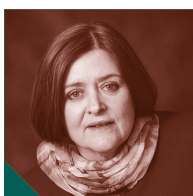


Experience of Junior Cycle Shedding a Light on Senior Cycle



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Recent years have seen much change in our second-level schools. It is timely to reflect on what can be learned from our experience of the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle, and surveys by the ASTI provide important insights on that experience. This article draws on teachers' unique perspectives in those surveys to shed light on how best to implement change at second level.

Education is a social and economic good. It enables our students to socialise; to develop key life skills; to live healthy, balanced lives; to develop the capacity to reason; to understand their society and other societies; to know their history and that of others; 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 life-long 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 years have seen much change at Junior Cycle in our second-level schools. 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 Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (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 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 Framework work 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 had the potential to improve learning outcomes, and this is contrary to the narrative that later grew around teachers resisting change. Teachers did raise concerns from the start which, in retrospect, are 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 time frame for implementing 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 removing 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 the lack of consultation 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.

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Throughout 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 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 an 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 Junior Cycle Framework's new subject specifications grew, so too did teachers' concern over each subject's depth of treatment, and this was a recurrent theme in our January 2022 survey of 2,981 teachers. 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.

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 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, one 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, leading to 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.

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 were published in 'Making Education Policy Work' (2019). Acknowledging the importance of setting realistic time targets, Fleming emphasises several features that are 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 before 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.

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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 sees implementation as a matter of course, whose success can be judged by performative measures. This was largely the approach taken to introducing the Framework to Junior Cycle and, in short, it was not a success. Despite bypassing recommendations by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and announcing wide-ranging changes to Senior Cycle in March 2022, it is to be hoped that the Minister will come to see that top-down policy development has limited chances of success.

It is therefore unsurprising that Fleming emphasises teacher agency as 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 in to them intellectually and emotionally like no other group of professionals – this is our everyday working life. Thus, we are in a unique position to inform any redevelopment of the curriculum, because our voice is that of the reflective, experienced, professional practitioner.

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 we hope that the Minister, before making definitive changes, would reflect on the serious body of work that 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-19 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 that if they make mistakes, we will help 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 which we, as the practitioners on the spot, know to be of immeasurable worth.

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