

Politics: Interest, Participation and Education. Comparing the Republic of Ireland with Germany

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In order to generate higher levels of interest in politics and participation in political processes, political, or citizenship, education, in schools must be at the heart of the curriculum and be characterised by active, learner-centred approaches. This paper hypothesises that, when compared with Germany, a more limited form of political education in Irish post-primary schools may be impacting negatively on the extent to which it is achieving such aims. In order to begin to explore this hypothesis, the results for seven items relating to interest in politics and participation in political processes from the most recent (2010) round of the European Social Survey (ESS) are compared for the Irish and German populations. In addition, the nature and status of political education in the German and the Irish school systems are compared. Conclusions are drawn and the implications for future research in this field and for political education in both countries considered.

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Introduction

Our understanding of the complex relationship between schooling and the political socialisation of young people remains incomplete (De Weerd et al. 2005, 26). However, since the 1990s, in particular, the number of studies concerned with the interplay between political education, or citizenship education, as a school subject and such variables as level of interest in politics and degree of engagement with political processes has begun to increase. A number of common findings have begun to emerge from these studies (for example De Weerd et al. 2005; Schulz et al. 2010).

The first concerns the relationship between interest and engagement, with researchers such as De Weerd et al. (2005, 27), Oesterreich (2002) and Schulz et al. (2010) repeatedly emphasising the relationship between interest in politics and citizenship. Secondly, the findings from the relevant studies indicate that two factors in particular are central to the awakening of such interest as part of the preparation of pupils for participation in political processes. The first factor concerns the position of political education in the school curriculum, particularly regarding the time devoted to it and status allocated to it. This status can be related for example to the question of whether the subject is formally assessed or not. The second factor relates to the nature of classroom practice in political education. This factor is influenced by a number of interrelated sub-issues. These include the classroom climate, the approach taken to teaching and learning in the classroom as well as the whole-school climate or ethos. Looking at each of these sub-issues in turn, it would appear that, for political

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education in particular, where classes are conducted in an open classroom climate in which there is room for negotiation, conflict and constructive disagreement, the generation of interest in politics is more likely. As Wiseman et al. (2011, 573) put it, '...if teachers run classrooms in a more open, democratic fashion, students have higher levels of political socialization'.

Secondly, researchers such as Gilleece and Cosgrove (2012) and Harrison (2008, 121) extend the reference to 'classroom climate' to that of the whole school and stress the importance of running schools in a more democratic fashion which involves students in a meaningful manner in decision making processes, albeit at a level appropriate to their age and experience. Thirdly, there is a move towards constructivist approaches as best practice in this subject (Hughes, Print and Sears, 2010). The importance of interactive discussion-based activities and attention to the student voice (Neubauer 2012) are stressed, in particular. According to Whiteley (2005 in De Weerd et al. 2005, 28).

A very important finding from studies on the impact of civic education is that civic knowledge, civic attitudes and civic skills are best learnt in civic education programmes that adopt a more active methodology for instructing participants.

Such a learner centred approach is more likely, it appears, to generate an interest in politics and potentially encourage engagement in political processes. However, several significant studies (for example, de Weerd et al. 2005; Kennelly and Llewellyn 2011; Kerr et al. 2010; Neubauer 2012, 89; Wolmuth 2010) report an overemphasis in practice on the transmission of factual material from the teacher to the pupil using a passive, lecture approach at the expense of the more learner-centred approaches.

The status and practice of political education in schools is, of course, not the only factor influencing levels of interest in politics and/or engagement with political processes among a given population. In the words of De Weerd et al. (2005, 30), 'in studying the input and output of citizenship education, it must be kept in mind that what is considered the output of citizenship education is also influenced by factors other than school' and is in fact 'the output of a much broader socialisation process in which different actors have a role'. These factors encompass the family including, for example, the educational attainment level of the parents as well as the political and economic environment in which pupils find themselves. However, as De Weerd et al. (2005, 31) stress, this does 'not mean that citizenship education is not important'. Indeed, its potential as a significant factor in the political socialisation process is also emphasised by others including, for example, Torney-Purta, Schwille and Amadeo (1999) and Gilleece and Cosgrove (2012). Some scholars such as Simon and Merrill (1998) in Wiseman et al. (2011, 564) even go as far as to suggest that 'the effect of civic education curricula and education in schools is the dominant mechanism of political socialisation' while the Report of the (Irish) Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007, 26) stresses the 'profound influence on our attitude and behaviour for life' that education can have.

Methodology

In the light of the issues raised above, this paper hypothesises that a comparatively limited form of political education in Irish post-primary schools in terms of both status and classroom practice may be impacting negatively on the extent to which the subject is generating interest in politics and preparing pupils for participation in

political processes when compared with a country like Germany where political education has a longer tradition and is more firmly established.

This hypothesis is explored from two angles. Firstly, a series of items were selected from the most recent version of the European Social Survey, or ESS, (Round 5, 2010, Edition 3.0, Release date: 18th December 2012) which related to levels of interest in politics and participation in political processes or what De Weerd, Gemmecke, Rigter and van Rij (2005, ii) refer to as ‘outcome indicators’ ‘since they are regarded as the outcome of citizenship education’. Secondly, information regarding the status and practice of citizenship education in German and Irish schools was assessed using the results and findings from relevant studies, cross national surveys such as the Civic Education Study (Cived) and the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) conducted by the Institute for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), national curricula, textbooks and pedagogical guidelines for teachers.

Clearly, this approach does not generate empirical data sufficient to test for the presence of a causal link between the status and nature of political education in Ireland and Germany and variables such as ‘levels of interest in politics’ and ‘engagement with political processes’ in both countries. In addition, as touched upon in the introduction, the nature of civic education in schools is only one of a myriad of factors which could potentially influence levels of interest and engagement with politics. However, we have also seen that the status and practice of political education within an education system is perceived as potentially a key influence on levels of interest in politics and participation in political processes. Therefore, it is argued here that comparing levels of interest and participation in political processes in Germany and Ireland in the context of the nature of political education in both countries allows us to begin to explore our hypothesis that a comparatively limited form of political education in Irish schools when compared with German schools is impacting on levels of interest in and engagement with politics in Ireland. It is hoped that such an approach will stimulate further empirical, comparative research which would allow for causal testing, as, in the words of De Weerd, Gemmecke, Rigter and van Rij (2005, VII), ‘there is a lack of knowledge about the causal relationship between active citizenship and citizenship education.’ It would be possible, for example, to look for a causal relationship input and output indicators of citizenship education between two or more of the countries who engaged with the ICCS (IEA 2009), in which 38 countries including Ireland participated. Germany unfortunately did not.

In terms of determining levels of interest in politics and engagement with political processes in Ireland and Germany, the ESS was selected for several reasons. Based in the Centre for Comparative Social Surveys in the City of London University and funded by the EC's Framework programmes, the European Science Foundation, and national funding councils in participating countries, it enjoys the status of a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC)². In addition, it is a multi-country survey recognised as consistently pursuing high standards of academic rigour (Jowell, Roberts, Fitzgerald and Eva, 2007).

Specifically, the ESS uses random (probability) samples based on full population coverage (of those aged over 15) in all of its surveys. The ESS is of course not exempt from the difficulties associated with international comparative survey

² An ERIC being a consortium of member states including Ireland in the case of the ESS, with a legal underpinning, involved in the establishment and operation of a research infrastructure (further information can be found at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2013-Press-Releases/PR2013-05-07.html#sthash.197Mp38G.dpuf>).

research, including the difficulties associated with ensuring linguistic and conceptual equivalence. In addition, as with all quantitative questionnaire-based surveys, issues around self-report and non-response bias remain. However, the ESS has been actively searching for ways in which to test for the effects of non-response using for example demographic information, sample-based and population-based weighting adjustments and model-based estimates of response probabilities (European Social Survey 2013). According to De Weerd, Gemmecke, Rigter and van Rij (2005, 65), in a review of the availability and quality international data sources on active citizenship, 'the team involved in ESS is especially geared to producing a survey that is methodologically sound. Sampling strategy, question translation and quality measurement of the questionnaire ensure optimal comparability in the operationalization of the study within all participating countries'. De Weerd, Gemmecke, Rigter and van Rij comment (2005, VI), nonetheless, that the ESS is missing two potentially useful items; 'Organising for the community' and 'Participation in public debate.' However, the authors temper this remark in their comment that no dataset is available which contains all indicators of active citizenship and add that 'the ESS is more complete than the others'. In the words of Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, EU Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science, made as part of the opening address to the ESS International Conference, *Cross-National Evidence from European Social Survey: Exploring Public Attitudes, Informing Public Policy*, held in Dublin in 2013 '[The ESS is] making a major contribution to the creation of effective social and economic policies in Europe'.

Of additional relevance for this study, the ESS contains a series of items appropriate for the assessment of levels of interest in politics and participation in political processes. These are, firstly, level of interest in politics itself and, secondly, six additional items reflective of participation in political processes, i.e. the exercising of voting rights, signing of petitions, participating in lawful demonstrations, boycotting of products, contacting a politician, and joining a political party (in the 12 months prior to the question being asked). The ESS also contains a facility whereby results can be broken down by age allowing for a focus on the category containing those aged between 15 and 29. This means that the majority of the Irish participants would be experiencing or would have had experience of CSPE as a school subject, the subject itself having been introduced in its current form in 1993 and made mandatory within the junior cycle (ages 12 to 15 approximately) in 1997.

In terms of statistical analysis, the results for the seven items of interest were identified in the country files for Ireland and Germany. Seven new variables were created in an SPSS data file containing the combined results for Ireland and Germany. The results for the first item, relating to level of interest on a scale from 1 to 4, were analysed using a comparison of means and an independent samples t-test at the 99% confidence level. The remaining nominal (yes/no) variables were analysed using cross-tabulation and a Pearson Chi Square test of independence to determine significance with the strength of association measured using Cramér's V (Cramer 1999), bearing in mind that large sample sizes, 3129 for Germany and 2578 for Ireland in this case, (as well as more than one degree of freedom in the statistical design) can result in a relatively lower Cramér's V even where a strong association exists.

The following section presents the results from the ESS regarding levels of interest in politics and participation in political processes in Germany and Ireland. The fourth section then presents the findings regarding the status and practice of citizenship education in German and Irish schools. The concluding fifth section

reviews the hypothesis and presents considerations around a potential relationship between levels of interest and participation in politics in Ireland and Germany and the nature of political education in both countries.

Trust, Interest and Political Engagement in Ireland and Germany: Findings from the European Social Survey

This section presents an analysis of seven items from the ESS. It is hoped that these might help to determine the extent to which political education in Ireland and Germany is generating interest in politics and active engagement with political processes.

Item 1: Level of Interest in Politic

Regarding levels of interest in politics, fewer Irish are interested in politics than Germans (Table 1).

Table 1: Level of Interest in Politics

Country/ Interest level	Germany	Ireland
Very interested	18.8	8.5
Quite interested	38.9	32.0
Hardly interested	34.1	26.6
Not at all interested	8.2	32.9

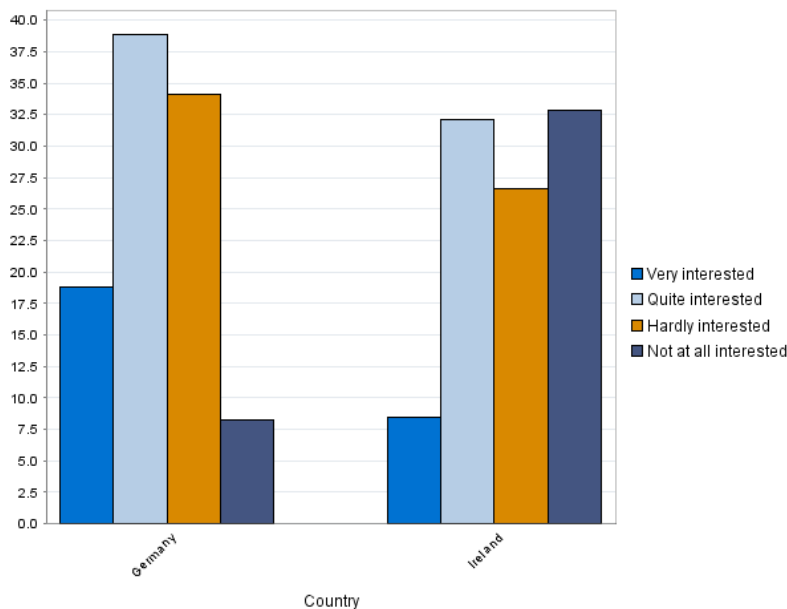


Chart 1: Level of Interest in Politics

For example, the mean for Ireland on a scale from 1 ‘very interested’ to 4 ‘not at all interested’ is 2.83 ($SD = .992$) and for Germany 2.32 ($SD = .869$) with an independent samples t-test confirming that this difference was significant ($t(5592) = 20.55, p < .01$).

Furthermore, a considerably higher percentage of Irish locate themselves at the lower end of the scale with approximately 60% of those surveyed describing themselves as either ‘not at all interested’ or ‘hardly interested’ compared with just over 40% of Germans surveyed. Additionally, a considerably higher percentage of Irish locate themselves at the lower extreme end (not at all interested) with the situation reversed at the other extreme end of ‘very interested’.

Items 2-7: Participation in political processes

The following six items relate to political action engaged in over the previous 12 months. In all six, it can be observed that more of those questioned in Germany than in Ireland reported having engaged with political processes in the previous year with a chi-square test of independence indicating in four of the six cases that this difference was statistically significant (Table 2).

Table 2: Participation in political Processes

Item	Country	Yes (%)	No (%)	Chi Square test $X^2(df,N)$
Voted in the last national election	Germany	72.7	16.3	$X^2(6, 5585) = 99.42,$ $p = .000$ $V = .094$
	Ireland	65.0	26.6	
Signed a petition	Germany	30.6	69.4	$X^2(3, 5593) = 200.47,$ $p = .000$ $V = .189$
	Ireland	16.3	83.7	
Boycotted products	Germany	30.0	70.0	$X^2(3, 5588) = 322.26,$ $p = .000$ $V = .24$
	Ireland	9.2	90.8	
Participated in a lawful public demonstration	Germany	8.4	91.6	$X^2(3, 5602) = 34.24,$ $p = .000$ $V = .078$
	Ireland	7.0	93.0	
Contacted a politician	Germany	15.4	84.6	$X^2(3, 5597) = 5.33,$ $p = .149$ $V = .025$
	Ireland	13.7	86.3	
Worked in a political party/action group	Germany	4.0	96	$X^2(3, 5600) = 4.19,$ $p = .242$ $V = .021$
	Ireland	2.9	97.1	

For example, almost 73% of Germans reported voting in the last national election compared with 65% of Irish. Almost twice as many signed a petition in Germany as in Ireland and more than three times as many boycotted certain products in Germany compared with Ireland. In terms of participating in lawful public demonstrations 8.4% of respondents in Germany reported having done so in the

previous twelve months compared with 7% of those questioned in Ireland. The differences observed between Ireland and Germany for these items were statistically significant at the 99% confidence as indicated by the chi-square results contained in the final column of Table 2.

For the remaining two examples of forms of engagement with political processes, 15.4% had contacted a politician in the previous twelve months in Germany compared with 13.7% in Ireland and, finally, 4% had worked for a political party or action group in Germany compared with 2.9% of respondents in Ireland. The chi square test of independence indicates, however, that these results were not statistically significant and therefore we cannot, with confidence, reject the null hypothesis that no difference exists between Ireland and Germany with regard to these forms of engagement.

In order to further test the notion that a relationship exists between levels of interest in politics and engagement with political processes for the two countries of interest here, an analysis of the relationships between the six variables (above) associated with different forms of political participation was also conducted with the variable 'levels of interest in politics'.

The results reveal that a significant relationship exists between expressed level of interest in politics in particular and all six of the items associated with participation in politics in both Germany and Ireland (Table 3).

Table 3: Relationship between Levels of Interest in Politics and political Engagement

	<i>df</i>	Germany <i>X</i> ²	Ireland <i>X</i> ²	Germany <i>p</i> <i>V</i>	Ireland <i>p</i> <i>V</i>
Voted in last national election	6	404.00	317.78	<i>p</i> = .000 <i>V</i> = .249	<i>p</i> = .000 <i>V</i> = .258
Signed a petition	3	117.41	93.30	<i>p</i> = .000 <i>V</i> = .194	<i>p</i> = .000 <i>V</i> = .177
Boycotted products	3	94.17	73.34	<i>p</i> = .000 <i>V</i> = .169	<i>p</i> = .000 <i>V</i> = .213
Participated in a lawful demonstration	3	132.65	42.22	<i>p</i> = .000 <i>V</i> = .131	<i>p</i> = .000 <i>V</i> = .114
Contacted a politician	3	39.03	95.29	<i>p</i> = .000 <i>V</i> = .193	<i>p</i> = .000 <i>V</i> = .171
Worked in a political party/action group	3	137.06	122.72	<i>p</i> = .000 <i>V</i> = .218	<i>p</i> = .000 <i>V</i> = .209

In other words, significantly more of those describing themselves as more interested in politics reported engagement in all of the political processes listed in the previous 12 months than did those describing themselves as less interested in politics. This was the case for both Germany and Ireland.

The following section compares political education as a school subject in German and Irish post primary schools with a particular focus on the status of political education and classroom practice in this subject.

Political Education in German and Irish Schools: Status and Classroom Practice

Händle, Oesterreich and Trommer (1999) suggest that political education in Germany is succeeding in the transmission of knowledge *about* politics to a large extent [emphasis own] but note a gap between the ‘goals and their realisation’ in terms of increasing interest in and engagement with politics. Similarly in Ireland, Bryan and Bracken (2011, 15) point to a ‘disconnect between the impressive goal’ of political education, ‘and the reality of its achievements on the ground’, while Faas and Ross (2012, 574) note a discrepancy in Ireland between ‘...the progressive rhetoric of policy documents and the content of textbooks and other curriculum material’.

This section considers the nature and aims of citizenship education in Germany and Ireland as depicted in syllabi, guidelines for teachers, policy documents and the relevant academic literature. It continues with an assessment of the status and classroom practice of political education in both countries in order to begin to address the hypothesis at the heart of this paper. Of note is the fact that, while in both countries, citizenship education takes place to some extent in all subjects including, for example, history and geography, the focus in this paper is on the distinct subject explicitly and specifically devoted to citizenship education in both countries, i.e. Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) in Ireland, with reference also to its predecessor at primary level, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), and *Sozialkunde/Gesellschaftskunde/Gemeinschaftskunde/Politische Bildung*³ in Germany.

The concept of political education in the Irish education system has been a controversial one since the foundation of the state. Its introduction was initially opposed by the Catholic church which feared that it might encroach on areas such as the moral education of young people which had traditionally fallen within the remit of religious education (Gleeson 2009). Thus, in order to ensure its survival within the education system initially, it was important that its aims were seen, as far as possible, as uncontroversial, particularly as it was ‘born into a post-colonial Irish state that was conservative and respectful of authority’ (Gleeson 2008: 74; see also Jeffers 2008: 15; Gleeson 2009).

Although respect for authority, particularly ecclesiastical authority has waned somewhat in recent decades, the political culture in Ireland remains consensual, with for example few major policy differences apparent between the two main political parties (Fahey, Hayes and Sinnot 2005, 16-17), a feature of Irish life which can be perceived as underlying the CSPE syllabus. Specifically, with regard to its aims, CSPE in Ireland is based on a concept of citizenship described in the syllabus as ‘the realisation of the civic, social and political dimensions in the life of the individual person through active participation in society’ (An Roinn Oideachais 2013: 10). The aims of CSPE in Ireland are expressed firstly in terms of education at this level as a whole:

‘The general aims and principles of CSPE concord wholly with those of the Junior Certificate Programme. In particular, the aims that the Junior Certificate programme should develop the pupils’ personal and social confidence, contribute to their moral

³ The particular title given to political or citizenship education in Germany varies according to the Federal State in which it is taught. All titles translate approximately into English as (Socio-) Political Education or Citizenship Studies.

development, and prepare them for the responsibilities of citizenship, are central concerns of CSPE (An Roinn Oideachais 2013: 2).

They also state (An Roinn Oideachais 2013: 2):

‘CSPE aims to prepare students for active, participatory citizenship. This is achieved through comprehensive exploration of the civic, social and political dimensions of their lives.....it should produce knowledgeable pupils who can explore analyse and evaluate, who are skilled and practised in more and critical appraisal and capable of making decisions and judgements through a reflective citizenship based on human rights and social responsibilities.’

Recognising that the ethos, organisational, extra-curricular activities and operational structures of schools also have a role to play, the focus of this subject is described as being:

‘...to provide the pupil with a concentrated and dedicated focus on all aspects of this area of education, with particular emphasis on the importance of active, participatory citizenship to the life of the young person in society’

(Curriculum Online. Civic, Social and Political Education Syllabus 2013).

Thus, there is a repeated emphasis within this subject in Ireland on the need to develop in pupils a desire to participate in civic society, socially and in political terms or ‘a personal commitment to active, constructive, participative citizenship’ (An Roinn Oideachais 2013: 14).

The emphasis in Germany, meanwhile, is placed particularly on the education of the ‘mature citizen’ (Detjen 2013; Händle 2002; Müller 2006) who is interested in politics, understands political issues, is capable of exercising independent judgement and participates actively in political processes. There is particularly strong opposition in Germany to any suggestion that schools might influence their pupils in one particular direction politically. This is a result of experience with the political manipulation of education in contemporary German history, for example, most obviously, under national socialism and again under communism in the eastern part of Germany. Aims revolve around facilitating the nurturing of a citizen with the requisite knowledge, skills and desire to participate fully in democratic society, who, in addition, knows their rights and is capable of shouldering their responsibilities and seizing opportunities open to them. For example, in the federal state of Nordrheinwestfalen these aims are expressed as follows:

Es ist die Aufgabe der Politischen Bildung, das notwendige Wissen und die kognitiven, normativen und handlungsbezogenen Voraussetzungen zu entwickeln und zu fördern, die die Bürgerrinnen und Bürger in die Lage versetzen, ihre demokratischen Rechte und Pflichten, ihre Möglichkeiten und Chancen wahrzunehmen (Ministerium für Schule, Wissenschaft und Forschung des Landes Nordrheinwestfalen 2001: 14). [Political education should support the acquisition of the requisite knowledge as well as the cognitive, normative and behavioural skills required by citizens to realise their democratic rights, responsibilities and opportunities [own translation].

In addition, the guidelines published for teachers emphasise that:

‘Der Unterricht soll das Interesse an gesellschaftlichen, wirtschaftlichen und politischen Gegenständen wecken und ermöglicht das Anwenden der erworbenen Kompetenzen in unterschiedlichen, aktuellen Zusammenhängen (Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrheinwestfalen 2013: 10) [Political education should awaken an interest in social, economic and political issues and facilitate the development of relevant transferable skills in pupils.] [own translation]

In a similar vein, in the state of Hessen, the syllabus produced by the Department of Education describes one of its primary goals as following ‘Ziel ist eine verantwortliche Mitwirkung in Staat, Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft vorzubereiten’ [The objective (of political education) is to prepare for responsible participation in the state, society and economy.] (Hessisches Kulturministerium 2013).

Thus, it would appear that Ireland and Germany tend to espouse a more liberal view of citizenship education (see Faas and Ross 2012 in the case of Ireland) with Germany also incorporating neo-liberal elements possibly to a greater extent. This is indicated for example in the inclusion of the study of business/the consumer society in political education in Germany in particular (see also penultimate and final sections for further illustration of this point). Nonetheless, both countries charge political education with a range of tasks concerned with the development of the autonomous individual in society and share a common aspiration among others, i.e. the generation of interest in politics and informed participation in political processes.

In terms of content, in Ireland, the centralised CSPE syllabus guides learning in this subject albeit in a flexible manner appropriate to school conditions and the needs of pupils. It is based on seven key concepts and four units of study (An Roinn Oideachais 2013). The concepts relate to rights, responsibilities, democracy, interdependence, stewardship, the law and development, while the units encompass The Individual and Citizenship, The Community, The State-Ireland, and Ireland and the World (An Roinn Oideachais 2013). Assessment is based on a report on an action project or a course work assessment book (60%) and a written exam (40%). The SPHE course delivered at primary level (ages 5-11), on the other hand, is divided into three strands: Myself, Myself and Others, and Myself and the Wider world (Curriculum Online 2013) and, as with all subjects at primary level, is not formally assessed.

In Germany, according to the principle of educational sovereignty enshrined in the *Grundgesetz* or Basic Law, decisions in relation to education are at the discretion of the individual federal states and within these states, guidelines issued by their Ministries of Education have the status of recommendations. The emphasis tends to be placed in terms of content on areas such as the individual and society including the place of young people, democracy, participation and human rights, the social welfare state, elections, parties and political decision making processes, basic values and the constitution, international relations, media and the freedom of the press, a consumer society, the social market economy and the world of work (Hessisches Kulturministerium 2013; Ministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kultur des Landes Schleswig-Holstein 2013).

Despite the emphasis on the active role of the individual in democratic society in both countries, there is a perception in both Germany and Ireland that political education in schools is not succeeding in generating sufficient interest in politics and participation in political processes. In terms of debates around possible reasons for this perceived failure (see for example, Bryan and Bracken (2011), Cosgrove, Gilleece and Shiel (2011), Gleeson and Munnally (2004), Händle, Oesterreich and Trommer (1999), Malak-Minkiewicz (2007) and Oesterreich (2003)) a number of

commonalities emerge. These relate, in particular, to class-room practice, the status of the subject as reflected in the amount of time devoted to it, and, related to these, the education of teachers in this field.

Firstly, with regard to classroom practice, experts in Germany have commented that, while both teachers and learners report preferring student-oriented, problem centred political education, German post-primary schools in general 'are dominated by teacher-centred instruction' (Händle, Oesterreich and Trommer 1999, 261). For example, a study conducted in by the *Bertelsmann Stiftung* (Bertelsmann Foundation) in collaboration the University of Münster assessed the level of opportunity for participation in the classroom of 12,084 12-18 year-olds across Germany (Fatke, Schneider, Meinhold-Henschel et al 2006). The authors report that only 14.5% of those pupils surveyed report having the opportunity to actively participate either 'often' or 'very often' in their classes (Fakte. Schneider, Meinhold-Henschel et al 2006, 29). Specifically with regard to political education, Sander (2002, 42) reports that a series of qualitative studies in Germany including that conducted by Kötters-König (2001) have demonstrated that despite what are often good intentions on the part of the teacher, teaching does not always succeed in developing in pupils a personal relationship with politics or an interest in it as a subject. One of the reasons suggested for this failure is the emphasis on teacher-centred instruction. However, it should be noted that, despite this degree of dissatisfaction expressed within Germany, Germany did perform above average in terms of the use of more student-centred methodologies in the political education classroom in the Cived study, a wide-ranging study (in which Ireland did not participate) conducted by the IEA (Torney-Purta, Lehman, Oswald and Schulz 2001). It was noted, however, that there was 'evidence of a preponderance of teacher centred formats' across all of the countries surveyed (Losito and Mintrop 2001, 263-264). The ICCS study conducted in 2009 and referred to briefly in the Methodology section, reported, however, that student participation in CSPE activities in classrooms in Ireland is significantly lower than international averages (Cosgrove, Gilleece and Shiel 2011, 114). The study also showed that Irish teachers made relatively little use of student-oriented teaching practices (i.e. practices which adapted teaching on the basis of individual student ability and involved students in planning classroom activities or topics) and employed structuring practices (e.g. reviewing homework or recapping previous lessons) on a more frequent basis than teachers in the other countries surveyed.

Cosgrove and Gilleece (2012) suggest that these findings be viewed in the context of a centralised, examination-focussed education system in Ireland. For example, in the words of Faas and Ross (2012, 583), 'The Leaving Certificate examination and the point-scoring capabilities of particular subjects and their usefulness in the labour market have become the fundamental focus for many students and teachers'. Given the nature of this examination, the 'back-wash effect', or influence of assessment type on teaching and learning, has resulted in an emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge compared with, relatively speaking, a greater emphasis in Germany on the development of higher order cognitive skills such as critical thinking within the education system as a whole.

On a related note, many researchers in this field emphasise that citizenship education in schools does not take place in a vacuum but rather is embedded within a particular school ethos. A democratic classroom climate can be reflected in a democratic school in which pupils participate in decision making processes. However, to take one example, although all students at post primary level in Ireland are entitled under the Education Act (Government of Ireland 1998) to establish, for example, a

Student Council (Gilleece and Cosgrove 2012), such councils often have a low status (Keogh and Whyte 2005) and in many schools are not in operation at all. For example, according to the results of the ICCS study referred to above, between three fifths and three quarters of Irish students had never taken place in decision making about how the school is run (Gilleece and Cosgrove 2012, 229). Indeed, the Irish Minister for Education, Mr Ruairí Quinn, TD, recently revealed his ‘...intention to ensure that all of the 730 post-primary schools actively have such a council... Lip service is paid to that democratic formation in many of our schools...’ he continued (Murray 2012). Similarly, the results of the Cived study revealed participation below the international average in Student Councils in Germany with a figure of 13% for the 14 year-olds questioned. Germany also scored below the international average for levels of confidence in the efficacy of such councils (Torney-Purta, Lehman, Oswald and Schulz 2001, 140-141).

As we have seen, performance in examinations, in particular centralised state examinations, is highly rated within both the Irish and German school systems although the incorporation of elements of continuous assessment into final grades has a longer tradition and is more established in Germany. Nevertheless, studies (for example by Händle, Oesterreich and Trommer 1999, 279) would suggest that ‘instrumental studying for tests’ continues to play a significant role in citizenship classrooms in Germany with Hahn (2009, 13-14) reaching similar conclusions. In Sander’s (2002, 39) view, the ‘political disappears behind the apparently certain (and easier to evaluate) factual knowledge and replaces exchange of ideas and moral reasoning’. Echoes of the ‘instrumental studying for tests’ referred to above in relation to Germany are also repeatedly found in arguments in Ireland that the extensive use of traditional approaches to teaching may be a consequence of the strong focus on examinations in the Irish educational system. For example, Cosgrove, Gilleece and Shiel (2011, xvii) argue that ‘it is difficult to see how teachers can switch between traditional (examination-focussed) and innovative modes of teaching during just one class period per week’. Similarly, also in an Irish context, Bryan and Bracken (2011: 14) conclude that the exam driven focus of the post-primary system is a major obstacle to the ‘meaningful inclusion and in-depth exploration’ of political themes in the classroom. Supporting this view is the fact that the findings of the ICCS study suggest that the examination questions for political education (CSPE) in Ireland focus to a greater extent on the recall of knowledge rather than reasoning or analytic processes (Cosgrove, Gilleece and Shiel 2011, xv). In addition, although an action project forms part of the assessment, analysis of these projects (Cosgrove, Gilleece and Shiel 2011, xv) indicates that more ‘passive’ forms (e.g. guest speaker, fundraising and/or visits) are preferred to more ‘active’ forms of engagement (e.g. campaign or protest 2%). In their view, ‘This would appear to be at odds with the subject’s emphasis on encouraging active, participatory citizenship’ and the ground-breaking inclusion within the Irish education system of an action project worth 60% of the final grade for the subject in the first place.

The second and related issue concerns the status of political education in German and Irish schools as reflected for example in the amount of time devoted to it. Indeed, as noted by Cosgrove, Gilleece and Shiel (2011, xv) in Ireland, the use of more passive forms of teaching and assessment ‘could be related to the limited amount of instructional time allocated to the subject’ in schools, a view supported by Bryan and Bracken (2011, 14) and in a German context by, for example Händle (2001), Kötters-König (2001) and Hahn (2009). This argument is further supported by

the fact that according to Händle (2001) teachers themselves regularly call for more class contact hours.

This relatively small amount of contact time devoted to political education in schools when compared with other subjects is considered by many to be indicative of the low status of the subject. At post primary level, in Ireland, it is allocated one class period per week or equivalent over the three years of the junior cycle (ages 12-14) or 70 hours in total (Coleman, Gray and Harrison 2005) and at primary level (ages 5-11) is allocated a portion at the teacher's discretion of the 30 minutes per week devoted to SPHE.

Jeffers (2008, 16) reported the view of student-teachers of CSPE in Ireland as being that '40 minutes per week offer insufficient time to engage seriously and systematically with active methodology' and continues, '...such provision, they say creates an impression that, no matter what the rhetoric, the subject cannot be very important.' A sense of CSPE being held in low esteem is strengthened by the fact that three to four 40 minute periods per week are allocated, for example, to 'Business and its values' in a subject entitled Business Studies and indeed to the majority of subjects in Junior Cycle curriculum (Jeffers 2008, 16).

In German post-primary schools, the situation is more complex as a result of the educational sovereignty of the individual federal states. However, at a minimum, political education is offered from grades 8 to 13 (i.e. age 10-18), and in some states from grade 5, for approximately two hours per week (Himmelmann 2006, 51). On a related point, increased emphasis has, nonetheless, been placed in some German states on economics and the functioning of the corporate world and a social market economy in the political education classroom (Buck and Geissel 2009), thus reducing the time available for political education. This has occurred to an extent in the light of unemployment in some parts of Germany, declining prosperity, cuts to the welfare state and a need to remain competitive in a globalised world which has resulted in a sense that young people need to develop new competencies such as 'economic self-sufficiency' and 'independence from state provision' (Buck and Geissel 2009). Some (e.g. Sander 2002: 36; Buck and Geissel 2009, 237) see this as an example of the 'nonchalant' treatment of political education in schools.⁴

Finally, a related potentially problematic dimension concerns the education of teachers of political education, both initial and on-going. For example, many researchers and educational policy makers particularly in Germany (e.g. Händle 2002, 6) speak of the discrepancy which exists between the study of *Politologie* or Political Science in Universities in Germany and the requirements of Political Education in schools, and argue that, generally what is taught in university is short on practicalities around the effective delivery of this subject. This is despite the fact that teachers themselves call for training in relevant and practical teaching methodologies (Händle 2001). Others suggest a need for greater input regarding learning theories and their applications from such fields as cognitive psychology and constructivism (Sander 2002, 42; see also Fatke et al. 2006, 27).

In Ireland, many of those who teach CSPE have spoken about their 'lack of formal training' on how to teach the subject and how they were 'conscripted' into it (Faas and Ross 2012; Gleeson 2009). For example, a recent Irish study (Bryan and Bracken 2011, 269) concluded that 'only a very small number of the in-career teachers who participated in their study had undertaken any in-service training in the

⁴ Of note here is the fact that political education in schools in Hessen has been renamed '*Politik und Wirtschaft*' or 'Politics and the Economy'.

field' and also reported (2011, 269) that the teachers interviewed for their study '... frequently mentioned the need for opportunities where they could come together to learn more and exchange information and knowledge about their own experiences of "doing" political education in schools.' Furthermore, in indicating which aspects would need improvement to enhance the teaching and learning of political education, one of the key elements emphasised by CSPE teachers in Ireland was training in methodologies and classroom practice (Cosgrove, Gilleece and Shiel 2011, 113). These findings are supported by the results of a study conducted in 2003 (Murphy 2008) in which it was concluded that only 20% of participant teachers of CSPE had volunteered to teach the subject and only 24% of participants had a relevant qualification in CSPE. Approximately half of these CSPE teachers had attended at least one professional development seminar in the area and more than half reported considerable reliance on a textbook, while also reporting that 74% of their pupils preferred active learning methods. Calls by teachers for a greater emphasis on initial and continuing professional development are supported by research findings in the field of political education emanating from the United States in particular which demonstrate a correlation between positive, sustainable in-service experiences of political education courses on the part of teachers and the performance in political education on the part of their students (Avery 2007, 33).

Thus, it would appear that there is a perception in both Ireland and Germany that, while advances have been made in the field of citizenship education in both countries, the way in which political education is delivered in schools is not yet optimal. However, while there are clearly issues to be addressed in both countries, in Ireland, in particular, the peripheral position of the subject in the school curriculum and the comparatively small amount of time devoted to it, coupled with a lack of appropriate education for teachers, appears likely to be hindering the use of more participative pedagogies and learner-centred methodologies to a greater extent than in Germany.

Conclusions and Implications

The primary purpose of this paper was to begin to explore the possibility that a more limited form of political education in Irish schools when compared with German schools may be having a negative impact on the extent to which it is generating interest in politics and engagement in political processes.

In order to begin to explore this hypothesis ESS measures of interest in politics and engagement with political processes in Germany and Ireland were reviewed in the context of the status and practice of political education in Germany and Ireland.

The findings indicate that the population in Ireland exhibits significantly lower levels of interest in politics than does the German population (Section 3). The Irish participants also reported being less engaged in political processes than the Germans with significant differences in levels of activity identified in four of the six items tested. In all four cases, i.e. voting in national elections, signing petitions, boycotting products and participating in lawful demonstrations, the Germans displayed a higher level of engagement than the Irish.

In the remaining two items tested, i.e. contacting a politician and participating in a political party or action group, no statistically significant differences were detected between Germany and Ireland. A possible explanation for this finding may be that these six items exist on a continuum from 'passive' or lower level

engagement/commitment to 'active' or higher level engagement/commitment with voting at one end of this continuum and joining a political party or action group at the other. It may be that the sphere of influence of school-based political education is greater in terms of lower level engagement, at least as it is currently practiced. This is an issue which could be usefully explored in further studies. As a corollary to this point, analysis of the data from the relevant ESS items for both Ireland and Germany support the existence of a significant relationship between interest and participation in political processes.

In parallel, the studies and reports reviewed in the fourth section of this paper confirm that, while political education continues to face significant challenges in Germany, there indeed appears to be a comparatively more limited form of political education in Irish post-primary schools currently. Supporting this conclusion is, most obviously, the fact that considerably less time is devoted to the subject in Ireland than in Germany. For example, Civic, Social and Political Education is offered to students between the ages of 12 and 14 in Ireland for 40 minutes per week compared with two hours per week for those aged between 10 and 18 in Germany. In addition, political education is not currently a component of the senior cycle in Irish post primary schools, and as such, is not offered as an examination subject in the final school leaving examination, the Leaving Certificate (although development of a new optional Leaving Certificate subject, Politics and Society, is currently underway). In contrast, it is a component of the final school leaving examination, the *Abitur*, in Germany. Thus, it would appear that political education has a lower status in Irish post-primary schools than in German post-primary schools with such status identified as being one of two key factors likely to influence the extent to which it generates interest in politics and engagement with political processes.

The second key factor relates to the nature of classroom practice in this subject with a learner-centred, participative approach proving more successful. The studies reviewed in the fourth section suggest that the achievement of this goal continues to pose a challenge as both Ireland and Germany continue to place the emphasis on teacher-centred instruction. This may partly be a result of deficiencies in the training of teachers for this subject in both countries. The smaller amount of time allocated to the subject in Ireland, however, is likely to exacerbate the impact of such shortcomings in Ireland. The findings of the large-scale studies on citizenship education conducted by the IEA in 1999 and 2009 provide tentative support for this hypothesis although obviously they do not allow for direct comparisons between Ireland and Germany.

These findings from the studies considered can reasonably be interpreted as providing tentative support for the suggestion that political education is generating interest in politics and participation in political processes to a lesser extent in Ireland than in Germany. In the Introduction to this paper, the lack of understanding of the relationship between political education in schools and the development of active participatory citizens was touched upon. However, many of the studies reviewed above suggest that political education in schools potentially has a key role to play in the political socialisation of young people. While factors core to the achievement of its objectives by political education have been identified (Introduction) and include placing the subject at the heart of the curriculum, ensuring an open class-room and school climate and the use of learner-centred methodologies, there is nonetheless a considerable need for on-going classroom-based research including for example active case-study research and ethnographic studies (see for example Bryan and Bracken 2011). Indeed, as Gallagher (2008, 25) argues, we are still in the process of

discovering what constitutes good practice in the field of citizenship education. In addition, as Gleeson (2009: 45, 55) discusses, many teachers lack sufficient exposure to educational research in general with some educational research lacking in practical applications.

Regarding policy implications, as we have seen, a key objective of political education in schools in both Ireland and Germany is to engage pupils to a greater extent in politics and political processes and to raise their level of interest in and awareness of political issues. Research in this field indicates that this objective is more likely to be achieved in an open, trusting, learner-centred classroom characterised by active teaching methodologies. Therefore, in order to create a framework for political education in which such an approach is more likely, even with the level of understanding we have currently, a number of additional steps could be taken in both Germany and Ireland and particularly in Ireland.

Firstly, political education should be afforded parity of esteem with other academic subjects in terms of the classroom contact time allocated to it. Secondly, in Ireland, plans to introduce political education under the title 'Politics and Society' into the senior cycle programme (ages 15-18) could be progressed bearing in mind the challenges currently faced by CSPE in the development and implementation of this particular subject. Indeed, the value of division of curricula into discrete subjects has in itself been the subject of debate (for example Gleeson 2009) and is of particular relevance to political education given its tendency to permeate entire curricula. Further discussion of this point is, however, beyond the scope of this current paper.

Thirdly, the need to recognise the 'critical need for meaningful' Political Education in Germany and Ireland (Avery 2007, 36) as distinct from education for business or economics is also recognised. Finally, appropriate teacher training, both in-service and initial teacher education, in more contemporary approaches to teaching and assessing political education is critical if this subject is to benefit more from active teaching methodologies and more suitable forms of assessment, particularly 'assessment for learning rather than assessment for grading' (Gleeson 2009: 126), and contribute to what Hahn (2010, 12) calls the development of 'participatory attitudes, dispositions and competencies' (see also Niens and McIlrath 2010, 81). Ideally, in order to take advantage of the 'great possibility for meaningful learning experiences offered by citizenship education' (Jeffers 2008: 21), such changes would be made in tandem with and monitored by case-study based, action research which could provide a basis for adjusting policies and curricula on an on-going basis.

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