

JUNIOR CYCLE REFORM

Five years in, where are we now?



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Implementation of the new Framework for Junior Cycle (DES, 2015) began in schools in September 2014, with the 2012 iteration of the Framework forming the basis of teacher professional development at that time. The 2014/15 school year also saw the introduction of a new subject specification in English for all first-year post-primary students.

Since then those students have gone on to complete the full three years of their junior cycle, which heralded many firsts: they were the first to experience new classroom-based assessments (CBAs), the first to sit the final state examination in its new format (two hours instead of five for higher-level students), and the first to be awarded the new Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA), a rich picture of student learning which replaced the old Junior Certificate. These students are currently in their senior cycle years; for the students following in their footsteps, junior cycle reform is a reality in more and more subjects.

The reform of junior cycle is now well under way in schools. Subject specifications are replacing old syllabuses. These specifications set out expectations for students and through a series of learning outcomes 'describe the knowledge, understanding, skills and values students should be able to demonstrate after a period of learning' (DES, 2015, p.10). This shift to a learning-outcomes-based specification is perhaps one of the most significant changes at classroom level.

Junior cycle learning outcomes are student-centred and so are written in terms of learners and their development rather than what is to be taught (Biesta and Priestley, 2013). Each subject specification is developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and undergoes rigorous development, involving extensive consultation. Aligning with the key tenets of junior cycle, each specification is written to include opportunities to develop key skills, including literacy and numeracy, which aim to support students' learning, progress, and achievement.

New subject specifications were introduced for Business Studies and Science in September 2016, which means that by the end of the 2018/19 school year, three subjects will have concluded their first full cycle in schools. September 2017 saw the introduction of subject specifications in Gaeilge, Visual Art, and Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), while September 2018 saw five being introduced: Mathematics, History, Geography, Music, and Home Economics. September 2019 will see the last group of subjects to be introduced, starting again

with first-year students: the four technological subjects, Classics, Religious Education, and Jewish Studies. By 2019 all subjects in their new format will have been phased in, and by 2022 all subjects will have undergone full cycles in the school system.

As well as individual subjects being revised, the curricular programme into which they fit is also changing. Students will now study a maximum of ten subjects for examination purposes, effectively ending situations where it was possible to study fourteen or even more subjects. More and more schools are introducing new short courses, of 100 hours duration across the junior cycle, and this is presenting opportunities for schools to better tailor their junior cycle to meet the needs of their own student cohort.

Innovative and creative courses such as Coding, Digital Media Literacy, Artistic Performance, Chinese Language and Culture, and Philosophy are popping up on junior cycle curricula nationwide, while external bodies such as the Post-Primary Languages Initiative are creating a repository of short courses that schools can introduce if they so wish. Short courses are designed in accordance with nationally established and published criteria by the NCCA, or schools may develop their own.

A new area of learning called well-being is assuming centre stage. This move is aimed at better supporting our students to cope with the normal ‘ups and downs’ of modern living and has at its core six well-being indicators: Connected, Aware, Resilient, Respected, Active, and Responsible. As well as promoting a whole-school culture of well-being, schools are asked to devote 400 hours of tuition time to this area by 2021, equivalent to one-fifth of the entire junior cycle programme.

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The timetabled provision of the well-being area of learning comprises PE, SPHE, CSPE (in the form of three short courses which schools can follow if desired), guidance-related learning, and other areas deemed appropriate by schools for their student body. The Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines for schools, published in January 2017 by the NCCA, support schools in developing their well-being programme.

A significant development at junior cycle has been the introduction of Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes. These are designed for a small number of students with particular special educational needs. This is the first time that students at these levels have had access to a tailored junior cycle programme, and is a welcome development in creating a more inclusive education system.

Student assessment practices at this level are also changing. Heretofore, student achievement at junior cycle level was measured primarily by how they performed in a final state exam in June. The reformed junior cycle changes all of this. It promotes formative assessment practice in classrooms, providing vital feedback on where the student is in their learning, where they need to go, and most importantly how to get there.

Junior cycle sees the introduction of a dual approach to assessment that supports student learning over the three years of junior cycle, and also

measures achievement at the end of those three years. While final exams still exist, albeit in a changed format, they are now complemented by structured Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) and an Assessment Task.

CBAs were developed to help assess skills that cannot be easily assessed in a traditional pen-and-paper exam. Students are required to undertake two CBAs in each subject they study, generally one in second year and one in third year. For short courses, only one CBA is required. Student work on CBAs takes place over a number of weeks (usually three) and is designed to take place as much as possible during class time. While CBAs are facilitated in the classroom by the subject teacher, they are externally devised by the NCCA, in consultation with the State Examinations Commission, who also define the national timetable for CBAs. CBAs are assessed by teachers with clear criteria provided, along with exemplars of student work at different levels to support teacher judgement.

Having assessed student work, teachers have an opportunity to share and discuss samples of work at Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings. This plays an important role in developing an understanding of standards and expectations, by enabling teachers to reflect on the evidence of students' work and to share the learning and teaching strategies supporting that work. SLAR also fosters 'purposeful peer interaction' (Fullan, 2008, p.46) and enhances student feedback.

Schools are also changing how they report on student progress, both to parents/guardians and to students themselves. Gone are the days of As, Bs, and Cs, etc., which provided limited insight into student progress, and in come new sets of descriptors for final exams and CBAs. For CBAs there are four levels of achievement: *Exceptional*, *Above Expectations*, *In Line with Expectations*, and *Yet to Meet Expectations*. These are informed by rich features of quality which are criteria to help teachers arrive at a best-fit, on-balance judgement about the quality of student work.

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Indeed, for schools, junior cycle reform has introduced a whole new language of learning, not just in how we report on student progress but right across the curriculum. Five years in, we all continue to engage with and develop a shared understanding of this new language. Significantly, most of this engagement happens collectively in schools, which in turn is helping to further promote an enhanced culture of teacher collaboration.

The changes currently being embedded in schools, like those outlined above, are significant. It was recognised early in the reform that schools would require significant support in implementing these changes effectively. This support came in the form of Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), a dedicated support service for schools, including school leaders and teachers. JCT is staffed entirely by teachers, who are seconded from their teaching role to design, develop, and facilitate high-quality professional learning experiences for teachers.

JCT has been providing sustained CPD for teachers since 2013/14 across a myriad of areas. We work closely with all interested stakeholders to ensure a smooth roll-out of our services nationally, and in doing so we endeavour to minimise disruption to teaching and learning at school level. Generally, schools close for two days annually to allow teachers to participate in CPD opportunities, while a smaller cohort of teachers will do an additional CPD day. No one ever moves to close schools lightly, but it is recognised that the greater good in the end will be worth the efforts being made now.

Other supports include allocating professional time to all teachers, which resulted in the creation of some 650 new teaching posts in summer 2017. School managers are also given additional resources to help them coordinate and manage changes at school level.

In recent months the NCCA has embarked on a review of senior cycle, and we look forward to what might transpire from this. There is little doubt, however, that the changes currently afoot at junior cycle level will impact across the wider school system and may lay foundations for developments in senior cycle.

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Mike Hughes, author of 'The Magenta Principles.ie', addresses the NAPD conference, October 2018.