educational aims, which focus on nurturing the holistic development of the individual and promoting the social and economic welfare of society.'*

ii. Learning Outcomes

Chapter headed 'Politics and Society'

The introduction to the second chapter 'Politics and Society' presents some of the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes that young people need. EAPN Ireland agrees with these. However we propose three additions.

- a. Providing students with and understanding of poverty and inequality which are key concepts at a local, national and global level.
- b. The importance of young people having the ability to look at the current political, economic and social environment they live in locally and globally and to understand and analyse the structural causes and that these are the result of decisions made by people. The syllabus should help young people understand that that due to these structural causes people do not all have the same opportunities to achieve equal outcomes and that the students can contribute to bringing about a change and create the conditions for a more equal and fair society and world.

- c. In relation to the broader principles for the State's involvement in education outlined in the White Paper, the building of a commitment among students to a society based on equality, inclusion and participation is clearly an important element. The curriculum as outlined will not support students to develop and understanding of these issues or a commitment to addressing them. Specific suggestions are made later which can enhance the draft Syllabus in this area.

These elements have to be at the core of the critical analysis and active citizenship as outlined in the introductory section of this chapter of the draft syllabus.

The objectives in this section should also include 'a practical experience of the realities through field work activity'.

Under the heading 'Further Learning' this should include Community Work and Youth Work.

iii. Content of the 'Politics and Society Curriculum'

The Chapter 'Syllabus Overview'

This chapter highlights the importance of students looking at their local context and learning to apply their learning. This is extremely important and as is the ability of the student to develop a critical analysis of the information they are receiving and how it relates to their local context. While this is highlighted earlier in the background chapters it is not as clearly highlighted under the learning outcomes of each unit and could be lost in the teaching of the subject. This is an essential element of information processing as one of the five skills identified as central for the learner in senior cycle.

The 'Key skills' section of this chapter includes a section on 'learning outcomes'. Similar to the point made above under the section on learning outcomes this should be extended to include students being able to understand the realities behind concepts such as human rights, inequality, poverty, racism and social exclusion which have different meanings but are connected.

Under the section 'teaching and learning' a range of important participatory teaching and learning tools are outlined. Engagement with civil society organisations needs to be added to this list including representative groups of those experiencing poverty, inequality and social exclusion which work from a rights based, collective approach.

The teaching and learning heading is repeated again on page 19. The list of learning outcomes listed here needs to include social responsibility.

Unit 1: Comments

EAPN Ireland would like to recommend that the NCCA relook at the emphasis placed on 'conflict' theory in this section. The focus on conflict arises from Karl Marx 'class conflict' theory. While the basis of this theory in the context of the syllabus is understood a more central approach to understanding the issues this section seeks to address is that of 'inequality' including income and other forms of inequality which are very linked to the issue of power inequality. Conflict might be taken to assume a struggle between groups with more or less equal power while in reality marginalised groups often have very little power over the decisions that affect their lives.

Paragraph 4 on page 22 highlights how groups that are given power by society can abuse this power to undermine the collective society. Here it is also important to look at how these groups also uphold the status quo and can be seen to protect the interest of some in society over others.

Topic 1 - Active Citizenship Project

This is an essential element to the success of the syllabus and ensures that students can engage with and apply their learning on a practical and personal level.

The syllabus needs to detail the timeframe and at what stages in learning students undertake active learning activities.

- **Under section 1.1:** poverty, social exclusion and rights need to be added. Again it needs to be clear what conflict means. It is important that equality is understood in a broad way to include income inequality, inequality related to family type, disability, ethnicity etc. and students should be able to engage groups working in these areas.
- **Section 1.7:** The participation of people in decisions that affect their lives is essential for good governance and sound policy making. This includes people who are marginalised who need to be supported and their capacity to participate increased. This needs to be clearly articulated in this section and students supported to engage with local organisation in order to gain a deeper understanding of participation.
- **An extra section 1.8 needs to be added.** This should include the student's ability to be able to analyse and understand the relevant political, social and economic context they are engaging in and deepen their understanding of the issues facing the people. The Project should also deepen the students understanding of the value of the role civil society organisations play in governance at a local, national and global level.

The area of attitudinal development needs to be addressed as part of this activity. This can be addressed both in a group context and individually.

Topic 2 – Origins of social solidarity

This topic is important but has the potential to become academic unless students are well guided in being able to apply their learning.

Topic 3 – Democratic Governance

Developing a clear understanding of the role power plays is critical in this section. Section 3.1 needs to also look at poverty and inequality in stable and unstable societies as well as the issue of ethnic diversity.

- **Section 3.2** should also include the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. This section should highlight the different ways the state has interacted with political and civil rights and with economic, social and cultural rights and how citizens can realise these rights. Students could undertake a project to look at this area. This relates to the statement on budgetary factors which should recognise how states prioritise and make decisions related to rights. Students should be able to understand the responsibilities of governments in relation to rights.
- **Section 3.3** Students should also be able to identify how citizens engage with each of the branches of Government and explore their roles and responsibilities and analyse to what extent these are realised.
- **Section 3.4 Media:** This section should also look at how the media address issues such as poverty, social exclusion, equality and human rights and the influence they have on public opinion on these issues. Also how people experiencing poverty and social exclusion can have a voice in the media.
- **Section 3.6** should look at the history of and rights related to voting. It should also look at who votes or not, why and the implications of this.
- **A section 3.7** needs to be added looking at the role of civil society. In particular students could study the principles of community work (social change, participation, collective action and a balance between task and process) and how they are realised at a local level and in the experience of students. It could be moved up to section 3.5.

Topic 4 – Democratic practice in small groups

- **Section 4.1** should name stereotyping alongside labelling while recognising the similarity of these concepts.
- **Section 4.3** should include respecting the wide diversity within the group.

- **Section 4.5.** It is very important that another area be added here which addresses the participation in a greater way in policy making and implementation of people experiencing poverty, social exclusion and inequality. This relates to the item on participation in the 'General Comments' section of this submission.

Topic 5 – Cultural and normative accounts of social order

This Topic is important. It needs to support students to understand the concepts of interculturalism and racism and address issues related to minority and majority groups in determining the 'norm'. The concept of ethnicity needs to be explored and this should include among other groups Travellers and Roma. This will have to be dealt with in a very sensitive manner.

This topic as presented is at risk of remaining very academic. Clear guidance will have to be given on how students can apply their learning.

Topic 6 – Divisions in society

This Topic needs to clearly address the issue of structural inequality and not overly focus on 'conflict'. The issue of wealth and power are important issues to be addressed. While Marxist theory is very influential and is well known it would also be advisable to guide students to critically review more contemporary texts such as the 'Spirit Level' by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. This will help students to be able better apply their learning.

- **Section 6.2** could look at how structural inequalities can be addressed at local, national, EU and global levels.

This topic should look at the State's role in putting in place independent bodies the role of which are to act as watchdog and advisor to the state to ensure that it is carrying out its responsibilities to its citizens. This includes the Equality Authority, the Human Rights Commission etc. Previously there was the Combat Poverty Agency and the National Consultation Committee on Racism and Interculturalism but both were integrated into Government departments. Students can look at practical examples in relation to these bodies.

Topic 7- Comparing perspectives

This topic is important but as described is very academic and needs to be more clearly spelt out in terms of how students can achieve more than an academic outcome from it. As outlined in the part 2 of this submission this issue needs to be addressed throughout the syllabus. Theory has to be introduced in an accessible manner related to everyday life. In this topic in particular there is an over academic approach with insufficient focus on applying it to the issues of poverty, social exclusion, inequality and human rights.

Unit 2 – Comments

It is important that students be able to understand the different outcomes for groups when different approaches to equality are taken by governments.

Topic 8 – Diversity in contemporary societies

- **Section 8.1** Where possible students should engage with local Traveller organisations.
- **Section 8.3** This should include learning and deepening their understanding of racism. Students in being able to refer to the nine grounds in Irish law should also be able to form an opinion on how successful this legislation has been in combating discrimination and promoting equality.

Topic 9 – Understanding the relationship between equality and diversity

- **Section 9.2:** Students ability to recognise the impact of EU anti-discrimination directives on Ireland needs to be covered here.

Students should also be able to understand the difference between preventing discrimination and promoting equality and what that means for the state and society. It is important that students understand the interrelationship between the concepts and issues of inequality and poverty. Groups experiencing inequality are at much greater risk of poverty and social exclusion. This link needs to be made in the content and continuity between Unit 1 and Unit 2.

Topic 10 – Perspectives on Development

Understanding the role of the European Union is essential under this Topic. Since the beginning of the EU there has been a steady increase in its social policy role.

- **Section 10.1:** Bullet 3 should name community and voluntary groups. And under the European Union students should also be able to understand and if possible be able to analyse some of the EUs role in social policy developments such as its commitment to ‘make a decisive impact on poverty’ by 2010.
- **Section 10.2:** Students should be able to name the Millennium Development Goals, to critique efforts by governments to achieve them and the role of civil society organisations in this.
- **Section 10.3** The National Economic and Social Council had also produces a ‘Social Report’ which also aims to highlight the importance of using broader measurements of progress beyond GDP.

Assessment

Overall the assessment should find a balance between a focus on students:

- a. knowledge and
- b. ability to engage with, understand and apply this knowledge

EAPN Ireland recommends that the greater emphasis be placed on the second area. This must be reflected in the manner by which this assessment takes place. We recommend that the majority of the assessment be based on the assessment of project and practical work carried out on a continuous assessment basis and which draws on students ability to apply their understanding and that much less of the assessment is in the form of written exam.

The assessment also needs to be able to assess attitudinal development which is more difficult to demonstrate in an exam based assessment.

In order to more properly assess students understanding of the subject and their ability to use this learning for the goals set out in the introductory sections the balance of assessment used for this subject needs to change. 20% is a fair percentage of the Active Citizenship element but other continuous assessment element needs to be introduced with less emphasis on the written exam.

5. Conclusion

EAPN Ireland welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the NCCA on the new syllabus. We believe that this subject has the capacity to greatly enhance the holistic development of students and increase their capacity to develop an understanding and commitment to a society which is based on equality, inclusion and human rights. We look forward to any future engagement in the development of the syllabus.