

# Policy Submission

**Submission to the  
National Council for Curriculum  
and Assessment  
on Developing Senior Cycle Education**

**June 2003**

**POLICY SUBMISSION TO  
NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT  
ON  
DEVELOPING SENIOR CYCLE EDUCATION**

**JUNE 2003**

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**SUBMISSION TO THE NCCA ON THE REVIEW OF SENIOR CYCLE EDUCATION  
BY  
THE COMBAT POVERTY AGENCY  
June 2003**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Combat Poverty Agency welcomes the publication of the NCCA Discussion Document *Developing Senior Cycle Education Consultative Paper on Issues and Options*. This submission puts forward Combat Poverty's views on the future of senior cycle education. It is separate to the prior submission (May 2003) made based on the consultation with the community and voluntary sector. This consultation, co-hosted by Combat Poverty and NCCA, informed the development of the Combat Poverty submission. This submission supplements the oral submission made by Combat Poverty at a bilateral consultation meeting with the NCCA on 10<sup>th</sup> June.

- **In relation to the purpose of the document**, Combat Poverty endorses the NCCA statement of the need for a clear vision of how senior cycle education can be further developed to ensure that the needs of individual learners and of society are met in the context of a rapidly changing society (p. 2). Combat Poverty also agrees that any new developments need to be feasible and adequately resourced.
- **In relation to the consultative process** which is being implemented by the NCCA, Combat Poverty welcomes the inclusion of the wide-ranging perspectives of the partners in education, the community and voluntary sector and other interested individuals and groups. In particular Combat Poverty supports the practice of consultation with groups working on behalf of those who experience educational disadvantage and welcomes the intention to include student voices through engagement with student councils, youth and other appropriate fora. Such a consultative process should be continued into the future.
- **In relation to the content and focus of the document**, Combat Poverty welcomes its focus on the core issues of the nature of the senior cycle experience, curricular breadth and balance and differentiation, the broadening of assessment approaches, and the establishing of provision that would contribute to social cohesion (p. 7).

Combat Poverty welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to the discussion document.

The submission is presented in three parts.

1. The context for the submission, including Combat Poverty's relevant education work and some key challenges identified by Combat Poverty in relation to current education policy development;
2. Responses to selected issues highlighted in the document;
3. Summary of key recommendations made.

## SECTION 1 CONTEXT FOR THIS SUBMISSION

### 1.1 Combat Poverty Agency

The Combat Poverty Agency is a statutory advisory agency working for the prevention and elimination of poverty and social exclusion. It was set up under the Combat Poverty Act 1986. Our aim, set out in our mission statement is *to promote a more just and inclusive society by working for the prevention and elimination of poverty and social exclusion.*

### The Work of the Combat Poverty

Ultimately Combat Poverty's job is to advise policy makers about the best strategies to tackle poverty and bring about a fairer society. Combat Poverty does this in four main ways:

- Policy advice to the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, and Government
- Research into the causes and effects of poverty
- Raising public awareness about poverty through publications, conferences and the media
- Supporting innovative community development and anti-poverty projects

Combat Poverty's work is underpinned by the belief that educational equality is core to the development of an inclusive society and the eradication of poverty. Furthermore, Combat Poverty believes that education can be an effective anti-poverty measure if:

- Quality education is made available to all young people
- Schools and teachers develop an understanding of the barriers which children experiencing poverty and other forms of social exclusion have to overcome if they are to participate fully in the education system
- Measures to prevent educational failure are put in place at a number of critical points in the education cycle
- Compensatory education is available for adults as contribution to breaking the cycle of disadvantage arising from poor educational opportunities
- Community involvement in education is supported and encouraged in order to enable education to be more responsive to people's needs and to be proactive in addressing these
- Lifelong learning is facilitated by continuity and connection between schooling and adult education and between school, home and community provision.

Since its establishment Combat Poverty has commissioned and supported a significant body of research on educational disadvantage. A full list is available from

Combat Poverty's publications list. It may be noted here that reports such as Boldt et al. 1998; Cullen, 1998; Kellaghan et al., 1995; Morgan, 1995; Rourke, 1995; and the work of Combat Poverty's Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage have contributed insights that informed key developments in educational policy and practice relating to educational disadvantage.

As part of its public awareness work the Combat Poverty Agency promotes and supports the inclusion of social/political education and education for citizenship in the post primary curriculum.

Since 1990 the range of education and curriculum related work includes:

- Involvement in feasibility and pilot phase of Junior Cycle (JC) Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE). This included input into development of Unit Three – *Going National* and in-service training for teachers
- Design of Contemporary Issues module for pilot phase of Leaving Certificate Applied Programme and subsequent input into in-service, resources, resource material provision and evaluation of the module
- In-service and resource material provision for Transition Year including the development of resource *Poverty in Focus* and the design and in-servicing of pilot media studies module entitled *Take a Better Look*
- Provision of resource material and in-service for specific subject areas including Religious Education and Home Economics
- Development of syllabus review submissions and teacher guidelines including Geography, Economics, Home Economics and Religious Education
- Submission to Expert Advisory Groups on Teacher Education (primary and post-primary)
- Promotion and support of social justice education, with a global perspective, as part of WEBS (formerly DETY) Network
- Funding of a curriculum development project "*Poverty, the Curriculum and the Classroom*" within the CDVEC CDU, to explore strategies for introduction of poverty as a social issue into the classroom
- Drafting, publication and promotion of *Food Issues* a second year Junior Cycle module
- Co-hosting of national seminar on *Issues, Opportunities and Challenges for Social, Political and Development Education in the Post-Primary Classroom* with National Committee for Development Education and Network of Grassroots Organisations in Development Education. Publication of conference proceedings.

- With the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, ADM and CDVEC CDU commissioning and publishing *Education for Reconciliation, A Curriculum Investigation*.
- With the Equality Authority and a number of NGOs, currently finalising a curriculum related web site for students, parents, teachers and community groups on poverty, equality and children's rights. ([www.cspe.ie](http://www.cspe.ie))
- With the CDVEC CDU and local education networks, management and funding of a Poverty Awareness Module for teachers in Killinarden through the work of Combat Poverty's Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage.
- With the CDVEC CDU, hosting a seminar series, *Charting the Future*, which examined Social and Political Education in the Senior Cycle of Post-Primary Schools.

The experience gained through this work helps to inform this submission.

## **1.2 Combat Poverty Perspective on Educational Disadvantage**

The wider context in which the senior cycle review is taking place is one that reflects a growing awareness at national level of the extent and impact of the problems of educational disadvantage and early school leaving. The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) (2002), noted that while significant progress has been achieved in that retention levels to Leaving Certificate have increased from 60% to 80% over the last 20 years, the under-representation of poorer socio-economic groups at senior cycle remains, and policy has not yet been able to address this issue. Noting that there has been very little relative improvement in the situation since its earlier report in 1997, the Forum states:

*'In 1999, the year for which most up to date statistics are available, almost 13,000 young people left before completion of the Leaving Certificate, of whom 2,400 or 3.2% left with no formal qualifications.'*  
(2002, p.31).

In relation to poverty specifically, the literature indicates strong links between educational disadvantage and poverty. Quoting Kellaghan et al. (1995), Boldt notes:

*'When economic limitations leave families with no resources beyond those needed for survival, it is obvious that children will not be in a position to benefit fully from educational provision'* Drawing from INTO research, Boldt et al. also highlights poverty impacts such as feelings of exclusion and humiliation related to the inability to afford uniforms, school books and school trips, hunger, tiredness, inadequate clothing and poor health.  
(1998, p. 13).



The impact of these experiences on the lives of those involved was emphasised by the 1997 NESF report. It noted the critical impact of educational disadvantage on the overall life chances of those affected and the fact it *"can lead to a life of uncertainty, marginalisation and dependence on the structures of social assistance."* (1997, p.9). In particular the report highlighted the fact that level of educational attainment is a factor strongly linked to the likelihood of participation in the labour market. The evidence suggests that those who leave school early, particularly without qualifications are likely to be unemployed and to eventually find themselves in a situation of long-term unemployment.

At policy level, a process of review has been underway since the mid 1990s within the Irish Education system, with particular reference to the ability of the system to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and facilitate the social inclusion of all citizens.

In relation to educational disadvantage, the White Paper on Education (1995) suggested that three key principles underpin current policy:

- A continuum of provision from early childhood to adulthood;
- A holistic approach focusing on the curriculum, the individual, the whole-school organisation and the national educational framework;
- A community based response based on integration of schools and relevant services.

In particular, the White Paper emphasised its commitment to positive discrimination as a means to achieve equality, and stated:

*'Measures to promote equality will include allocating resources to those in greatest need, providing appropriate support systems, and changing the tangible and intangible qualities of the system itself to cater for the diverse educational needs and interests of the population. It will also include strategies for the earliest feasible intervention to support children at risk of educational failure and will develop specific measures to continue special supports for such children throughout their education.'* (p.7)

In recent years, this commitment has been reflected in a number of policy initiatives of successive Governments that have aimed to address educational disadvantage at national level. One key initiative is the *National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS, 1997)*. This represents a major policy initiative by the State to place the needs of the poor and socially excluded at the top of the national agenda in Government policy development and action. NAPS has educational disadvantage as one of its five main themes and sets three key educational targets

- To half the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulties by 2006
- To reduce the proportion of the population aged 16-64 with restricted literacy to below 10 to 20 per cent by 2007
- To reduce the number of young people who leave school early, so that the percentage of those who complete upper secondary or equivalent will reach 85 per cent by 2003 and 90 per cent by 2006.

Furthermore NAPS set out to put institutional mechanisms in place *‘...to ensure that the issue of reducing poverty and social exclusion is firmly on the agenda of all government departments and agencies and that there is appropriate co-ordination across and between departments on policy in this area’* (NAPS, 1995c, p.1).

As noted by Boldt et al.

*‘The NAPS Working Group on Educational Disadvantage identified the promotion of partnerships, widespread collaboration and consultation, and the development and expansion of networks in communities among parents, schools, employers’ agencies and training services as strategies to combat the problem’.*  
(1998, p.11).

*The National Development Plan 2000-2006* (1999) reaffirms Government commitment in NAPS. The Plan sets out a national strategy to sustain and develop Ireland's economic and social development. It emphasises the promotion of social inclusion as a central objective, and commits substantial national resources to strategies that promote education and service integration to meet the needs of those areas and groups experiencing poverty and social exclusion throughout the country.

Combat Poverty also acknowledges the development of the Social Inclusion Unit in the Department of Education and Science, the Educational Disadvantage Committee and Forum and the National Educational Welfare Board as important institutional developments concerned with educational disadvantage.

The above policy initiatives were set against the backdrop of an extensive literature (from Combat Poverty and other sources) which aimed to provide an understanding and analysis of educational disadvantage and the challenges involved (e.g. Boldt & Devine, 1999, 1997; Johnston 1998; NESF, 1997; Kellaghan et al. 1995; CMRS 1992). While it is beyond the brief of this document to engage in a detailed review of this literature, it is useful to note key areas of relevance to the arguments presented in this submission. These include the following:

- **Conceptual definitions** of the term 'educational disadvantage' - Elements typically involved in these definitions are the child's experience in school, their ability to benefit from the process of schooling and their leaving of school early (often without qualifications) (e.g. Kellaghan et al, 1995, Crooks and Stokes eds. 1987, CMRS, 1992 Boldt and Devine, 1998). Bolt and Devine emphasise the complex conditions and interrelated factors which educational disadvantage usually represents and suggest that this makes it a difficult concept to define in a way which facilitates setting measurable criteria for its reduction or elimination. Drawing from the range of definitional approaches within the literature, Boldt and Devine, (1998, p. 10) offer the following definition of educational disadvantage:

*'In relation to a student in the formal education system, educational disadvantage may be considered to be a limited ability to derive an equitable benefit from schooling compared to one's peers by age, as a result of school demands, approaches, assessments and expectations which do not correspond to the student's knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours into which (s)he has been socialised (as opposed to those to which (s)he is naturally endowed.)'*

- **Understanding of causes and effects** of 'educational disadvantage' - Within the literature, agreement exists that a multiplicity of factors is involved, and that these factors are intertwined to the extent that it's difficult to separate cause and effect. They include the following:
  - Poverty - limited economic resources leave families with no resources beyond those needed for survival and this means that children will not be in a position to benefit fully from educational provision, (see Kellaghan et al.1995, INTO, 1994).
  - Literacy problems which result in the student being unable to cope with the demands of the formal school curriculum (see Archer and O'Flaherty, 1986, Fontes and Kellaghan, 1977);
  - Socio-economic characteristics of the student's family (including such factors as unemployment of the main breadwinner), (see Breen, 1984, Hannan, 1986, Sexton, 1988);
  - School organisation and curricula, including the degree to which schools understand the child's community culture (see Hannan, 1987, O'Brien 1990.)

In parallel with such theoretical discussions, the debate on educational disadvantage has also been informed by the practice and findings of an increasing number of initiatives which have been set up to respond to educational disadvantage. Included in these are:

- **Formal education system measures** developed by the Department of Education and Science. These include initiatives such as pre-schooling, home-school liaison, remedial teaching, guidance and psychological services, initiatives such as *Early Start*, *Breaking the Cycle*, *8-15 Early School Leaving Initiative* (ESLI) and the *Stay in School Retention Initiative* (SSRI), and also ancillary services and resources for schools in disadvantaged areas. All of these represent a wide range of initiatives aimed at targeting schools and individual children with a view to needs identification, in-school and out-of school support services, parental involvement and development and the integrated delivery of the services of collaborating agencies to the young people and their families. Of particular note is the new *School Completion Programme*. This programme subsumes the ESLI and the SSRI and will form a key component of the Department's strategy to both prevent and respond to early school leaving (re-defined within this programme as leaving before completion of senior cycle education). Selected schools at primary and second levels that form an educational community network serving areas of highest levels of early school leaving have been invited to participate in the programme. Schools and other key local agencies/groups are required to work with parents to devise a collaborative programme of in-school and out-of school actions – the Retention Plan – that will prevent early school leaving and support young people with characteristics and behaviour indicative of real risk. Initial observations on the potential of this programme are mixed. The NESF report (2002) notes its potential for a more concerted response to early school leaving as it provides for schools to develop more effective strategies, like tracking, out-of-school support and outreach, family support, mentoring, staff development and parental development.
- **Non-formal measures** - these include a range of community-based activities such as after-school projects, homework clubs, Transition programmes, parenting initiatives etc. delivered by local community/development organisations or agencies whose work includes provision for young people e.g. youth services, community development projects, family resource centres, drugs projects, Gardai. Mainstream provision by Probation & Welfare services and FAS is also included.

Mainstream provision for early school leavers within the non-formal context is provided through the Youthreach Programme which is delivered in four settings: VEC Youthreach Centres; FAS Community Training Workshops (CTWs); Senior Traveller Training Centres (STTCs) and Justice Workshops for young offenders.

Much of the work in the non-formal sector in relation to early school leaving is organised through the Youth Work sector and the potential of this sector to deliver complimentary educational supports is increasingly being recognised (Rourke, 1999; Boldt and Devine, 1998). In 2001, a Youth Work Act was introduced by Government. The purpose of the Act was to provide a legal framework for the provision of youth work programmes and services by the Minister, the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and the National and Regional Youth Organisations.

While this Act has not yet been implemented, it is hoped that the new development will 'put priorities in youth work on a more strategic level and will provide a much-needed framework for the development of the sector as whole' (NESF, 2002). Within this context, a recommendation by the NESF is that all existing community-based youth programmes aimed at prevention and response to early school leaving should be linked in effectively with schools, and programmes like Youthreach, in order to ensure access to systems of accreditation.

To date, significant learning has emerged from the different initiatives which have been implemented. Overall this learning has underlined the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of the needs of the children and young people involved, and the fact that no one agency or provider can respond to these needs. It has pointed to the need for an integrated response in which the involvement of schools, community and statutory agencies, parents and children is facilitated. Shortcomings have been identified concerning policy supporting this provision. In particular, these include:

- inadequate resources in relation to the scale and depth of the need identified (Johnston, 1997);
- the lack of inclusion of community representation in relevant decision-making in relation to formal education system measures in particular, (Whelan et al. 1996);
- and the limited availability of support for documenting and evaluating community sector pilot educational actions and mainstreaming models of good practice (Johnston, 1997).

## **SECTION 2. RESPONSES TO SELECTED ISSUES HIGHLIGHTED BY THE DISCUSSION DOCUMENT**

A number of priority areas are selected for discussion in this submission:

- 1) Equality, Access and Lifelong Learning
- 2) Curriculum Development
- 3) Assessment, Certification and Qualifications

### **2.1 Equality, Access and Lifelong Learning**

#### **2.1.1 Equality**

As already noted in section 1.2, there have been some positive developments in recent years in relation to educational equality in Irish society. It is the view of the Combat Poverty Agency that a key factor in the progress achieved was the explicit focus within education policy statements on *equality* as a core principle for educational developments. Besides encouraging research and debate on the concept and implementation of educational equality, this focus also facilitated a policy commitment to providing the additional educational supports and resources required to counteract the barriers experienced by disadvantaged students. In view of the importance of sustaining this progress, Combat Poverty believes that it is vital that the principle of equality is restated explicitly as core to any proposed developments of senior cycle education.

In practice this would mean that the NCCA proposal would go beyond a general statement of commitment to equality and would incorporate:

- (a) a clear statement that *equality* should be a core principle underpinning senior cycle education (reference is made to the statement in the White Paper on Adult Education, p. 13 section (b)).
- (b) a statement of the equality objectives which flow from this principle (reference is made to the White Paper on Education p. 6, 43 and 50).

#### *Poverty-proofing*

From an anti-poverty perspective specifically, Combat Poverty also believes that a recommendation should be made by NCCA that developments within senior cycle education should be poverty-proofed by the Department of Education and Science. This means that they should be assessed at the design and review stages to establish their likely impact on reducing poverty and inequality. Such an approach is

a central pillar of the Government's National Anti-Poverty Strategy which is endorsed by the National Development Plan for 2000 –2006.

#### *Joined-up policy*

It is also recommended that the Department of Education and Science should pro-actively encourage other relevant Government Departments to commit at policy level to a collaborative provision of the range of resources and supports necessary for a holistic response to educational disadvantage. While it is acknowledged that education provision has a key role to play in tackling poverty and disadvantage, it is clear that education alone cannot address the multi-dimensional issues involved. The Senior Cycle review of the NCCA could take more account of ways to improve the integration of curriculum implementation with other facets of learners' everyday experience. Combat Poverty believes that it is vital that policy development on senior cycle education is particularly linked with policy development on community development, family supports, health supports and employment training.

#### **2.1.2 Access**

The question posed by the NCCA discussion document as to how well can learners access senior cycle programmes and further life long learning is one of particular importance for students experiencing poverty and other forms of social exclusion. As noted within the NCCA discussion document, key issues are the flexibility of the different programmes to respond to needs of different student groups and the degree to which barriers to access for particular students can be removed.

With regard to students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, Combat Poverty suggests that a key challenge for the development of senior cycle education will be how to strengthen insights and understanding of:

- their needs in relation to senior cycle education
- the barriers they experience both in accessing and participating in different programmes on offer
- the barriers they experience both in accessing and participating in further lifelong learning opportunities
- how these barriers can be addressed.

#### *Lessons from research and demonstration projects*

In relation to this challenge, Combat Poverty stresses the need for continued Government support for quality research and demonstration projects on these matters. Positive examples of such research include the Combat Poverty *Demonstration Project on Educational Disadvantage*, and the CDVEC CDU/Combat Poverty *Project Poverty, the Curriculum and the Classroom*. Significant insights have

been provided by both of these projects in relation to educational disadvantage and poverty awareness issues. For example in one of the reports on the Demonstration Project, *Integrated Services and Children at Risk* (1997) strong indications are provided of the value of an integrated approach to combating educational disadvantage. The report emphasised the value of achieving more effective home-school- community linkages based on an analysis that recognised that educational disadvantage grows out of a discontinuity between the school and non-school experiences of disadvantaged children and that interventions need to go beyond conventional schooling.

A key insight, provided by the evaluation report on the project *Poverty, the Curriculum and the Classroom* (2002) is the value of an active partnership between schools and local community groups in planning and delivery of effective social education projects. This report highlights how such a mechanism can result in transfer of skills and knowledge between teachers and community workers and an alleviation of anxiety among teachers about teaching controversial topics within poverty awareness and social education.

To date there has been a predominant focus on junior cycle education in relation to targeting attention and resources on children identified as at risk of early school drop out before completion of junior cycle education. As evidenced by the expansion of the age group targeted by the 8-15 Initiative to the 8-18 year age group now being targeted by the new School Completion Programme, policy focus regarding school retention is now shifting to include senior cycle education. In view of the valuable contribution research focusing on junior cycle experience has made to highlighting and addressing equality issues for students, there is now need to broaden the research focus to include senior cycle education.

### **2.1.3 Lifelong Learning**

In relation to access to lifelong learning, Combat Poverty highlights the need to ensure that senior cycle education is sufficiently flexible to facilitate delivery by non-formal providers for those whose needs are not met within the formal system. Increasing opportunities are available for delivery of mainstream senior cycle programmes to students by non-formal providers. However, there is a general consensus that senior cycle programme curricula structure (content and approach) and assessment procedures do not have the necessary flexibility to be responsive to the alternative approaches of the non-formal sector. This means there is a danger that although interventions to retain and re-engage such students, to completion of senior cycle education may be effective, the inflexibility of the system and the lack of policy linkage with the formal sector may actually prevent their educational progress



and limit their access to lifelong learning opportunities. This situation particularly applies in relation to the potential effectiveness of the School Completion Programme. Noting the value of a number of existing initiatives '*Linking Education in the Workplace*' in Tallaght, Northside and Clondalkin Partnership areas, the NESF notes:

*'The Team's view is that greater flexibility on where and how education is delivered could enhance the potential of such initiatives. As a first step, it recommends that the Leaving Certificate Applied should be extended more widely so that students can undertake it on a part-time basis while at work'.*  
(p. 75).

#### *Learning from models of out-of-school delivery of Senior Cycle programmes*

A good example of out of school delivery of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme is the project developed by Tralee Education Network as part of the Combat Poverty Agency Demonstration Project. Tralee Education Network (a partnership between Kerry Education Services (Co VEC) and Kerry Diocesan Youth Service) supported and developed a Leaving Certificate Applied Option which they felt provided more progression opportunities for existing Youthreach graduates. The report on the project noted:

*'The actual learning programme provided a unique opportunity to incorporate the methodologies of Youthreach and other youth-based education and training into a formally accredited system. This consideration was particularly important as it potentially helped affirm the previous contribution of youth services in developing learning programmes for young people.'*  
(1998, p.27)

Combat Poverty believes that developments of Senior Cycle Education should have particular regard for the needs of those completing senior cycle programmes within informal provision and should ensure that developments enhance the capacity of this sector to respond to their students' needs. These developments should also enhance the work of the School Completion Programmes.

#### *Access to further education*

The almost total reliance on the Leaving Certificate to provide a route for progression to further education is unhelpful and might be lessened by a greater promotion at school, home and community levels of the opportunities offered by FETAC.

#### 2.1.4 Role of Teachers

In highlighting the importance of insights and understanding into the needs and difficulties of students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, Combat Poverty particularly wishes to draw attention to the need to facilitate greater engagement of senior cycle teachers in this process. In view of their close 'front line' relationship with senior cycle pupils, which in some cases can span two to three years, Combat Poverty believes that they are observing at first hand the difficulties that curriculum content, delivery and assessment procedures may cause for particular students. In Combat Poverty's view, the potential for teachers within the senior cycle to contribute their insights on the issues involved for students from disadvantaged backgrounds has not been fully recognised and a valuable source of insight has remained untapped. As noted by the NCCA discussion document:

*'The fundamental purpose of education is to enable learners to live their lives to their fullest potential as individuals within democratic society. In this sense educational aims must attend both to the needs of the individual, to the needs of society and to the interface between the two – the domain of the individual in society.'* (p. 30).

#### *Poverty awareness and teacher education*

In order to address this situation, the Combat Poverty Agency suggests that the NCCA review should recommend that all teachers involved in senior cycle education should be provided with structured professional opportunities (within initial teacher training and continuous in-service training) to enhance their awareness of issues related to poverty and inequality generally and their skills of analysis of the issues involved. In Combat Poverty's experience such an opportunity would be a welcome one to many teachers. As noted by Cullen in his report on the Demonstration Project (1998, p. 13), *'Schools are increasingly recognising that to improve the educational performance of at-risk children efforts must be made to remove learning barriers that arise from problems outside school in the community.'* Boltd et al. also highlight the importance of such insight in ensuring that pedagogy and curricula are relevant to students' needs and based on a respect for the culture and worldview of children from different backgrounds (1998, p. 19).

A number of elements are recommended for inclusion into these professional development opportunities for teachers:

- ***Awareness of poverty and social inequality*** – this should include an understanding of the concept of poverty within an international and global framework. It should involve opportunities to develop insights into the structural nature of issues such as poverty and exclusion, and an empathetic

understanding of how they are experienced by individual students and their families. As well as an understanding of socio-economic disadvantage, teachers need to develop an understanding of other sources of exclusion and awareness of how gender, race, ethnicity and disability may interact with economic poverty to produce multiple forms of deprivation.

- **Skills** - In order to enhance their understanding of poverty and social disadvantage, and engage in needs analysis and feedback, teachers must also have opportunities to develop a range of skills including, analytic skills, communication and interpersonal skills. They must be facilitated to interpret students' behaviours and to understand the challenging behaviour of those students whose negative experiences of school and other contexts have undermined self-esteem and compounded existing disadvantage. This will enable them to become confident in managing student behaviours and to ensure that they retain high educational expectations for these students and to help them to raise their own educational expectations.

Teachers should also be enabled to engage critically with sociological research and with media reporting of it. They should also become aware of the importance of community development and of action at local level to combat poverty and exclusion.

- **Understanding of the social role of schools** - Teachers should have opportunities to reflect on the fact that schools can function either as providers of opportunities to enhance life chances or as agents of reproduction of inequality (Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Smyth, 1999). While the mechanisms by which schools carry out these roles are relatively complex, it is extremely important that teachers have opportunities to develop an understanding of the implications for senior cycle education of educational practices such as selection, streaming, provision and allocation of subjects, supports for students subject and career choices, measures to prevent early school-leaving and/or senior cycle early drop out

In relation to delivery of these training opportunities Combat Poverty recommends close collaboration with the community sector. As demonstrated by the CDVEC CDU and Combat Poverty *Poverty, The Curriculum and the Classroom*, the shared insights and skills transfers arising from the Partnership between schools and community groups greatly enriches poverty awareness education. A further recommendation is that schools should be encouraged to include this kind of in service training in their whole school plan.

### 2.1.5 Role of Guidance

The Agency stresses the vital role of quality guidance and support within senior cycle education (including follow up after leaving school) for students from socio-economically disadvantaged families. For students experiencing poverty, availability of money is clearly likely to mean significant limits on the breadth of choice realistically available to them in relation to further education or later lifelong learning opportunities. Further constraints arising from the impact of inter-generational educational disadvantage are, however, also likely to come into play for these students.

As CORI note:

*‘There is need to understand that middle class families are more knowledgeable about how the system works and what it can offer. They are also better placed to negotiate the complexities of the system, particularly in relation to making favorable subject choices, while less advantaged students are unlikely to have the benefit of family knowledge regarding career choices etc.*

*(1998, p. 24).*

Students who are disadvantaged will need a continuum of supports throughout the senior cycle and as a follow on to their completion of that cycle if they are to have equality of opportunity and outcome from lifelong learning and access to a quality progression experience. In-school supports should include well informed career guidance, not just as a provision in its own right but also as a cross-curricular support provided by all teachers. As noted in the Consultative Process Background Document of the Commission on the Points, ‘the National Centre for Guidance in Education maintains that good quality, comprehensive guidance can significantly contribute to broadening the views of second-level students and their parents on diverse pathways to careers. (1998, p. 119). Ideally lifelong learning supports will also be mediated through effective school-community-business networks developed by the school (as demonstrated by the Combat Poverty Demonstration Programme on Education Disadvantage). It should be noted in this regard that the new School Completion Programmes are likely to be in a position to facilitate such a process.

While Combat Poverty acknowledges that many of the influences on the chances of some students for equality of opportunity and outcome from lifelong learning and/or employment may be beyond the scope of influence of senior cycle education in schools, this is nonetheless a key transition period for students as they move into young adulthood and prepare to take on the relevant responsibilities.

## **2.2. Curriculum Development**

At an overview level, the Combat Poverty Agency fully endorses the thrust of the NCCA Discussion Document in relation to curriculum reform.

In view of the extensive research evidence that highlights the difficulties often involved for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the Combat Poverty Agency recommends that the review must take special note of the following concerns.

- The linguistic orientation of the current system both in terms of its cognitive content and mode of assessment means that most students must be proficient in written linguistic self expression if they are to perform well and achieve in the schools system. There is need to include consideration of media which could allow for expression through other intellectual orientations such as visual spatial, bodily kinaesthetic, musical or interpersonal spheres
- The need for emphasis on a wider curriculum which fosters positive attitudes in all young people, regardless of social class, gender, disability or ethnic group, to on-going engagement with lifelong learning and which also prepares them for adult life and wider civic responsibilities. This wider curriculum would also be more inclusive of non-academic subjects. Furthermore subjects should be audited in order to identify those which are more conducive to the development of positive attitudes and life long learning.
- The lack of opportunities for learners to develop their personal or thinking skills. Any changes to the senior cycle curriculum should provide opportunities for development of student's critical analysis and their social development.
- The need for the curriculum to reflect cultural diversity and demonstrate respect for the different social and cultural backgrounds of different student groups
- The opportunities provided by the review to name key areas of experience to which all students should be exposed. Learning outcomes and key skills can be named and assessment based on these.

In a wider sense the proposed curriculum at senior cycle must provide a platform for schools and other educational institutions to re-think their approaches to teaching and learning and, more importantly, to re-think 'their indicators and measures of success in a manner likely to facilitate a vision of children as learners rather than

competitors' (Lynch, 2001). The challenge is how to make the curriculum relevant, positive and accessible, particularly in an era of increasing diversity. As Granville and Malone note, this challenge involves: 'a challenge to the status quo; a challenge to the underlying values of the curriculum; a breaking of the silence and a giving of voice to make sense of what students are experiencing in their every day lives.' (CDU / Combat Poverty 2001).

As noted in the Combat Poverty submission on Teacher Training, a further challenge is to encourage a 'whole school approach' to all subject areas. This submission noted:

*'While teacher education courses have traditionally focused on teaching skills and educational understanding within the context of individual school subjects, the introduction of Department of Education and Science initiatives such as whole school development shift the focus towards collegial and collective approaches to a range of educational issues. Student teachers need to be enabled to work within such a context and to contribute constructively to the development of such a school climate.'*

### **2.2.1 Provision For Social And Political Education At Senior Cycle**

In relation to specific areas for curriculum development, a key recommendation by the Combat Poverty is for the inclusion of specific, dedicated provision for social and political education (SPE) at senior cycle. (A detailed submission on this recommendation, *Towards Social, Political and Citizenship Education in the Established Leaving Certificate*, was presented to the NCCA in January 2000. The discussion below presents a summary outline of some the key points made within that submission).

- ***Understanding of concept 'curriculum' which informs the argument made***

The Agency's recommendation is one informed by the definition of curriculum outlined in the Education White Paper.

*'The term curriculum encompasses the content, structure and processes of teaching and learning which the school provides in accordance with its educational objectives and values. It includes specific and implicit elements. The specific elements are those concepts, skills, areas of knowledge and attitudes which children learn at school, as part of their personal and social development. The implicit elements are those factors which make up the ethos and general environment of the school. The curriculum in school is concerned not only with the subjects taught but also how and why they are*

*taught and with the outcomes of this activity for the learner'* (Department of Education and Science 1995)

This inclusive notion of curriculum is particularly relevant to the development of social/political and citizenship education and in particular its stress on the importance of the school ethos and environment.

- ***Current Context and Rationale for inclusion of SPE at Senior Cycle***

Combat Poverty has identified a number of factors that currently exist in Ireland which it considers to be relevant to the further development of social and political education.

These relate to:

- ***The Civic/Political Context***

The need for knowledge and understanding of current civic and political debates and new structures and agreements that have been set up (e.g. Equality Authority and Equality legislation, Human Rights Commission, various UN Declarations)

- ***The Social/Economic Context***

Despite many positive changes including a drop in the level and depth of actual poverty, there is still a range of issues to be addressed – (e.g. relative poverty, racism and discrimination).

- ***The Educational Context***

There are opportunities for continuity with Junior Certificate CSPE and the valuable lessons learned can be carried forward. Learning is also available from the Social Education Programme in Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied and Link Modules in LCVP and also from a number of innovative curricular initiatives recently or currently being developed, including those in the areas of human rights education, education for peace and reconciliation, anti-racist and multi-cultural education, anti-poverty education and education for gender equality.

- ***Context for Young People's Lives***

In general young people in Ireland are living in a more complex world than previous generations and this has implications for the type of education required to equip them to understand and be able to play a full and constructive role in shaping this complex world.

- ***Proposed Senior Cycle SPE Model***

The Agency believes that the education system should provide a vision of Irish society that is committed to the values of social equity and justice. This ethos should

permeate all levels of education and all subject areas and should enable all participants in the education system to learn to respect and value themselves and others (Combat Poverty Submission to the Green Paper p. 7/8). It is reflected in Combat Poverty's education approach which promotes:

- Skills development e.g. critical thinking, communication, presentation)
- Positive attitudinal development e.g. tolerance, empathy
- Conceptual understanding e.g. justice, human rights, relative poverty
- Knowledge acquisition e.g. causes of poverty, extent and nature of poverty, tackling poverty

In relation to the specific focus for social and political education Combat Poverty envisages that one of the most fundamental understandings that students might achieve within a Senior Cycle SPE is that societies and their political and economic systems are shaped by human beings and therefore can be changed by them. In order to achieve this Combat Poverty believes that the subject should be informed by a set of essential concepts similar to those in the Junior Certificate CSPE course. These would include

- Equality
- Social Justice
- Human rights
- Democracy – both representative and participatory
- Consultation and participation
- Dialogue and collaboration
- Sustainable development
- Reconciliation.

The content should be accessible and not overly academic and where feasible it should be related to the experience of the student. The content should not be overly prescriptive so as to allow for the development of key issues at local school level that are of relevance to students.

### ***Proposed Methodologies for SPE Senior Cycle Education***

The programme should include an emphasis on developing understanding, skills and attitudes of students as well as focussing on how they learn. The emphasis in the approach being proposed is in line with the development of personal and social skills proposed by the NCCA. These include

- Self Management
- Thinking Skills
- Working with Others
- Physical Skills



- Work, Learning and Study Skills

From the perspective of Combat Poverty experiential and active learning methods have been found to benefit students of all ability levels including those who are not academically inclined. As outlined in the NCCA Discussion Paper on 'Civic, Social and Political Education at Post-Primary level':

*Active Learning can be defined as learning methods where students are given the opportunity to actively engage with the subject, issues or material at hand, through discussion activities, simulations, research activities, action projects etc. -under the guidance of teachers. It is difficult to imagine students as active citizens if their experience of learning about citizenship has been predominantly passive"*  
(NCCA, 1991)

As many learners affected by poverty fall into this category it is particularly important to promote the use of such approaches as it can have a two-fold benefit for such students. It can be part of a meaningful educational and development experience and also can contribute to the learner's capacity to work with others to bring about change in society in relation to an issue which directly affects them.

Combat Poverty recommends that learners be provided with opportunities to engage in well structured and guided action projects. In particular these should be carried out within a model of partnership between the school and the community development sector. (The learning from the CD VEC CDU/Combat Poverty project, *Poverty the Curriculum and the Classroom* is of relevance here)

### ***Impact of SPE on Other Areas of the Curriculum***

It is also suggested that the establishment of SPE as a dedicated subject provision in its own right should not exclude the integration of social and political education into a range of appropriate subject areas and also extra curricular activities. Furthermore the learning methods developed in SPE have broad curricular relevance for both teachers and learners in other areas of the Senior Cycle.

Finally Combat Poverty believes that in order to achieve positive learning outcomes for students in this area the following whole school aspects need to be encouraged:

- The development of the overall culture of the school so that it is an open and respectful environment which is guided by and promotes equality and human rights
- The provision of structures and opportunities for students to input into school policy

- The importance of the support of the school principal for social, political education
- The importance of whole school planning and evaluation
- The need to involve more partners in the educational process particularly local organisations including community development organisations
- The need for schools to develop anti- discrimination policies which are implemented and reviewed

### **2.3 Assessment, Certification and Qualifications**

Assessment is an integral part of the senior cycle programme. It performs a dual function. Firstly it provides a mechanism for managing the teaching and learning process and secondly assessment plays a major role in relation to selection for employment, for further education, for lifelong learning and accreditation of learners.

#### **(a) Assessment for managing the teaching and learning process**

In relation to the role of assessment in managing an effective teaching-learning process, Combat Poverty believes that significant development is needed in the existing system to ensure that difficulties which students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience at senior cycle level, can be identified at the earliest possible stage and alleviated. This is particularly important for students who do not have the advantage of parental/family and/or community knowledge that may alleviate their difficulties. Addressing difficulties for these students is likely to enhance their performance and enable them achieve more positive feedback from teachers.

In relation to in-school experience research focusing on educationally disadvantaged students has consistently shown the importance of positive assessment experience for sustaining motivation and thereby retaining them within the school system. It is recommended that such an approach should be tied to each element of the curriculum, should involve learners and teachers, should be supported by quality guidance provision and should focus on identifying students' particular strengths and weaknesses in relation to the particular curricular area. Combat Poverty recommends that this form of assessment should be based on clear criteria and should incorporate a balance between the following areas of focus:

- initial assessment (a benchmarking of needs and identification of 'where students are at');
- assessing progress (providing feedback and affirmation);
- diagnosis of problems and barriers;
- readiness for summative assessment and progression.

## **(b) Assessment for Selection**

The Combat Poverty Agency draws particular attention to the NCCA document's point that 'the results of such assessment convert into certification, qualifications, a passport to Higher Education and become an important factor in the future work and life prospects of learners.' (p. 42). This fact is consistently borne out in literature on the relationship between educational disadvantage and poverty and unemployment. This research shows clearly that adults who leave school without formal certification and qualifications are more likely to be poor, more likely to be unemployed and less likely to participate in adult education. As noted in the NAPS document under policy actions

*'Education can play a key role in the promotion of equality of opportunity. Educational qualifications, or the lack of them, determine to a large extent the life chances of people. The likelihood of obtaining educational qualifications has been found to be closely associated with social background, to the extent that it is children of the poor who constitute a majority of those who do not benefit from the education system.'*

(1997, p. 9).

This has particular consequences for the role the assessment process plays in selection and the Combat Poverty Agency welcomes the NCCA discussion document's challenge to the dominance of external, terminal, written examinations and general summative assessment approaches for Senior Cycle education. This challenge is particularly important in relation to the established Leaving Certificate programme in which the majority of students participate. Research by CORI (1998) has emphasised the social implications of the use of such methods and has demonstrated how they can contribute to educational disadvantage.

For example:

- students are required to work towards long-term goals, which may seriously disadvantage those such as the children of unemployed or low- paid parents for whom long-term planning is a luxury
- because of the domination of written examinations, certain skills (e.g. literacy) are tested over and over again
- practical knowledge is less likely to be valued
- the skills required for the examination are likely to be emphasised in the classroom, resulting in the provision of a narrow curriculum which does not give sufficient opportunity for the development of multiple forms of intelligence
- students from better off families can avail of a variety of methods for boosting their results (grinds and intensive preparation programmes)

While these consequences are serious for all students, this is particularly the case for those who are already disadvantaged. In this context, Combat Poverty endorses the discussion document's recommendation for a broadening of the range of assessment components employed in the Leaving Certificate examination. The Combat Poverty Agency agrees that this range should be such as to ensure that assessment approaches can meet the diverse needs of students and provide an opportunity to reflect the diverse purposes of diverse curricula. As noted within the Consultation Document of the Commission on the Points, there is potential to build on the developments of the Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programmes. Quoting one submission the report notes;

*'... with the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, it is heartening to see a gradual movement towards catering for the needs and abilities of all students. It also heralds the way for opening doors to alternative forms of assessment rather than the traditional summative type'*  
(p. 117).

The report also notes the National Council for Vocational Awards suggestion that the approaches to assessment that it has developed can inform further developments in Leaving Certificate assessment. The Council highlights the *'variety of modes and techniques of assessment, including coursework, projects, assignments, in addition to the traditional terminal written examination' as well as portfolio assessment.*' (p. 117)

Combat Poverty particularly welcomes the idea proposed in the review of a dual system whereby some parts are assessed in a more formal way while others are more creatively assessed so that a mix of certification is received including a record of achievements beyond a formal examination. Combat Poverty agrees that this could help to alleviate the negative impact of some people's under achievement against particular standards and introduce the flexibility to introduce new forms of learning for accreditation. It is also likely to contribute to a more inclusive and enjoyable experience for all students.

In relation to assessment generally, Combat Poverty agrees with NCCA on the importance of such issues as quality and practicality. As CORI note:

*'If we are to introduce more authentic forms of assessment, we must not lose sight of some of the fundamental principles which should inform assessment. Among these we would include quality, validity and reliability but in addition, we should now add principles such as appropriateness,*

*transparency, openness and rigour. We must keep in mind the importance of administrative and economic feasibility when coming up with new and innovative forms of assessment'.*

(1998, p. 113)

In emphasising the value of these opportunities, Combat Poverty strongly agrees with the NCCA view that it should engage with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to progress articulation and a form of equivalence between 'formal qualifications and other qualifications in the context of a national qualifications framework (46). Furthermore, Combat Poverty endorses the NCCA statement that it is important that curriculum and assessment provision at this level clearly relate to frameworks, structures and institutions established for adult and continuing education.

### **Certification and Qualifications**

Against this backdrop the issue of parity of esteem for different programmes within Senior Cycle education as presently structured must be highlighted. As noted in the NCCA document (p.12) the development of a number of options for senior cycle students was well intentioned in relation to providing more choice to students with different academic orientations, the reality is that the introduction of the new options may not have necessarily benefited students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In effect the evidence suggests that a relatively unified high status Leaving Certificate has been maintained and a two track system has emerged in terms of parity of esteem between the programmes. This concern was reflected in the findings of the NCCA's own review of the Leaving Certificate Applied in 1998 and this was reinforced by a CDVEC CDU report which noted

*' .. students join the Leaving Certificate Applied either because they are advised to do so by their teachers or else because they want to avoid the pressurised learning environment associated with traditional examinations. While they seem to benefit educationally from the changed learning environment, the students nonetheless find themselves at the end of their course facing major barriers.'*

(p. 93/94, 1999).

These barriers included, barriers of structure, in that the students are confined to a limited range of further education courses, no matter how well they perform in the Leaving Certificate Applied examinations, and barriers of prejudice, based on a value system that favours the more traditional liberal education model of the Leaving Certificate Established programme over the more vocational orientation of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme.

The clear indication from this research is that in spite of the value of the alternative programme in relation to meeting the needs of less academically orientated students, the different value placed on the certification awarded for the different programmes can act as a re-enforcement of the disadvantage experienced by these students.

The Combat Poverty/NCCA consultation with community and voluntary sectors concerned with poverty and disadvantaged particularly highlighted a concern, shared by Combat Poverty, about the low public status of Leaving Certificate Applied. The consultation highlighted that this status may be reflective of a prejudice against the students who take the programme rather than necessarily being a value judgement on the quality and standard of the LCA itself.

### **Programme Options**

The issue of parity of esteem has clear implications for the direction Irish senior cycle education takes in the future and Combat Poverty supports the views presented within the NCCA document concerning the direction that progressive education systems are taking into the future:

- Moving from a predominant focus on curricular content to emphasising skills and processes
- A parallel movement from subjects and cognitive attainment to a more holistic view of learning
- A movement away from didactic teaching towards self directed learning
- A breaking down of the false dichotomy between academic and vocational education

(Lawton, 1998)

While a range of options is available for developing senior cycle education, Combat Poverty considers two in particular most relevant to the diverse needs of senior cycle students.

- (i) Option Three in the document proposes a three year cycle combining Transition Year, Leaving Certificate (Established) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme with the Leaving Certificate Applied retaining its ring fencing. Combat Poverty acknowledges that this option has the potential to provide schools with many creative possibilities. A three year programme with an appropriate balance between assessment for learning and assessment for certification and selection could provide learners with a holistic senior cycle experience. If this option is adopted, Combat Poverty recommends a more positive promotion of the Leaving Certificate Applied. This would require more

effort to engage with parents and provide clear information to them on the alternative model of education being made available and the different opportunities provided by the final Leaving Certificate Applied qualification. Efforts for positive promotion could be greatly enhanced by schools utilising the vital channel of student councils to ensure that accurate information is provided to students considering taking the alternative option. Active networking between schools and other providers and key sectoral interests such as business, media and the wider local community would also be vital for promoting support and respect for the programme. At a more fundamental programme level, however, a core issue for the Leaving Certificate Applied programme is the fact that it is 'ring-fenced' and therefore students cannot combine the Leaving Certificate Applied with elements from the more prestigious Leaving Certificate Established programme. Clearly this points to the need to consider removal of this ring-fencing in the longer-term. If this option is chosen significant care will be needed to ensure that the principle of partnership underpins the development of a new model and that this model is one which has the flexibility to meet the needs of diverse student groups.

- (ii) Option Four proposes a unified senior cycle programme combining the best features of all existing programmes. This option has many positive features, not least the fact that it addresses the issue of programmes having different status levels. Furthermore this option is more open to the introduction of modularisation throughout the senior cycle, a proposal that Combat Poverty supports. However, in considering this option, one must be mindful of the background to the development of the alternative programmes within senior cycle education. In essence the purpose was to provide an alternative option which could be more responsive those with different educational needs, aptitudes and aspirations. Unless a new unified senior cycle programme has the capacity (and resources) to provide this all embracing response, the reality is Option Four could be a retrograde step in education policy development, particularly in the context of the continuing problem of educational disadvantage.

In relation to NCCA's final recommendation on a specific option, Combat Poverty draws attention to two key considerations. Firstly there is a cost factor involved for learners undertaking a three-year programme and this has particular implications for those who are experiencing poverty. The reality is they may not be in a position to commit to such a programme. A cost-benefit study of the introduction of a means-tested income support to address the household income deficiency experienced by

young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who opt to stay in education could be given consideration.

Secondly Combat Poverty supports the development of greater flexibility for participation in Senior Cycle education. The senior cycle programme should be available on both a full time and part-time basis in order to respond to diverse needs including those of young people who need to work while completing their education. It should be flexible enough to allow students who leave school early to return to education and get credit for course work already completed.



### SECTION 3. SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The principle of equality should be restated explicitly as core to any proposed developments of senior cycle education. In practice this would mean that the NCCA proposal would go beyond a general statement of commitment to equality and would incorporate:

(a) a clear statement that *equality* should be a core principle underpinning senior cycle education (reference is made to the statement in the White Paper on Adult Education, p. 13 section (b)).

(c) a statement of the equality objectives which flow from this principle (reference is made to the White Paper on Education p. 6, 43 and 50).

2. Developments within senior cycle education should be poverty-proofed by the Department of Education and Science. This means that they should be assessed at the design and review stages to establish their likely impact on reducing poverty and inequality.

3. Policy development on senior cycle education should be strongly linked with policy development on community development, family supports, health supports and employment training.

4. There should be continued Government support for quality research and demonstration projects on educational disadvantage and the research focus should be broadened to include issues within senior cycle education

5. Senior cycle education should be sufficiently flexible to facilitate delivery by non-formal providers for those whose needs are not met within the formal system.

6. The potential for teachers within the senior cycle to contribute their insights on the issues involved for students from disadvantaged backgrounds should be recognised. All teachers involved in senior cycle should be provided with structured professional opportunities (within initial teacher training and continuous in-service training) to enhance their awareness of issues related to poverty and inequality generally and their skills of analysis of the issues involved

7. In relation to delivery of these training opportunities for teachers Combat Poverty recommends close collaboration with the community sector. A further

recommendation is that schools should be encouraged to include this kind of in service training in their whole school plan.

**8.** Students who are disadvantaged should have access to a continuum of supports throughout the senior cycle and as a follow on to their completion of that cycle in order to enhance their chances for equality of opportunity and outcomes from lifelong learning and access to a quality progression experience. In-school supports should include well-informed career guidance, not just as a provision in its own right but also as a cross-curricular support provided by all teachers

**9.** In relation to curricular review, there is need:

- to include consideration of media which could allow for expression through other intellectual orientations such as visual spatial, bodily kinaesthetic, musical or interpersonal spheres
- for emphasis on a wider curriculum which fosters positive attitudes in all young people, regardless of social class, gender, disability or ethnic group, to on-going engagement with lifelong learning and which also prepares them for adult life and wider civic responsibilities. This wider curriculum would also be more inclusive of non-academic subjects. Furthermore subjects should be audited to establish which are more conducive to the development of positive attitudes and life long learning.
- to provide opportunities for students to develop their personal and critical analysis skills.
- for the curriculum to reflect cultural diversity and demonstrate respect for the different social and cultural backgrounds of different student groups
- to name key areas of experience to which all students should be exposed. Learning outcomes and key skills should be named and assessment based on these.
- The proposed curriculum at senior cycle must provide a platform for schools and other educational institutions to re-think their approaches to teaching and learning and, more importantly, to re-think their indicators and measures of success .

**10.** A key recommendation by the Combat Poverty is for the inclusion of specific, dedicated provision for social and political education (SPE) at senior cycle. In order to achieve this Combat Poverty believes that the subject should be informed by a set of essential concepts similar to those in the Junior Certificate CSPE course. The content should be accessible and not overly academic and where feasible it should be related to the experience of the student. The content should not be overly

prescriptive so as to allow for the development of key issues at local school level that are of relevance to students. The programme should include an emphasis on developing understanding, skills and attitudes of students as well as focussing on how they learn. Active learning methodologies are recommended.

**11.** It is also suggested that the establishment of SPE as a dedicated subject provision in its own right should not exclude the integration of social and political education into a range of appropriate subject areas and also extra curricular activities. Furthermore the learning methods developed in SPE have broad curricular relevance for both teachers and learners in other areas of the Senior Cycle.

**12.** In relation to the role of assessment in managing an effective teaching-learning process, significant development is recommended in the existing system to ensure that difficulties which students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience at senior cycle level, can be identified at the earliest possible stage and alleviated.

It is recommended that such an approach should be tied to each element of the curriculum, should involve learners and teachers, should be supported by quality guidance provision and should focus on identifying learners particular strengths and weaknesses in relation to the particular curricular area.

**13.** Combat Poverty recommends that formative assessment should be based on clear criteria and should incorporate a balance between the following areas of focus:

- initial assessment (a benchmarking of needs and identification of 'where students are at');
- assessing progress (providing feedback and affirmation);
- diagnosis of problems and barriers;
- readiness for summative assessment and progression.

**14.** A broadening of the range of assessment components employed in the Leaving Certificate examination is recommended. This range should be such as to ensure that assessment approaches can meet the diverse needs of students and provide an opportunity to reflect the diverse purposes of diverse curricula. The potential to build on the developments of the Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programmes should be noted.

**15.** A mix of certification should be provided so that some parts are assessed in a more formal way while others can be more creatively assessed and certification can include a record of achievements beyond a formal examination.

**16.** The NCCA should engage with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to progress articulation and a form of equivalence between 'formal qualifications and other qualifications in the context of a national qualifications framework.

**17.** Curriculum and assessment provision at senior cycle level should clearly relate to frameworks, structures and institutions established for adult and continuing education.

**18.** If Option Three i.e. a three year cycle combining Transition Year, Leaving Certificate (Established) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme with the Leaving Certificate Applied retaining its ring fencing, then it is recommended that pro active promotion through a variety of networks should take place. Consideration will also have to be given to removing the ring-fencing and this should be done in the context of maximum consultation.

**19.** If Option Four is proposed, it is recommended that the issues which provided the rationale for the introduction of alternative strands be considered carefully so that the needs that the different programmes were intended to address are highlighted and assurance given that adequate resources can be provided to ensure that one programme can address these issues.

**20.** In relation to NCCA's final recommendation on a specific option, Combat Poverty recommends attention to two key considerations. Firstly there is a cost factor involved for learners undertaking a three-year programme and this has particular implications for those who are experiencing poverty. The reality is they may not be in a position to commit to such a programme. A cost-benefit study of means-tested income support to address the household income deficiency experienced by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who opt to stay in education could be considered.

Secondly Combat Poverty recommends the development of greater flexibility for participation in Senior Cycle education. The programme should be available on both a full time and part-time basis in order to respond to diverse needs including those of young people who need to work while completing their education. It should be flexible enough to allow students who leave school early to return to education and get credit for course work already completed.

**21.** Combat Poverty recommends that adequate resources must be made available to ensure maximum quality for any agreed changes to be implemented

**22.** The planning and implementation of any changes to senior cycle education should seek to be inclusive of existing targeted initiatives for those identified as 'most at risk' e.g. the School Completion Programme.

**23.** A comprehensive monitoring and review structure should be developed in order to monitor the implementation of the changes proposed in the review and to assess their effectiveness.

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