



LISTEN TO TEACHERS' VOICE ON SENIOR CYCLE

Any change to Senior Cycle requires thoughtful discussion and understanding of the complexity of education, says ASTI President MIRIAM DUGGAN in this article, which was previously published in *Education Matters*.

Education is a social and economic good. Education enables our students to socialise, to develop key life skills, and to live healthy, balanced lives. It also develops their capacity to reason, to understand their society and other societies, and to know their history and that of others. It enables them to become engaged in critical thinking about the world they live in, to become active citizens, to understand how decisions are made – and challenged – perhaps to discover a lifelong interest in a subject of study, and to respect the role that arts and the humanities play in our interior lives, especially in a world of TikTok and Instagram. In short, education constitutes a dynamic interplay of social, physical, intellectual, economic and cultural imperatives. To understate things, it is complex, and understanding that complexity ought to be an essential aspect of any change process at second level.

Recent change

Recent years have seen much change at Junior Cycle. Whether these changes merit being called reforms, history will decide. Nonetheless, it seems timely to reflect on what can be learned from our experience of the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle.

From the beginning, the ASTI has monitored the process of implementing the Framework and its impact on the work of students and teachers. We have completed regular surveys of our members, offering them the opportunity to air their professional views and concerns, and assessing their experience of the implementation process and subject specifications. These surveys include Teachers' Voice (2013), Survey of English, Business and Science Teachers on CBAs, SLARs and Assessment Tasks (February 2018), Teachers' Experience of Inservice for Junior Cycle (October 2018), and the

Implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle (January 2022). This body of work by the ASTI is significant on a number of levels – not least because it is the only real-time record of teachers' experiences of implementing enormous change. It is to be hoped that the Minister will study what we have learned from the introduction of the Framework on how and how not to approach further change at second level.

Several key strands emerged in these surveys. Teachers could see that the Framework could have the potential to improve learning outcomes and this is contrary to the narrative that later grew around teachers resisting change. Teachers did raise their concerns from the start, which in retrospect were quite prophetic. Given their understanding of the complexity of the school system and the need to plan change thoroughly, teachers were correctly cautious about the timeframe for the implementation of the Framework, believing that meaningful change can only occur over a reasonable time period.

Added to this, the context of change was given insufficient consideration. Successive austerity budgets and cutbacks in education – reduced staffing levels, fewer resources, reductions in guidance provision, larger classes, the consequences of removal of in-school management structures – did not create conducive conditions for successive innovations such as the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and School Self-Evaluation. Most significantly, the increased workload and lack of consultation in this process led to teachers experiencing “dissonance, demoralisation and a feeling of disempowerment” (Teachers' Voice, 2019). These legacy issues in the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle have had a negative impact on the attractiveness of the teaching profession, as evidenced by the growing

recruitment and retention crisis we are experiencing in schools throughout the country.

Teacher concerns

Throughout the ASTI's engagement on the Framework for Junior Cycle, teachers have been very clear on the importance of retaining the externally assessed Junior Certificate examination as a trusted and valued form of assessment. As teachers, we regularly assess our students but we know that this process is complemented by assessment for State certification being externally set and marked. It is a trusted and valued system, and allows for real comparability of standards. This is a very important part of ASTI policy and an absolute red line for our members.

Curricular revision and redevelopment are necessary – this is nothing new. As the body of knowledge, discovery, interest and technology advances, so too the curriculum must adapt. However, as our experience of the Framework for Junior Cycle's subject specifications grew, so too did teachers' concern over each subject's depth of treatment in the new subject specifications, and this was a recurrent theme in our January 2022 survey of 2,981 teachers. A total of 40% of respondents disagreed that the subject specifications contained an appropriate balance between knowledge and skills, while only 35% agreed. It says much about teachers' uncertainty about the specifications that 25% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Including some open questions in the survey allowed the ASTI to access a rich seam of qualitative data, including teachers' perceptions of the new subject specifications. The following comments give a flavour of some of those perceptions:

- "The specifications for my subject are too vague".
- "I am concerned with the watering down of skills and knowledge that the new Junior Cycle has introduced".

Perhaps most starkly, another teacher commented: "My subject has been dumbed down – I am no longer confident that I am teaching correctly".

Volume of content and its impact on depth of treatment emerged as another theme in this survey. Teachers felt that the volume of content in the new specifications left little time for real student engagement with the subject, thereby having a 'dumbing-down' impact. It was clear from responses that the introduction of common-level papers for non-core subjects also had a negative effect on learning and preparation for Senior Cycle, with 78% disagreeing that the subject specifications support progression to Senior Cycle.

ASTI research

In the context of reviewing Senior Cycle, the ASTI commissioned Dr Brian Fleming to do independent research on the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle, the results of which were published in 'Making Education Policy Work' (2019). Acknowledging the importance of setting realistic time targets, Fleming emphasises several features crucial to encouraging transformative change in teaching and learning. He speaks of the need for a clear and shared articulation of the principles of change, the importance of building capacity in schools prior to implementing change, and the significance of recognising that change needs to be incremental rather than radical. Allied with the recognition of how teachers' workload has intensified over recent years, these key findings have great relevance for any further proposed change.

In tracing how best to form and deliver policy, Fleming gives the history of the development of two policy implementation models: the top-down view, whereby Government ministers make policy decisions and practitioners simply implement them; and, the bottom-up view, which acknowledges the necessary input of practitioners. The former perspective sees implementation as a matter of course, the success of which can be judged by performative measures. This was largely the approach taken to the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle and, in short, it was not a success. Despite bypassing National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) recommendations and announcing wide-ranging changes to Senior Cycle last March, it is to be hoped that the Minister will come to see that top-down policy development has limited chance of success.

It is unsurprising that Fleming emphasises that teacher agency is central to any change process in schools. Teachers are probably the first to recognise what is happening on the ground and in the lives of our students. We are tuned into them intellectually and emotionally like no other group of professionals – these are our everyday working lives. Thus, we are placed in a unique position to inform any redevelopment of the curriculum because our voice is that of the reflective, experienced, professional practitioner.

Listen to the teacher's voice

It is important to note that the voice of teachers is different from that of other stakeholders. Teachers understand their subject areas and, more importantly, know what works in the classroom to support their students' learning. Engaged rather than ignored, the voice of the practitioner can offer great insight into any change process in schools and ought to be at the heart of any proposed change.

Two final thoughts on the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. The first is that there are many lessons to be learned and, before making definitive changes, we would hope that the Minister would reflect on the serious body of work the ASTI has compiled on teachers' experience of Junior Cycle.

The second point refers to what it is hoped we don't have to learn from our recent experience. During the Covid pandemic, teachers made the difficult decision to involve themselves in calculated and predicted grades. We did this because the alternative was to leave our students in stasis. It would, however, be a serious mistake to interpret the decision we made during the global pandemic as a weakening of our policy on external assessment for State certification. Assessing our own students for State certification is directly contrary to the relational style of teaching, which our society values so highly. When we teach, we say to our students if they make mistakes, we will help them and guide them. We are their advocates and so much of what we do is based on that relationship. We can't be advocates and judges, and that is why we cannot accept the Minister's intention that we would be involved in assessing our own students for State certification. We are not simply saying no, but rather are defending a value that we, as the practitioners on the spot, know to be of immeasurable worth.

This article was first published in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022*, print edition Second Level chapter, and in the online edition at: <https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2022/YB2022-Second-Level-03.pdf>