



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

What Subject Inspections tell us about Junior Cycle implementation

A composite report on findings from subject inspections with a focus on Junior Cycle

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to:

- provide evaluative commentary on the effectiveness of the implementation of the redeveloped Junior Cycle
- identify what further steps are necessary to support effective implementation in schools
- inform decision-making in the Department in relation to Junior Cycle implementation and the redevelopment of Senior Cycle.

The report is based primarily on evidence gathered during subject inspections with a focus on Junior Cycle conducted by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education. These inspections took place in ninety-eight post-primary schools during a four-week period in April and May 2023. All lesson observations took place in Junior Cycle classes and included subjects from all five phases of implementation of Junior Cycle.

The inspections gathered evidence at classroom level and at whole-school level. Areas of enquiry included lesson planning, timetabling arrangements, engagement with classroom-based assessments (CBA), use of professional time and engagement with the relevant processes for subject learning and assessment review (SLAR).

Background to junior cycle

Junior Cycle is the programme in which students participate in the first three years of their post-primary education. From September 2014, Junior Cycle was introduced to schools in a phased replacement of the existing Junior Certificate programme.

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* provides the basis for post-primary schools to plan high-quality, inclusive and relevant education programmes with improved learning experiences for all students, including those with special educational needs. The *Framework* sets out eight principles that underpin Junior Cycle and describes the learning at the core of the programme in twenty-four statements of learning. The *Framework* also presents eight key skills that are developed during Junior Cycle and needed to support students in their personal, social and future work lives.

In Junior Cycle, students are placed at the centre of the learning process. Students learn through a combination of subjects, short courses, and other learning experiences. All students complete an area of learning called Wellbeing. Priority learning units (PLUs) are included in learning programmes that provide for a small number of students with significant special educational needs. These are known as Level 1 and Level 2 learning programmes.

From 2014, a phased transition to the new Junior Cycle was facilitated in schools. By 2022, all new and revised Junior Cycle subjects and short courses had been introduced and the Junior Certificate had been phased out.

Twenty-one new subject specifications were introduced on a phased basis between September 2014 and September 2019. These are shown in Table 1. In addition, short course specifications in a range of areas were made available to schools.

Phase	Subject	Year of introduction
Phase 1	English	September 2014
Phase 2	Business Studies and Science	September 2016
Phase 3	Irish, Modern Foreign Languages and Visual Art	September 2017
Phase 4	Mathematics, Music, Home Economics, Geography and History	September 2018
Phase 5	Classics, Engineering, Wood Technology, Graphics, Applied Technology, Religious Education and Jewish Studies	September 2019

Table 1: Implementation phases of Junior Cycle

The most significant change introduced by the Junior Cycle was in the area of assessment. The Junior Cycle allows for new ways of learning and a broader range of skills to be assessed. There is a dual approach to assessment, comprising classroom-based assessment, an assessment task and a final, externally assessed, state-certified examination. The student's achievement in classroom-based assessments and state examinations are recorded in their Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA).

Since 2014, the Department of Education has provided a dedicated continuing professional development (CPD) service for teachers and school leaders to prepare for and support the implementation of Junior Cycle. This service, Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), has been amalgamated with other DE support services from September 2023 to form Oide, a single teacher support service.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has commissioned a four-year longitudinal study exploring the implementation and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle in post-primary schools. This mixed-methods, multi-dimensional research is being carried out by a team of independent researchers from University of Limerick. The study is capturing the views of teachers, school leaders, students, parents and wider educational stakeholders on the *Framework*. To date, two interim reports have been published, which can be accessed [here](#), and the third report is due to be published in Spring 2024.

Contextual factors

The more recent period in which Junior Cycle was being introduced to schools was notable for particular challenges to the work of schools. COVID-19 gave rise to school closures, restrictions on pedagogical practices on resumption of schooling, and adaptations to the work of teacher support services and the Inspectorate.

In the context of these challenges, Junior Cycle examinations were cancelled in 2020 and 2021. During that period the assessment of students' learning and achievements for Junior Cycle students took place at school level. Teachers drew on their professional knowledge and decided on the most appropriate forms of school-based assessment to put in place. While guidance was provided, schools had autonomy to decide whether to run school-based assessments and what form they would take. Up to the present school year, the number of classroom-based assessments that students are required to complete has been significantly reduced and students are not required to complete assessment tasks.

The combination of the cancellation of state examinations and revised assessment arrangements for Junior Cycle required the adoption of a broader range of assessment methodologies beyond the traditional approaches to examinations and assessment. This occurred at the same time as teachers needed to adapt their planning and pedagogical approaches to support remote teaching and learning when COVID-19 impacted on schooling. Continuing to engage with professional learning supports will assist teachers in further embedding effective assessment practices in the context of the full implementation of the *Framework* and the return to the assessment arrangements set out in the 2015 Framework for Junior Cycle.

Schools and teachers have worked throughout this period to mitigate the effects of disrupted schooling on students' learning. As the level of disruption to the learning experience has reduced very significantly and COVID-19 restrictions have been discontinued, the opportunities for active learning approaches, including group work and practical work, have been restored.

The Inspectorate's review of continuity of schooling during COVID-19 indicated many successes in meeting the challenges presented to schools with schools adapting to new ways of working. However, one critically important area of challenge identified was the provision of regular and practical feedback to students on their work. While this improved as teachers became more familiar with the use of learning platforms, the use of digital technologies should continue to be utilised appropriately to enable both teachers and students to fully support learning and assessment.

Challenges in the supply of teachers across the system are also a relevant contextual factor. By way of response, the Department introduced the teaching hours extension

scheme in 2022/23. This scheme was designed to provide school management with an alternative means of sourcing suitably qualified teachers from within the school.

Almost all of the changes and improvements envisaged with the introduction of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* have been implemented. In recent years, the challenges faced by the education system have required schools, teachers and students to adopt short-term solutions to achieve aspects of that vision. Reflecting on these changes, especially the increased use of digital technologies, provides a compelling rationale for schools and teachers to actively embed the *Framework* and apply the learning across other programmes.

METHODOLOGY

Subject inspections with a focus on Junior Cycle were notified and conducted by the Inspectorate in accordance with *A Guide to Inspection in Post-Primary Schools*¹. During the initial phone call with the school, the school leadership was informed that the primary focus of the inspection would be on Junior Cycle.

Evaluation activities used during these inspections included:

- meetings with school management
- focus group meetings with students
- lesson observations
- observation of student work
- feedback to individual subject teachers, and
- overall feedback to the subject department.

As well as their overall evaluations of teaching and learning, inspectors evaluated the lessons observed with reference to five key areas of practice. These were as follows:

- linking of lesson content to units of learning from the subject plan
- the use of learning intentions in planning the lesson
- the use of success criteria in planning the lesson
- the extent to which the lesson was student centred
- how the development of key skills was facilitated.

Each school will have a published inspection report, in accordance with *Publication of School Inspection Reports- Guidelines*².

Table 2 shows the composition of the sample of schools by patronage type. The 'other' category comprises community and comprehensive schools, and designated community colleges.

Type	Count	%
Voluntary Secondary School	54	55
Education and Training Boards	36	37
Other	8	8
Total	98	100

Table 2: Schools inspected by patronage type

Inspectors observed 411 lessons in classes from first year to third year in post-primary schools. These lessons were distributed across the three years, with 145, 138 and 128

¹ <https://assets.gov.ie/25258/e2f3707cfb3448db8cb0752613d031bd.pdf>

² <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/25264/78e5b85e218a40b8b87a1dae697cb650.pdf#page=null>

lessons observed in first, second and third year respectively. Lesson observations took place in subjects from all phases of Junior Cycle implementation. Table 3 shows the number and percentage of lessons observed by subject and implementation phase.

Implementation	Subject	Number of Lessons	%
<i>Phase 1</i>	English	39	9.5
<i>Phase 2</i>	Business Studies; Science	96	23.4
<i>Phase 3</i>	Irish; Modern Foreign Languages (MFL); Visual Art	79	19.2
<i>Phase 4</i>	Geography; History; Mathematics; Home Economics	167	40.6
<i>Phase 5</i>	Technology subjects	9	2.2
<i>Other</i>		21	5.1
<i>Total</i>		411	100

Table 3: Subjects observed by implementation phase

TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

Overall quality of teaching and learning

Inspectors were generally very positive about the overall quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed. All but a few lessons were evaluated as being good or very good in terms of both the quality of teaching and the quality of learning. There was, however, evidence of significant scope for development in the area of assessment.

In some aspects of teachers' practice, inspectors were more positive about lessons in subjects that were introduced in the earlier phases of Junior Cycle implementation. It is evident that teachers and departments for these subjects have had more experience of Junior Cycle and engagement with CPD than those subjects introduced later when the delivery of CPD was impacted by COVID-19.

Aspects of teaching and learning that were most effective

The aspects of teaching considered by inspectors as the most positive were classroom management, and teachers' subject and pedagogical knowledge. These were judged to be very good or good in almost all lessons observed. Inspectors also recorded that respectful interactions between teachers and students were observed in almost all lessons.

The development of Junior Cycle key skills was noted as being effective. Inspectors found that the development of key skills was facilitated to some extent in almost all lessons observed in most subjects. Inspectors recorded more positive judgements about the development of key skills in subjects from earlier phases of implementation.

Aspects of teaching and learning that were least effective

The two aspects of teaching and learning about which inspectors were least positive in their lessons observed were assessment and feedback to progress learning, and students' ownership and responsibility for learning. These aspects are closely related, as students' ownership of learning is strengthened considerably by the use of assessment (including self-assessment) for formative purposes and the provision of meaningful feedback. Moreover, these two aspects of teaching and learning are also closely associated with teachers' practice in the setting of success criteria, which was the aspect of planning and preparation in which inspectors observed most scope for improvement.

A key feature of Junior Cycle is the use of assessment for formative purposes. In these inspections, however, inspectors linked scope for development in assessment practices to a need to develop a shared understanding among school leaders and teachers that formative assessment is a core component of the teaching and learning process, rather

than a discrete event. They reported that assessment was not always valued in this way in the culture of some post-primary schools.

Classroom-based assessments (CBAs)

The importance of formative assessment in supporting teaching and learning is reflected in the inclusion of classroom-based assessment (CBAs) in Junior Cycle. CBAs are a key aspect of the *Framework*. As part of the revised assessment arrangements during COVID-19, the number of CBAs that students have to complete has been reduced.

In these inspections, inspectors used focus groups to gather evidence on the perceptions and practices of teachers and students with regard to CBAs. The majority of teachers and most students reported that their experience of the CBA process and CBA outcomes was positive. In general, students were more positive about their experience of the CBAs than their teachers.

The most effective practice was noted where the CBA was part of the routine teaching, learning and assessment process. Both teachers and students commented positively on the range of skills that were demonstrated during the CBA process. Some teachers commented on the opportunity that the CBA provided for students to reflect on their work and to receive feedback from their peers. Others reported on the improvement that had occurred in students' oral language and presentation skills.

Many students spoke about how the process had developed their skills in research and presentation and provided them with opportunities to become more creative and independent learners. Some students also observed that the CBAs gave them a new perspective on the subject area.

Where students and teachers were negative about CBAs, comments made were generally in relation to the scheduling by the school of multiple CBAs within a short timeframe and the pressure and stress that this generated. There was evidence in these inspections that in-school management often considered CBAs to be discrete events, rather than an integral component of the process of teaching and learning. There was evidence also that this affected the scheduling of CBAs in a way that had a negative impact on the experiences of teachers and students.

In a few schools, students reported that they did not feel that they were adequately prepared for CBAs and that this too led to stress. In some cases, the CBA was the students' first experience of having to work independently and make decisions about their own learning. In some cases, students stated that the descriptor awarded for the CBA had not been communicated to them. This appeared to be linked to the timing of the CBA and the subject learning and assessment review (SLAR). The lack of feedback had a negative impact on students' engagement with the process.

In almost all schools, it was reported that CBAs were being conducted at school, as had been envisaged in the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*. In a few schools, however, inspectors noted that CBAs were being completed in the home setting and the schools were advised by the inspector to address this.

Department of Education Circular 28/2023 requires schools to consider the cumulative burden on students and teachers of multiple assessments across the full range of subjects. In this context, the CBAs are expected to substitute for other assessments currently undertaken in the school, such as in-house examinations. Schools were reminded that they should examine their own assessment policies and must plan for the replacement of in-house examinations with CBAs for students to avoid over-assessment.

A significant minority of the schools in which inspections were conducted had revised their in-house assessment procedures, in line with the Department's guidance. In a majority of schools, however, students were still required to complete traditional in-school examinations in addition to the CBA. In many cases, CBAs in all subjects were being scheduled for late in the school year. The cumulative effect of scheduling all CBAs at the same time of year in addition to traditional summative, in-school examinations and, in some cases, mock examinations, placed a significant assessment burden on students. Moreover, in some cases, the skills being assessed in CBAs had not been part of the students' classroom learning experience during the year. Along with the scheduling issues, this led to the CBA being a less positive and less meaningful experience for the student than was envisaged in the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*. This was reflected in some students' contributions to focus groups convened as part of these inspections.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE-SCHOOL SUPPORT

Overall quality of subject provision and whole-school support

In almost all schools, the time allocations for Junior Cycle subjects met or exceeded the minimum requirement for the delivery of the subject specification. In the few schools where this was not the case, the school was advised by the inspector to address the issue.

Two key whole-school issues in relation to Junior Cycle are the provision for subject learning and assessment reviews (SLAR) and the use of teachers' professional time. In almost all schools, it was reported that SLAR meetings were taking place in accordance with Department circulars. The few schools in which this was not the case were advised of the need to address this. Evidence indicated that the SLAR process was being implemented effectively. Schools reported positively on teachers' attendance at SLAR meetings and on the professional development that was taking place as a result. Inspectors reported that there was scope for development in the recording and sharing of reports of SLAR meetings by SLAR facilitators. There was scope for development also in the collation, analysis and use of SLAR facilitators' reports by school leadership at subject level and at whole-school level.

Inspectors reported that there was scope for more effective in-school communication around the use of the professional non-class-contact time allocated within the school timetable to each teacher.

Subject learning and assessment review

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* requires teachers of each subject involved in teaching and assessing CBAs in the school to engage in subject learning and assessment review (SLAR) meetings, at which they 'share and discuss samples of student work, the provisional descriptors awarded and the features in the work which reflect the descriptor in question'.

SLAR meetings support:

- the development of a collegial professional culture
- confidence in teachers' assessments of student performance
- a shared understanding among teachers of national standards and expectations
- teachers' reflections on the assessment process within their subjects
- the provision of relevant feedback by teachers to their students.

The requirements for SLAR meetings are set out in Department of Education Circular 0017/2020 *Guidance on the Junior Cycle Subject Learning and Assessment Review Process*. Inspectors found that the practice in all but a few schools was in accordance with these requirements.

In the majority of schools, it was reported that all teachers were involved in the SLAR process in their subject area. Inspectors recorded that where there was only one teacher of a particular subject in a school, these teachers were being facilitated to attend SLAR meetings with teachers of this subject in another school.

Inspectors reviewed the available evidence regarding the professional learning that was taking place at SLAR meetings. In more than half of the schools visited, this evidence was available in the SLAR facilitator's report. In a further third of schools, the evidence was in minutes of subject-department meetings. In a few schools, learning from the SLAR meetings had not been recorded. In some cases, teachers were not aware of the additional time available to SLAR facilitators.

Teachers were very positive overall when reporting on their learning from the SLAR process and meetings. The area in which teachers most frequently reported that learning had occurred was the area of standards. This was the most frequently mentioned area in under half of schools. In one quarter of schools, the most-reported area of learning was developing teaching, learning and assessment. In a few schools, the areas of collaboration and communication, and organisational changes were the most frequently reported.

Teachers of subjects that were introduced in the earlier implementation phases of Junior Cycle were more likely to identify teaching, learning and assessment as the area in which most learning was taking place. Teachers of subjects from later implementation phases were more likely to identify the collective understanding of standards as the main area of learning from the SLAR process. This may be seen as a positive trend, with increasing experience of the SLAR process correlating with an increased tendency to link the SLAR process to teaching, learning and assessment.

Professional time

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* recognises that teachers need professional time to engage in a range of professional collaborative activities, a proportion of which involves collaboration with teaching colleagues to support teaching, learning, assessment and reporting. Since September 2017, in all subject areas, full-time teachers involved in the enactment of Junior Cycle have been entitled to avail of twenty-two hours of professional time, with a pro-rata entitlement for part-time teachers.

In most schools, it was reported that professional time was being used for subject department collaboration, attendance at SLAR meetings, preparation for CBAs, planning and other related activities. Inspectors reported that at times it was difficult to identify how the professional time was being used as it was not always evident in the subject planning documentation nor was it apparent during discussions with the teachers. In some cases, teachers were unaware that they had professional time.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Inspectors found that the quality of individual teachers' planning and preparation was very good or good in most of the lessons observed. The two aspects of planning and preparation that inspectors evaluated most positively were the use of learning intentions, and the linking of the lesson to a unit of learning in the subject plan and the relevant learning outcome(s) in the subject specification. The aspect in which inspectors found most scope for improvement was the use of success criteria.

Aspects of planning and preparation that were most effective

The areas of practice about which inspectors were most positive in lesson observations were the linking of lessons to a unit of learning in the subject plan and the relevant learning outcome(s) in the subject specification, and the use of learning intentions in planning for the lesson. In most subjects, inspectors found that lesson content was linked to units of learning from the subject plan to some extent in almost all lessons observed. This was especially evident in subjects from the earlier phases of implementation. In half of the subjects, inspectors found that learning intentions were used to some extent in almost all lessons observed.

Aspects of planning and preparation that were least effective

The aspect of teachers' individual planning and preparation in which inspectors found most scope for improvement was the use of success criteria in lessons. Success criteria are linked to learning intentions and describe what success looks like. They help the teacher and student to make judgements about the quality of student learning. In almost one third of the lessons observed, there was no reference to associated success criteria for learning. English, was the subject in which inspectors reported that the use of success criteria was largely present in more than half of the lessons observed. Other than this, however, it was clear that the use of success criteria in lesson planning was an area in need of development across most subjects, irrespective of the phase in which they were implemented.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is much that is encouraging in the findings of the ninety-eight subject inspections with a focus on Junior Cycle, especially when one considers that the phased introduction of the programme has been impacted by COVID-19 and issues related to teacher supply.

The overall quality of teaching and learning was judged to be very good or good in almost all of the lessons observed. The aspects of teaching evaluated by inspectors as most positive were classroom management and teachers' subject and pedagogical knowledge. The development of Junior Cycle key skills was facilitated to some extent in almost all lessons observed in most subjects, especially those subjects that were introduced in the earlier phases.

The majority of teachers and students reported that their experience of the CBA process and CBA outcomes was positive. In general, students were more positive about their experience of the CBAs than their teachers. Evidence indicated that the SLAR process was being implemented effectively. Schools reported positively on teachers' attendance at SLAR meetings and on the professional development that was taking place as a result. The collective understanding of standards was the main area of learning identified by many teachers from the SLAR process. Teachers of subjects that were introduced in the earlier implementation phases of Junior Cycle were more likely to identify teaching, learning and assessment as the areas in which most learning was taking place through the SLAR meetings. This may be seen as a positive trend, with increasing experience of the SLAR process correlating with an increased tendency to link the process to teaching, learning and assessment.

The quality of individual teachers' planning and preparation was very good or good in most of the lessons observed. The two aspects of planning and preparation about which inspectors were most positive were the use of learning intentions, and the linking of the lesson to a unit of learning in the subject plan.

These positive findings indicate that, despite the disruption and restrictions caused by COVID-19 to the operation of schools, there is a useful foundation in place. The more positive findings from lessons in subjects that were introduced in the earlier phases may also indicate that the supports provided have led to a modest but positive shift in the culture of teaching and learning in post-primary schools.

For the implementation of Junior Cycle to be effective at whole-school level, there is a need for schools to foster a culture in which a high value is placed on the use of assessment for formative purposes. Formative assessment, including CBAs, should be

an integral component of effective teaching and learning. It is important that school leaders show the way in this regard by adhering to the requirements of Department of Education Circular 28/2023 in the scheduling of CBAs and Department of Education Circular 17/2020 in the management of SLAR meetings.

- Schools should ensure that CBAs are scheduled across the school year and avoid having an overload of assessment events at particular times. This would reduce the pressure felt by teachers and students. It would also support the use of the CBA as part of ongoing teaching, learning and formative assessment in the classroom.
- In-school management teams should review their assessment policy and practice to ensure that CBAs will substitute for other assessments such as in-house examinations.
- Teachers should be familiar with their obligations with regard to professional time, including SLAR meetings, and schools should provide guidance on how this time may be used to best support implementation of Junior Cycle in the school.
- Schools should ensure that SLAR facilitators are aware of their time allocation and reporting obligations and use facilitators' reports to support leadership of teaching and learning.

At the level of the classroom and subject department, there is a need to use assessment regularly for formative purposes, to support, guide and improve teaching and learning. The use of formative assessment also provides an effective basis for meaningful feedback to students and for the development of students' capacity for self-assessment and responsibility for their own learning.

- Teachers should develop and use clearly-expressed success criteria to guide teaching and learning. These success criteria should be developed and/or shared with students and used as reference points for feedback to students on their learning.
- Teachers should develop students' capacity for self-assessment and peer-assessment, to support their learning and the development of the relevant key skills.
- The development of the knowledge, understanding, skills and values required by students for CBAs should be a regular strand of classroom practice rather than a discrete event that is confined to a particular time of the school year.