



TEACHERS' VOICE

Report of a 2018 ASTI Survey on the
Implementation of Framework for
Junior Cycle



Report of the 2018 ASTI Survey

INTRODUCTION

In late 2018, the ASTI conducted a survey of teachers' experience of the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. Only teachers who were teaching the new subject and short course specifications were invited to participate. A total of 764 members teaching English, science, maths, history, Irish, French, geography, business studies, visual art, Spanish, music, German, and Italian responded to the online survey. In addition to the feedback on the inservice for the new specifications, teachers also provided detailed commentary on their overall experience of the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. This commentary has been categorised under a number of thematic headings and presented below.

CURRICULUM CHANGE

Teachers' experience of the process of curriculum change is highly significant in terms of how a new curriculum is enacted in the classroom. For teachers, change is both personal and professional. At a personal level, it can involve challenges to beliefs and practices that have stood the test of time. At a professional level, it can involve having to engage in new practices in both teaching and assessment. The potential for conflict at both levels in the reform of the Junior Cycle curriculum was a dominant theme in the landmark ASTI consultation with over 10,000 members in 2013 which resulted in the publication *Teachers' Voice*.

This online survey in many ways underlines the validity of the concerns expressed in that publication. Teachers' experience of the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle has been one of fragmentation. This experience has been compounded by the lack of confidence which many teachers have expressed in the rationale for change.

Achieving curriculum changes takes time and must be consistently supported at many levels. When teachers experience change as rushed, lacking in joined-up approaches, inadequately supported by material resources and where the curriculum is perceived as lacking in clarity, this contributes to a sense of dissonance, demoralisation and disempowerment. A key finding in this survey is that, for the majority of teachers, the junior cycle curriculum change process has been one of dislocation rather than continuity.

FRAMEWORK FOR JUNIOR CYCLE

The subject specification model in the Framework for Junior Cycle, characterised by reduced content, prioritisation of learning outcomes, integration of key skills and classroom-based assessments, is challenging for teachers. The new 'language' of the Framework, combined with the lack of clarity on learning outcomes and units of learning in particular, has caused confusion and uncertainty for many teachers. It has also significantly added to their workload as they seek to 'unpack' the relationships between these elements of the new specifications.

This challenge of having to individually 'unpack' the specification is exacerbated by the fact that many ASTI members were teaching the new specification before attendance at Junior Cycle

Teachers (JCT) inservice. Many teachers were therefore disappointed that, at the inservice, they were not provided with sample documentation providing practical guidance on lesson planning, units of learning, integration of key skills, sample examination papers.

A recurring theme in teachers' responses to the new specifications was their concern about the reduction in subject content. This development left many teachers unsure of exactly what areas of the subject discipline should be taught: it has also sustained fears about potential 'dumbing down' of standards, particularly in the context of common level examination papers.

IMPACT OF MINIMUM 40 MINUTE CLASSES

Many teachers expressed concern about the impact of the requirement for minimum class periods of 40 minutes on the amount of class periods they had per week. Many schools had reduced subject timetables from four to three class periods per week to as they moved to longer class periods of between 40 and 60 minutes. While longer class periods were perceived as having merits, many teachers felt it reduced opportunities for regular interaction with students.

CONTINUITY WITH SENIOR CYCLE CURRICULUM

The potential discontinuity between the experience of students in the new Framework curriculum and the expectations of the Leaving Certificate programme was a recurring theme. Combined with the reduction in the number of weekly classes per subject, teachers are deeply concerned about the impact of the Framework on students' Senior Cycle learning, in particular given the 'high stakes' nature of the Leaving Certificate examination for entry to higher education.

ASSESSMENT: CBAS AND SLARS

Teachers' experience of Classroom Based Assessment (CBA) was mixed. Some considered that it broadened the range of students' learning experiences while others questioned its value for students. Concern was expressed about the risk of assessment overload as more subject specifications were introduced. Teachers were also concerned about the increased workload which was in part driven by lack of practical guidance on the conduct of CBAs and the criteria for awarding descriptors. The lack of practical guidance on CBAs was exemplified in the fact that only 6% of teachers stated that their school had developed whole-school guidance in relation to students' absences during CBAs.

Just over a third of teachers had taken part in Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings at the time of survey. Slightly more than half (54%) stated that the SLAR meetings took place within the 2 hour time limit specified in the 2015 Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation. 60% of teachers who were the only teacher of their subject in their school stated that they had not been facilitated to take part in a SLAR meeting in a nearby school.

The timing of SLAR meetings was a matter of contention in several schools. Both their timing and the attendant workload have proved problematic for many teachers. Lack of clarity on the criteria for the awarding of descriptors in CBAs has resulted in some SLAR meetings being fraught.

Many teachers expressed concern about the cumulative impact of CBAs and SLAR meetings on students' and teachers' time for extra-curricular activities. 44% of teachers stated that school enrichment activities, including sport and games, had been scaled back in the weeks scheduled for CBAs and SLARs.

INCREASED WORKLOAD

A pervasive theme throughout the feedback on the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle has been its impact on workload. It is clear, that irrespective of teachers' views on the Framework, almost every dimension of the new curriculum has impacted on workload. For example, the specification subject model with reduced information on subject content, learning outcomes and key skills has resulted in much greater planning work for teachers who feel that they have to develop their own resources to supplement the specified course content. Teachers state that they have to 'unpack' the specification, especially in relation to the learning outcomes. The lack of support material in the form of lesson plans, templates for units of study for learning outcomes, the non-availability of sample questions until late in third-year have all exacerbated workload. Planning and conducting CBAs and participation in SLARs have increased individual planning time. SLAR meetings demand time as does the subject department meetings being held to coordinate both CBAs and SLARs. The professional time allocation of 40-minutes is unanimously regarded as inadequate.

INSERVICE FOR FRAMEWORK FOR JUNIOR CYCLE

While some teachers indicated satisfaction with the JCT inservice, in the main, their experience was unsatisfactory. Much of the latter was attributed to the delayed access in attending inservice: most teachers were already teaching year two of the Framework by the time they had opportunity to attend inservice. Many teachers stated that they were not facilitated by their school management to attend due to inability to find substitute cover. Late access to inservice compounded teachers' frustration that much of the inservice focused on 'explaining' the Framework rather than providing teachers with concrete guidance on how to 'un-pack' the subject specification, including the provision of planning templates for units of study and key skills. Many teachers expressed annoyance that in some instances, presenters, were unable to provide answers to some concerns, largely because the latter were not necessarily within the remit of the JCT. Reflecting on their participation in JCT inservice, 37% of teachers stated that they had a better understanding of the rationale for the Framework; 23% stated that they had a better understanding of how to teach the new subject specification; 34% had a better understanding of the role of learning outcomes; 31% had a better understanding of how to conduct CBAs; and 29% had a better understanding of the process of SLAR meetings.

What is striking from teachers' response is their strongly expressed need for more and better inservice.

Teachers also provided feedback on the whole-school inservice which they received. Their experience of this mirrored their experience of the out-of-school or 'cluster' inservice. Similarly, their dissatisfaction can be attributed to the late timing of this event – more than two years after the Framework was introduced in 2015.

CONCLUSION

Curriculum change is a complex, multi-layered process which takes place over the medium to long-term. It is clear from teachers' response to the survey that many feel that have not been adequately prepared for the change process. One of the key criticisms of the Framework for Junior Cycle is the lack of a clear implementation strategy, in particular in relation to sustaining teachers' professional learning, time for professional collaboration and supporting school leadership.



Áras Thomáis Mhic Dhonncha, Sráid an Fhíona, B.Á.C. 8
THOMAS MACDONAGH HOUSE, WINETAVERN STREET, DUBLIN 8

Tel: 01-604 0160, 1850 418 400 Fax: 01-897 2760
Email: info@asti.ie Web: <http://www.asti.ie>

