
Schools using Junior Cycle to be more inclusive

Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) commissioned the Economic and Social Research Institute to carry out research into the experiences of students across their first three years of post-primary schooling. This, along with evidence from international research, provided a clear rationale for a reformed junior cycle that would be more engaging and responsive to students' needs at 12-15 years of age. The new junior cycle was introduced into Irish schools in 2014 and is being rolled out year on year to be completed in 2018.

Fundamental to that aspiration came the requirement to provide more inclusive programmes of learning for those young people whose achievements weren't being recognised by the traditional Junior Certificate.

Implementing the new junior cycle

While there is much in the new junior cycle that is recognisable to schools and society – the retention of familiar subject areas for instance - there are also additions which have the potential to make learning for young people at this age and stage of their education journey more engaging, inclusive and exciting. Inclusion is at the core of the new junior cycle - it is one of the eight principles. It is present in the broad and balanced curriculum as set out in the 24 Statements of Learning. It is woven into the fabric of the subjects, short courses, Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs), assessment procedures, key skills and other learning experiences.

The development of short courses as new curricular components introduces refreshing opportunities for young people to undertake study in new areas of learning such as Artistic Performance, Programming and Coding or Chinese. However, it is in recognising the voice of the student, the articulation of curriculum using learning outcomes-based statements, a changed assessment culture, and the development of learning programmes for students with general learning disabilities that we find the greatest prospects for inclusion.

Existing subject syllabi determined what knowledge needed to be taught and learned. Whereas new specifications focus on describing the outcomes of learning in terms of knowledge, skills and values. These focus not just on important knowledge but on skills and values that will serve students well in future. The NCCA has been increasingly including the voice of students in its curriculum and assessment development work. The learning outcomes are written as statements of what students should know or be able to do by the end of junior cycle. Differentiation is embedded in the learning outcomes by applying the principles of **Universal Design for Learning** in their development so they inform teachers' interpretation of them in the classroom to suit students' needs and school contexts.

The **Key Skills of Junior Cycle** further offer occasions to include all students. Which teenager would not benefit from developing the skills of communicating, working with others, managing myself or any of the other key skills now being developed in junior cycle classrooms? These represent exactly the sort of learning that is critical for all students.

Introducing inclusive practice

Examples of how teachers are embracing chances to be more inclusive in their practice are already visible. Some have been working with NCCA in generating examples of student work that exemplify the learning that might take place in the context of revised specifications. These teachers are already reporting how students who receive special educational needs support in writing are being motivated by the chances of success in oral activities, so heavily promoted by the Key Skills of junior cycle as well as by Modern Foreign Languages and junior cycle English. The Classroom-Based Assessments for these subjects, also facilitate the demonstration of oral language proficiency and communication skills so the students' success can be recorded on the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement.

Students whose achievements could not be recognised by the Junior Certificate now have an opportunity to focus on Priority Learning Units in core areas of learning. Students identified with general learning difficulties for whom the curriculum remains inaccessible even with high degrees of differentiation in a mainstream class, can undertake learning at a different Level of the National Framework of Qualifications.

Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs) are being seen by Special National Schools, mainstream schools and other learning settings as providing a means to offer the small group of young people concerned a way of gaining recognition at junior cycle along with their peers. Teachers are taking the learning outcomes particularly applicable to the student who is following a bespoke L2LP and supporting them to achieve them (as far as possible in mainstream classrooms) with peers.

Level 1 Learning Programmes (L1LPs) which are in an advanced stage of development at the time of writing this article will cater for students for whom recognition for learning through L2LPs is inaccessible. Most of the students for whom L1LPs might be considered suitable are in Special National Schools, though a small number are also in special classes in mainstream schools and may spend short periods with their mainstream peers. They too, will receive a Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement at the end of their junior cycle.

Assessment

The focus on formative assessment in junior cycle is aimed at reducing the emphasis on the final examination and re-focusing on assessment as part of the learning process. Some schools are beginning to explore modes of reporting or feedback which is much more formative in nature and away from the use of narrowly constructed grades or marks. So now students are comparing their performance with their own previous achievements and can build on that as opposed to being constantly ranked and compared to others. Of course an element of summative assessment has been retained but it too can be used for formative purposes. The student voice

NCCA has been including the voice of students at early stages of curriculum and assessment development. Working with Dr Paula Flynn of Trinity College Dublin, NCCA has been pro-actively seeking the opinions of students as 'experts in their own learning' as background papers or draft specifications for junior cycle subjects are developed. In advance of the development of the junior cycle Wellbeing Guidelines for instance, a student forum was convened in Dublin Castle which saw students from a variety of school backgrounds and geographical locations come together to discuss what Wellbeing meant to them and how it might look in their schools. Now schools are also consulting students as well as parents on curriculum decisions based on the twenty four Statements of Learning for their school contexts.

The following are three examples of how schools are using the new Junior Cycle to be more inclusive.

Example 1

Short courses are offering opportunities for success for those students who find it difficult to demonstrate their learning in written format. An example is where one school had a student at risk of leaving school. He didn't attend school on the days he had Business Studies which was part of the core curriculum and therefore compulsory in that school.

In talking with the student, the school identified that he struggled with the academic nature of the subject (note we are talking here about the Junior Certificate syllabus as opposed to the new Business Studies Junior Cycle specification). They also identified his interest and skills in ICT. Knowing that there were four other students who also struggled with Business Studies because of either Dyslexia, Autism, EAL or borderline General Learning Difficulties, the school offered the five students the Digital Media Literacy (DML) short course as an alternative. The 'at risk' student's attendance improved on the days he had DML which means he is attending more classes overall.

Before the development of NCCA short courses the school reports that these five students would have received a generic learning support class as an alternative to Business Studies. Now they will receive recognition in the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement for their achievement in the short course. Also as a result of this pilot, Business is now an optional, rather than compulsory subject in the school to facilitate the needs and interests of all students.

Example 2

Another school asked their students to evaluate their experiences of the Classroom Based Assessment (CBA) in the new junior cycle English course which assesses their oral communication. The CBA takes place in second year and forms part of their summative assessment. It will be reported on at the end of junior cycle on the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement. The students' comments are summarised as follows:

- There was less fear of a terminal exam. Having undertaken the CBAs in second and third year they feel they have already 'banked' some success.
- A sense of confidence building was reported from having to stand in front of their peers and present to them. While it was challenging it was also very rewarding to students.
- There was tangible peer support throughout the CBA.
- So many of the topics chosen by their peers were of interest to them and their classmates felt engaged.
- Trust from teachers to choose topics they considered to be relevant to their lives was important to them as was the permission to choose their preferred format of communication
- Reflection on their work was valuable and reinforced the learning process for them.

All reported a sense of accomplishment on completion. It was clear to them that the new English

assessments test their English skills and not their skills in rote learning. The students reported enjoying having to think for themselves.

Conclusion

As junior cycle becomes embedded in schools over the coming years, there will be lots of good practice to highlight. Colleagues in the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) support service are conveying the message in their workshops with practitioners that in planning for a few we are, in fact planning for all. It would be misleading to say that all schools are implementing more inclusive practices. In part, this is because society itself has not quite made the shift from integration to inclusion. Nevertheless, the three examples of changed practice above provide an early insight into how some teachers are embracing change and the opportunity to make learning and teaching more student-centered and inclusive.

References

<http://www.juniorycycle.ie/Curriculum/Research/ESRI-Research>

<http://www.juniorycycle.ie/Curriculum/Statements-of-Learning>

<http://curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/Level-2-LPs>



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