

Report to SCoTENS Committee
North-South Conference
Teaching Controversial Issues in Post-Primary Classrooms
April 20 – 21 2007
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Introduction

The North-South Conference on teaching controversial issues in post-primary classrooms is the second citizenship-related event to be funded through the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS). These initiatives are the outcome of an agreed strategy to initiate and sustain a co-operative, cross-border forum on Citizenship Education, with particular reference to collaborative professional engagement amongst teachers, teacher educators, teacher trainers and other associated colleagues.

Funding from SCoTENS has enabled the organisation of an invitational conference for up to forty people (costing attached as Appendix 1). Additional funding was also received from CCEA and IFI. The Conference was held in the Armagh City Hotel, from April 20 – 21 2007. The event represented an opportunity for colleagues from both jurisdictions involved in Citizenship education to actively engage in discussion and debate on the teaching of controversial issues, to initiate and/or strengthen professional relationships and to share insights from existing practice.

Background

Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) has been a part of the compulsory core curriculum in the Republic of Ireland since 1997. CSPE focuses on seven core concepts – Human Dignity, Rights and Responsibilities, Democracy, Development, Law, Interdependence and Stewardship, and is taught to pupils from Year 1 to Year 3 in all post-primary schools as a time-tabled class period. Formal assessment in the Junior Certificate Examination includes credit for a report on an action project.

In Northern Ireland Citizenship Education has yet to become a mandatory feature of the curriculum. It has however been introduced as a pilot scheme at Key Stage 3 increasingly into all Northern Ireland schools. Within the framework of the current curriculum review process, Local and Global Citizenship will become a statutory subject from September 2007. Local and

Global Citizenship is delivered through four key themes – Diversity and Inclusion, Equality and Social Justice, Human Rights and Social Responsibilities and Democracy and Active Participation.

Conference Planning

A planning meeting was held in Armagh during August 2006 to agree the content and format of the conference. Given the proposed theme, it was considered that a speaker with a proven teaching and research background on the subject of teaching controversial issues could most effectively facilitate a programme of activity that would meet the needs of the audience. It was agreed that an approach would be made to Dr Diana Hess – who was taking a sabbatical year – to facilitate the conference.

Dr Hess is Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has an established international academic profile in this area, a key feature of which is interactive work with practitioners. Her most recent published work includes '*Educating democratic citizens in troubled times*' and she is currently involved in a longitudinal study on how deliberating controversial issues in High School courses influences the civic learning and participation of young people. A selection of her recent publications is included (Appendix 2).

With guidance from Dr Hess, it was agreed that the conference would follow a workshop format. This was intended to provide opportunities for colleagues from both jurisdictions to explore multiple interpretations of controversial issues, to identify those issues which most challenged classroom practice, and to consider teaching and/or training approaches that could be successfully implemented in post-primary classrooms.

A participant list for the conference was drawn up to include representatives from both the formal and non-formal education sectors; this included schools, Initial Teacher Education (ITE), Education and Library Boards (ELBs), Department of Education and Science (DES), Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Appendix 3). The conference programme comprised three specific workshops (Appendix 4). Each session was facilitated by Dr Hess and was formulated to accommodate the different professional contexts of participants. Importantly, it remained sufficiently flexible to allow redirection if necessary. The workshops covered the following topics: the theory of teaching

controversial issues; definitions of controversial issues; what makes an issue controversial; classroom practice; emotional intelligence; personal disclosure.

Conference Feedback

Feedback on the conference produced a number of observations which are outlined below:

- Controversial issues are, by definition, wide-ranging, and are often shaped by personal, social, cultural, political or religious realities.
- The definition of controversial issues is a fluid concept that assumes a shifting classification where some issues are considered more sensitive and/or difficult at certain points in time.
- It was recognised that controversial issues assume a degree of difficulty depending on individual perspectives and personal readiness to address a sensitive topic. What one individual considers controversial may be less so to another.
- Although there were some common issues to both jurisdictions (eg immigration), others were more or less relevant depending on location (eg the conflict in the North and the issue of Travellers in the South).
- Teachers and pupils may hold different interpretations of what represents a controversial issue. For this reason, the sensitivity of certain topics cannot be assumed. It is important that teachers explore pupils' reality in order to gauge which issues provoke most student response.
- Personal disclosure (particularly from teachers) is an issue that continues to provoke a mixed reaction – as a response that weakens the position of the teacher or as a response that may influence pupil opinion.
- It is planned that communication with Dr Hess will be continued. It is hoped that it may be possible to extend a further invitation to facilitate a similar event at a future date.