CEC Sub-committee report on teachers' experience of the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle

Introduction

In May 2021, C.E.C. adopted the following motion:

Motion 7

That the ASTI conduct a survey of its members on their experience of implementing the Framework for Junior Cycle and that this survey be developed by a sub-committee of CEC and its findings utilised in enabling the ASTI in planning its response to proposed changes at Senior Cycle level.

The following CEC members were elected to the sub-committee: John Conneely, Clare Branch (proposer of motion and Chair of sub-committee); Pauline Nagle, Clare Branch; Deirdre Mc Donald, Wexford Tony Boland Branch; Seamus Keane, Fingal Branch; Ciaran Kavanagh, Dublin North East Branch.

The sub-committee met on four occasions to conduct its work. Assistant General Secretary/Education & Research Officer provided the professional support for the work of the sub-committee.

Survey methodology

A questionnaire was issued to all members for whom the ASTI has an email address - 13, 000 in total. 2,981 members responded representing a high response rate of almost 23%. The survey was conducted over a two-week period in late November. The survey design was quantitative with two sections for qualitative responses.

Survey results



TOTAL SURVEYED = 2,981

Junior Cycle subjects: Teachers' subjects included all junior cycle subjects, with core subjects having the highest number of respondents. 22% of all respondents were teaching English: 21% mathematics; 13% Gaeilge; and 17% history. Other majority junior cycle subjects such as science and business studies were taught by 16% and 11% of teachers respectively.



CSPE

0%

12%



25%

50%

75%





SUBJECT SPECIFICATIONS:

- 1. Contain an adequate statement of knowledge content to be covered over the 3 year cycle
- 2. Contain an appropriate balance between knowledge and skills
- 3. Contain clear statement of learning outcomes

4. Provide opportunities for students with special educational needs to engage with the subject

- 5. Provide opportunities for exceptionally able students to engage with the subject
- 6. Provide opportunities for lower-achieving students to engage with the subject
- 7. Allocation of class-contact hours to my subject over the 3-year cycle is adequate
- 8. Promotes active learning in the classroom
- 9. Support progression to senior cycle curriculum

CBAs AND IN-SCHOOL ASSESSMENT

Are CBAs substituting for other assessments such as in-house examinations as required in Circular 17/2020?



11% were not sure

CBAs IN THE CLASSROOM





SLAR FACILITATOR



ASSESSMENT TASK, JUNIOR CYCLE EXAMINATION





ACTIONS FOR THE ASTI

What would you like the ASTI to do to improve the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle? (tick all that apply)



Reduction in class size is the top priority for teachers - 66% - to improve the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle.

49%

Obtaining more detailed subject specifications is supported by 49%.



Thematic analysis

Introduction

As is now the experience in ASTI research, the vast majority of respondents – 82% - completed the open questions in the survey. This data ran to 133 pages of comments by 2,460 teachers outlining their personal experience of implementing the Junior Cycle curriculum in the classroom. This feedback is typically personal, succinct and explicit and, as such, constitutes rich qualitative data to support a thematic analysis based on the quantitative data. What stands out in the qualitative data is the wide range of teachers' experience of implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. Some diversity is also evident in the quantitative data where, across many statements, sometimes there was an almost equivalent percentage of teachers indicating agreement, disagreement and neither agreement or disagreement. A number of dominant themes emerged from the qualitative which both underpin and deepen the quantitative data. These themes are presented below. Two open questions were asked: teachers' views on the implementation of the Wellbeing programme and their overall view on the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle in their school.

Wellbeing in the Framework for Junior Cycle

Overall, teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the implementation of the Wellbeing programme. This dissatisfaction emanated primarily from the fact that hours allocated to their subject over the three-year cycle had been reduced to facilitate delivery of the programme. This corroborates the finding that just 32% of teachers agreed that the allocation of hours was satisfactory: 55% disagreed.

Another common theme in this feedback was the disjunction between the stated aims of the curriculum and the actual experience in schools. This was particularly manifested in the huge assessment burden students now experienced due to CBAs across all subjects and short courses. Another example of this disjunction was the focus on wellbeing as a discrete curriculum space as distinct from an inherent dimension of personal and social growth inherent in learning, classroom relationships and relationships with peers. One teacher remarked that there was an underestimation of how much subjects such as Visual Art, PE, music and schools' extra-curricular activities contributed to wellbeing.

Many teachers expressed the view that, taking into consideration the disruption in school planning, etc., following the shift to remote teaching, it was too early to make a definitive judgement on the success or otherwise of the programme.

In principle, idea behind this programme is very sound. As with all initiatives, it is difficult to find time and engage adequately. Teachers are becoming increasingly jaded from large-scale system reform. When will we get a chance to engage properly and seriously with these changes if there is always something new?

School is excellent in terms of how it supports student wellbeing but number of hours allocated to it should be reduced.

Difficult to assess the programme and its value yet. Need more guidance and not leave so much up to the school.

More career guidance and counselling required to deliver it effectively.

Overall experience on implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle

Progression to senior cycle

The motion adopted by CEC stipulated that the research findings be utilised in enabling the ASTI in planning its response to proposed changes at Senior Cycle level. As is evident from the survey, an absolute majority of teachers, 78%, did not agree that the specifications support progression to senior cycle. Indeed, it would be an under-statement to say that there is profound and universal concern among teachers about the capacity of the junior cycle subject specifications to prepare students for the senior cycle curriculum. Lack of depth of content knowledge was not the only source of this conviction. The introduction of common level papers for non-core subjects combined with the new grading model is widely regarded as detrimental to both academically strong and weaker students. This view is evident in the quantitative data with only 21% of teachers agreeing that the banding of marks for each grade descriptor is appropriate compared to 53% who disagreed.

I actually enjoy teaching Junior Cycle English: the course is innovative and challenging. The exam, however, does not support the learning and does not prepare students for senior cycle.

I teach a lot of senior cycle classes and I strongly believe that the students are not prepared for the 'shock' of the senior cycle... A lot of my fifth year students are overwhelmed within the first few weeks. There has to be a better bridge between the two cycles.

The new Business (specification) does not prepare students in any way for the Senior Cycle. I find that student are inadequately prepared for the amount of study and work that has to be done for Leaving Certificate. They are missing the basis particularly in Accounting - having done the JC Business (very little book-keeping on the course). 5th and 6th year students are way more stressed in preparing for the LC than in the past because they have so little done at JC level, they are missing the basic understanding of the courses.

JC has been dumbed down to a very large extent making transition to Senior Cycle very difficult for students.

The implementation of the JC is not the issue, it's the common level approach which is a huge cause for concern. It serves very few students- the weaker students struggle to manage and the more able find it doesn't challenge their abilities enough.

Subject specifications

The quantitative data on subject specifications indicates, with two exceptions, a diversity of views on the subject specifications. (The two exceptions are progression to senior cycle and time allocation to subjects.) This diversity was reflected in the comments where positive, negative and in-between views were expressed regarding the subject specifications. However, it must be emphasised that even those teachers who expressed positive views, most invariably qualified their comment by expressing concern about students' progression to senior cycle. This concern was based on a number of aspects of the specifications: lack of depth of knowledge content, multiple learning outcomes and the challenge of them to key skills, assessment modalities and time for teaching.

Lack of depth of knowledge content over the three-year cycle was repeatedly identified by teaches as problematic. Many teachers stated that, several years into the new Framework curriculum, they were unsure if they were teaching the course properly. This is creating confusion and frustration for teachers and is also impacting on their workload.

Specifications for both my subjects are too vague. Level of detail for certain topics can be interpreted differently by teachers...leading to confusion.

At school level, have done our best to emphasise and translate active learning methodologies and student ownership and autonomy into practice. However, the translation of specifications into local context has to be questioned. These documents are clunky, bureaucratic, and repetitive.

I have my first group of MFL students in fifth year who have done the new curriculum and they don't seem to be as knowledgeable as previous years. What concerns me, and most teachers I work with, is the watering down of skills and knowledge that the new JC has introduced (I'm not being negative here, I'm merely stating facts as I see them and live them)

The subject has been dumbed down - I no longer feel confident that I am teaching correctly as the specification is much too vague. Teachers should not have to unpack learning outcomes this should be provided in (guide to) depth of treatment given within the specification . Students are not being prepared for senior cycle as the common level specification & exam is aimed too low at the weaker student. The exam paper is not challenging enough for most students.

Learning outcomes remain problematic. They are too broad, too vague and are lacking in guidance to the teacher on what students are expected to be able to do in order to show that they have achieved each learning outcome. This causes confusion and frustration for both teachers and students adding to workload of teachers.

There is lack of clarity around depth of treatment of the learning outcomes. This makes it difficult particularly for weaker students. A list of experimental/practical activities to address some of the learning outcomes would be very helpful as there is little clarity around what skills students are supposed to have knowledge of/experience at present.

Teachers should not have to unpack learning outcomes - this should be provided in a depth of treatment given within the specification.

The worst feature has been the utter vagueness of the learning outcomes and specifications leaving the subject teacher unclear regarding what topics they use teach and depth of treatment. For example are we supposed to teach the topic of Heat at junior cycle. No one knows. It's not in the specification but advisors have implied it's linked to one or more learning outcomes. Why does it have to be so complicated? Clear expectations please.

Another issue for teachers is the *amount of content* in the specifications which requires them to 'rush' in teaching. One comment noted that this 'rushing' was having a dumbing-down effect because it left no time for deeper engagement by students with particular topics.

I feel CBA 1 in English has worked well (oral presentation) but I feel the huge amount of material to be covered in the new course means I have to rush through a lot rather than allowing students to engage in deep learning experiences in my subject.

Way too much time being spent on the amount of literature to be covered in Irish. CBAs are a nightmare to facilitate and way too time consuming.

The banding of grades and the amount of material to cover is not conducive to the time allocated. It aims for the middle ground/average student. It doesn't prepare students for the leaving cert, especially the amount of writing in my subjects (English/History).

A number of teachers stated that there was an over-emphasis in the curriculum on promoting students' self-reflection and *learner autonomy*. Not only is the latter not the sole point of learning, many students needed a lot of assistance or 'scaffolding' to engage in this iterative process. From the teachers' perspective, such individualised assistance is time-consuming in the classroom.

Assessment – CBAs and Assessment Task and Junior Cycle examination

In contrast to other topics, views on *Classroom Based Assessments* were more polarised in teachers' comments: either they liked them or they didn't! However, irrespective of their attitude, most teachers stated that they found preparation for the CBAs time-consuming. Many teachers questioned the value of having two CBAs in each subject. This was leading to assessment overload, anxiety among students and detracting from teaching time.

I have mixed views. I like the concept of CBAs. However, there are several issues... 6 weeks is too long to give to them and it means that any project ideas the teacher has themselves doesn't get done due to lack of time. Students are stressed about meeting criteria and the fun of the CBA is removed. ...A lot of students don't value their CBAs. I always positive about them in front of students but they seem negative at the end of the three weeks.

I have found CBAs to be of little value to teaching and learning. It has taken a huge amount of time away from regular teaching of my subject. Students are not well prepared for Senior Cycle specifications for this reason.

It has been challenging in the beginning to get used to recording students and given class time to the completion of CBAs. Building students' confidence to be able to deliver their CBA1 in front of their class has been a challenge I had not anticipated.

I think we could reduce the amount of CBAs and hence focus one appropriate ones. This will make it better for students and teachers and also make organising school matches or other extra curricular activities easy for teachers.

Student anxiety in 'performing in front of the class' was a recurring comment with many teachers expressing cynicism that the assessment demands of the Framework were increasing student anxiety while at the same time, additional timetabling was allocated to the Wellbeing programme.

I think it is a pity that the CBAs take up so much time and can be so stressful for students who don't really see a reward in them.

Students find the CBA process so stressful because of the pressure they are under throughout the year to complete these CBAs. Instead of there just being pressure at exam time there is pressure throughout 2nd and 3rd year. It is ridiculous to think that we are asking 14/15 year old to do 20 projects basically over 2 years. The number should be reduced to 1 CBA per subject across 2nd and 3rd year which is more manageable.

Many teachers were particularly critical about the **Assessment Task.** It was not considered as meriting 10% of the final examination mark as it did not reflect the actual work of students in CBA 2. Several stated that it should be removed from the curriculum altogether as it was not performing a clear or useful assessment role. Others stated that, in order for it to have a value, the percentage of marks (10%) should be increased.

The Assessment Task is added pressure for the students. It is too vague and the language is too difficult for the majority of students to access.

CBAs and Assessment Task preparation takes up far too much class time and is just another tick the box exercise along with SLAR meetings because all it is doing is increasing the workload of the teacher and is having a negative impact on the teaching and learning of our students.

For the amount of time taken the Assessment Task should warrant more than 10%.

The 10% Assessment Task is a logistical nightmare to organise and not worth the effort as students have started to rote learn their answers.

While many teachers had not the experience of their students sitting the *Junior Cycle examination* due to the pandemic, those who had were almost uniformly unhappy with the model. The majority of comments referred to the unsuitability of the common level paper to appropriately challenge all students, the shorter duration of the examination, coupled with more tick-box questions. Teachers uniformly perceived these changes as negatively impacting on progression to senior cycle in that students are under-prepared for the Leaving Certificate examination. The grade descriptors in the examination are also problematic: many teachers stated that they are unsuitable, demotivating for students across all ability ranges and ultimately, not an accurate statement of student achievement.

The banding of grades is too wide, giving the middle ability students little motivation to aim higher. There is a big difference between a student achieving 55% and 74% in an exam and there should be recognition of the extra work it takes. There should be another grade between merit and higher merit. Also with there only being one level in the subject now it makes the paper much more daunting for less able students who are presented with a lot of material to interpret on the science paper. This can be very stressful for them. They do not have the safety net of an ordinary level paper to drop down to.

I am struggling a little in my subject area in relation to written exams. No marking scheme for sample papers, not enough sample papers, makes it harder to support students ...given the common level paper.

Junior Cycle was implemented as well as could be expected in our school. From an assessment point of view, we were unclear about what content was examinable and at what depth of treatment. Sample papers were minimal and had no marking schemes, provided with little detail as to how examination would proceed. Overall, students know less in my subject area...they all achieve roughly the same grade even though it is a mixed-ability class. It doesn't make any sense.

Subject Learning and Assessment Review process- SLARs

Compared to other aspects of the Framework, SLAR meetings did not feature as prominently in teachers' comments. Several teachers expressed dissatisfaction that substitution cover was not provided for SLAR meetings. Generally, teachers stated that they added to workload. Lack of time for professional work, including SLARs, was an issue for many teachers.

Implementation has been difficult, particularly with timing of CBAs across all subjects now that more have been introduced. Also SLAR meetings have not happened (Covid). Time that it takes for prep and students to do CBAs is enormous and just seems like "another massive task" instead of relieving pressure. Now that subjects are up and running, they are ok-but most frustrating is that students who have been through JC (English) are completely ill prepared and unable for senior cycle curriculum. Focus on skills is great in theory but the majority of students are not managing to apply them.

Lack of time given to teachers to engage with JC implementation - 22 hours not enough especially...teaching 2/3 plus subjects. Cover must or provided for teachers to attend SLAR meetings during school day. Far too much training, etc., taking place evenings and weekends far too much expected of teachers outside school hours.

SLARs are interesting but ultimately a waste of time because teachers don't know other teachers students.

It's adding to my workload: collecting work for CBAs, working on second drafts and reflection notes when all students are present, chasing up students who have been absent... too much time is spent on CBAs. The SLAR fiasco created a tense staff meeting... I just want to teach! I feel like more of an administrator teaching the JC at times. And then I worry that my students are going to be lost at leaving cert. I feel like I don't have enough time to cover texts in depth.

Workload and teacher wellbeing

Teacher workload is intense, intensifying and unsustainable. Teachers feel constantly under-pressure and the assessment features of the Framework for Junior Cycle are particularly impactful. Valuable teaching time is spent in the two three-week time frames assisting students to prepare their CBAs. Teachers then have to 'rush' to cover the rest of the course and are left feeling frustrated and stressed. This is exacerbated by the fact that many teachers have had reduced timetabled hours due to the Wellbeing programme.

Excessive workload is by its nature detrimental. When it is perceived as not serving the core purpose of one's work it is can undermine motivation and morale. Many teachers' comments indicated that excessive workload was having a negative impact on both, thus undermining their wellbeing.

Having taught for over 13 years, one might imagine that the job would become easier with more experience but, personally, I would say that my own workload and stress, etc., has increased with the increased administration and box-ticking. The job has become more about what we should do than actually having time to it. I can only speak for myself but from what I

can see teaching is not as an attractive profession as it was once. Teacher burnout is on the increase.

JC is a huge workload and students are not covering material in enough detail to facilitate an easier transition to LC. Having fewer class contact hours is making it difficult to complete active learning methodologies. The balance of active learning and covering material is difficult to achieve.

Implementation of the Framework is overall working well. However, the workload is never ending and is very demanding. Work on CBAs can be challenging, especially when subject departments need the IT room to complete the task. Given the length and breadth of the specifications, requests for IT equipment, timetable, there should only be one CBA per subject. Is the Assessment Task necessary?

Workload as teacher has increased. CBA takes up a lot of time. Reducing in class time has also left it hard to get curriculum finished.

Incredible increase in workload for both students & teachers. Creating a lot of stress. Not enough time to implement effectively.

Resources for implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle

A key resource to support the implementation of the new Framework curriculum was *inservice* provided by the dedicated support service, Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT). As emerged in previous ASTI research on the Junior Cycle, significant numbers of teachers were disappointed by aspects of the inservice they attended. Chief among the latter was the time-gaps between information demanded by teachers and the capacity of the JCT facilitators to deliver same. This time-gap was particularly relevant to the demand from teachers in relation to aspects of the Junior Cycle examination and the availability of marking papers. Another criticism was the time-gap between the introduction of the subject specification and participation in inservice. Furthermore, most teachers teach two subjects and many were unable to attend inservice in both.

All teachers had to choose one subject for CPD, this put pressure on teachers in the (subject) department if one of our colleagues opted to attend training for another subject. Making decisions as a department fell to those who had attended the training days. There was so much to take in on those training days that it was impossible to bring back information and no time (was) given to share it with colleagues.

No matter how much inservice I attend I am constantly stressed that I am selling my students short. Due to the vagueness of the learning outcomes, the exam has become totally vague - content has totally disappeared, replaced by questions on interpreting data. I sometimes feel the child that never attended my class and just turned up on the day could do just as well as those who attended and studied regularly ... and that's some statement to make. CBAs and the number of them HAS to be looked at.

JCT days were very unhelpful. Nice facilitators but totally unable to answer detailed questions. No resources shared or practical help in how to deliver this programme.

Supports given from JCT not great.

Many teachers also criticised the timing of inservice delivery after the introduction of the new specification and underlined the need for inservice *in advance* of the introduction on curriculum change.

Time is one of the most important resources available to teachers. Having adequate time to engage in all professional duties is, in effect, a key condition of work. Lack of adequate time was a major theme throughout teachers' comments.

The amount of planning it entails is unbelievable. It seems impossible to meet the specification requirement. Trying to incorporate the Learning Outcomes, key skills, wellbeing indicators as well as digital literacy is just too ambitious and too much within a very limited time allowance.

More work, more assessment, more demands on our time and no decrease in class size.

It is being implemented but not taught the way the Framework envisaged due to a lack of time...All of the active learning activities are nice on paper but overwhelmingly impractical in the classroom due mainly to time constraints caused by a bigger syllabus, a lack of resources, and time taken by CBAs.

Class size emerged frequently as a major obstacle to the implementation of the Framework. Teachers repeatedly referenced large junior cycle classes as limiting the scope for focusing on skills, active learning methodologies, etc. The pressure on teachers' time were particularly acute during the preparation for CBAs because of the large classes.

The CBAs take too much time from teaching having had a reduction in teaching time for my subject. The large class size means that it is an arduous task to correct them all.

Class size and infrastructure in my school is not suitable for active learning methodologies.

Teachers comments also highlighted the differential *access to resource* between schools to fully implement the Framework. Lack of access to digital resources were frequently highlighted.

All well and good telling us to do a mentimeter exercise but we don't have iPads and phones are not allowed to be used in class. Having all the lovely activities but no resources provided to implement them - post its for ghost walks! and the simple issues like that. Promoting a print rich environment but we have limited access to a black and white printer that is out of service more than it is operational. There is a growing divide between schools that have and have not.

There was no budget for extra resources to implement the CBA's. My department were poorly informed and under resourced.

I feel my workload and stress levels have greatly increased. C.B.A.'s are supposed to be student directed but where I teach the students need so much help and support. There are very poor digital resources in my school which makes life more challenging.

Conclusion

In drawing conclusions from the survey, it is of note that 74% of respondents had eleven or more years teaching experience. Also of note is the fact that teachers of core subjects – Gaeilge, English, Maths and History – constituted 72% of respondents. Both characteristics imply a high level of authenticity and reliability to the survey data – quantitative and qualitative.

Teachers in this survey expressed varying degrees of satisfaction with aspects of the implementation of the Framework across key elements. The fact that many teachers 'neither agreed or disagreed' with several statements can be interpreted that they are simply getting on with the work of teaching the curriculum while remaining critical of several aspects. Chief among the latter is the majority belief among teachers that the subject specifications, coupled with the changes to the terminal examination, are not preparing students for the senior cycle curriculum.

The recommendations issuing from this survey are as follows:

- 1. A comprehensive independent evaluation of the implementation of the Framework for Junior cycle needs to be conducted.
- 2. The NCCA and the Department of Education must address teachers' concerns in relation to the lack of depth of content in the subject specifications.
- 3. Class size needs to be reduced. Large classes are a major contributor to teacher workload and are actively hindering effective implementation of the curriculum for students.
- 4. Teacher workload and the provision of adequate professional time must be addressed by the Department of Education.
- 5. The Wellbeing Programme should revert to the initial time allocation of 300 hours. The 400 hours allocation is negatively impacting on curriculum time for other subjects and inhibits a more integrated cross curricular approach to this area of the curriculum.
- 6. The Department of Education must address teacher wellbeing. It must also address the lack of coherence between the ambitions of the Department's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Implementation and that of the Department of Health's National Framework for Healthy Workplaces in Ireland.