A Study of Teacher Engagement with Junior Cycle:

Have You Asked the Teacher?

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Submitted to the University of Dublin Trinity College
2022

Declaration

I hereby declare that this is entirely my own work, and it has not been submitted as an exercise for the award of a degree at this or any other University. I agree that the library may lend or copy this dissertation on request.

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2022

Summary

A Study of Teacher Engagement with Junior Cycle Reform

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* aimed to fundamentally change approaches to curriculum and assessment, improving the learning experience across the lower second level. Junior Cycle was introduced into schools in 2014, and it was to take eight years for the complete roll-out of all subjects. At the time of writing, it is 2021, at year seven in the process.

Reforms succeed or fail based on teacher implementation. Research from the educational reform in Scotland (Priestley & Sinnema, 2014) noted that it was impossible to teacher-proof reforms. It is well established that teachers act as change agents (Fullan, 2016; Guskey, 2002). Therefore, it is critical to monitor their engagement with and enactment of reforms as they become embedded in teacher professional practice. There is a need for this research, which fills a gap in the available literature regarding teachers in the Irish education system and Junior Cycle reform.

Social constructivism was a natural fit as the theoretical framework. Developing a research design based on cooperative principles empowering participants to engage with the research was a priority. The Lundy Model (2007) of participatory research underpinned the research design. Informed by the literature, an online survey, and the support of a Research Advisory Group (RAG), the author generated open questions to be used in World Café style gatherings. World Café is a flexible, collaborative method to gather participant perspectives in a social and relaxed environment (MacFarlane, 2017). Five World Café gatherings were held in the Midlands, the East and the South-east of the country, with 282 teacher participants.

The teacher conversations from the World Café gatherings provided insights into teacher perceptions around the changes and implementation which would address the research questions. This novel participatory research approach to data collection was followed by a combination of qualitative (Braun & Clarke,

2013) and summative analysis (Francis Rapport, 2010). The analysis techniques ensured the integrity of the teacher voice and provided a rich data source to address the research questions. The RAG continued the participatory and collaborative approach of this research in developing the research questions. The group agreed the following research questions that it was felt could be answered by the teacher sample engaged in the World Café gatherings.

Question One: To what extent did teacher conversations reflect the development of more student-centred learning environments, as expressed by the Junior Cycle Reform framework?

Question Two: Did teacher conversations identify opportunities and/or barriers to the Junior Cycle Reform's goal to replace the high-stakes summative exam system at the Junior Cycle level?

This research identified a commitment on behalf of Irish teachers to high-quality student learning. The data demonstrated a broad welcome for student-centred learning and a new recognition of the role of the student in the learning dynamic. The analysis indicated that the goal of embedding student-centred learning had, for the most part, been achieved. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2011) stated that unless the terminal exam at the end of the third year changed, nothing else would change; and that changing the form of assessment was fundamental to the success of the reforms. However, their focus may have been on the wrong exam. It would appear from this research that the Leaving Certificate is the high-stakes exam that most influences Junior Cycle. Changing the perception of lower secondary as preparation for the Leaving Certificate may not be possible until the Leaving Certificate itself is fully reformed.

The data generated at the World Café gathering provides valuable insights into Irish teacher engagement with the reform process and the continuing professional development that accompanies it. It presents evidence of barriers to teacher engagement with Junior Cycle reform that might be useful in the development and delivery of Senior Cycle reform currently underway. The

research design proved a highly effective tool to uncover participant perceptions and may have applications in other research fields.

Acknowledgements

We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. I have been blessed to have been surrounded by people who empowered me to be better, to persist, and to achieve. To my family for their forbearance and tea-making, my extraordinary parents, my colleagues, my D.Ed. What's App support group and my incredibly patient and encouraging supervisors, with all my heart, I thank you.

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List of Abbreviations

AT: Assessment Task

ASTI: Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland

CBA: Classroom-based Assessment

CPD: Continuing Professional Development

DES: Department of Education and Skills (2020 Department of Education)

JCT: Junior Cycle for Teachers

JCPA: Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

NCCA: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

SEC: State Examination Commission

SLAR: Subject Learning and Assessment Review

SSE: School Self Evaluation

TUI: Teachers' Union of Ireland

1.   Introduction

1.1.   The General Context of the Study

In response to social and economic developments worldwide, Ireland and other jurisdictions are engaging with educational reform. The Irish secondary education system serving 12 to 18-year-olds is divided into lower secondary, transition year and Senior Cycle. Plans to reform the lower second level were begun by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 1999. The Junior Cycle was finally unveiled in 2012. However, teacher union opposition caused a re-evaluation, and in 2015, a year after the new curriculum had been introduced, the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* was established. Union resistance continued until 2017, when all teachers became fully engaged with the newly reformed Junior Cycle. Seven years from the introduction of English as the first subject, it was an opportune time to explore teacher perceptions around Junior Cycle and the reform process.

This study aims to explore teacher engagement with reforms from the teachers' perspective. It is the decisions that teachers make in their classrooms, on a day-to-day basis, that ultimately determines the kind of learning that takes place. For Junior Cycle reform to take hold, teachers must embrace the rationale behind it and have confidence in its ability to deliver better learning outcomes to their students. Without teacher agency, significant and lasting educational reform is unlikely. This study is an exploration of what teachers think about the reforms as they unfold in their school and classrooms.

1.2.   The Researcher

I have been teaching for more than 30 years – long enough to have taught Science, Maths and Religion through three lower second-level curricula, the Intermediate Certificate, the Junior Certificate and now Junior Cycle. Passionate about learning, I have been working in teacher education since 2015, when I joined Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT). This is the body charged with developing and delivering teacher in-service training for the Junior Cycle. My experiences have given me a unique opportunity to observe teacher engagement with Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and the roll-out of the Junior Cycle reforms. I worked as the coordinator for Junior Cycle in my own school and supported teachers as they

struggled with the change process. Part of the role with JCT was to research both formative assessment and teacher engagement with CPD. The combination of practical experience, observations and theoretical background created the perfect storm that initiated this research study.

1.3. The Objective of the Research and Research Questions

This study explores teacher perceptions around Junior Cycle reform, which is acknowledged as one of the most significant changes to teacher practices ever introduced in the Irish education system. The study charts the rationale behind the changes and teacher engagement with educational reform generally. The research investigates teacher perceptions around their changed role, new assessment practices, and what they see as the challenges and benefits of the new Junior Cycle. It provides a window on teacher engagement and enactment of the Junior Cycle. There is a significant gap in the literature in relation to Irish teachers and Junior Cycle reform. This research goes some way to filling that gap.

Genuine engagement necessitates understanding the perspective of the other without judgement. Designed using the principals of participatory research, this study draws on the collective wisdom present in a body of professionals. Reforms succeed or fail, based on what teachers decide to do in their classrooms. This research unpacks the teacher perceptions that inform those decisions. Specifically, the study seeks to establish the extent to which two major principles of the Junior Cycle Framework have been enacted and achieved.

Question One: To what extent did teacher conversations reflect the development of more student-learning environments, as expressed by the Junior Cycle Reform framework?

Question Two: Did teacher conversations identify opportunities and/or barriers to the Junior Cycle Reform's goal to replace the high-stakes summative exam system at the Junior Cycle level?

1.4. The significance of the Research

Junior Cycle is a relatively new initiative. It was designed to take eight years for the complete roll-out of all subjects. This study was completed in 2021, at year seven. All subjects have engaged, to some extent, with only English, Science and Business Studies having completed full three-year cycles. There has been little research undertaken into teacher engagement with the reforms. To date, research has focused on policy (Conway, 2013; MacPhail et al., 2018), system reviews (Coolahan et al., 2017), the rationale for change (Printer, 2020) and assessment changes (Murchan, 2018). Few have reflected on teacher perceptions of the reforms (Byrne & Prendergast, 2020; Darmody et al., 2020). There is a need to interrogate teacher engagement with the reforms. How teachers are implementing the curricular and pedagogical changes has not been explored. Senior cycle reform is also underway. Valuable insights could be gained from a study of teacher engagement with Junior cycle.

Reforms succeed or fail based on teacher implementation. Research by Priestley & Sinnema (2014) noted that it was impossible to teacher-proof reforms. Teachers act as agents of change (Fullan, 2016; Guskey, 2002), therefore, it is critical to monitor their engagement with and enactment of reforms as they become embedded in teacher professional practice. There is a need for this research, which fills a gap in the available literature regarding Irish teachers and Junior Cycle reform.

Junior Cycle is part of a larger reform agenda that will see changes at Senior Cycle. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD (2020) has urged Ireland to reflect on the experiences of the Junior Cycle in order to support smooth progress for Senior Cycle reform. This research may provide insight for those engaged in the development and delivery of CPD at Senior Cycle.

1.5. Research Design

As a teacher researching teachers, I designed this research to provide a high degree of reflexivity. The choice of theoretical framework reflects a constructivist approach. There is a desire throughout to maintain the Lundy (2007) model of participatory

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research. The aim was always to reflect the participant perceptions accurately and without bias. Table 1, below, outlines the basic structure of the research design.

Table 1: Outline of Research Design

Social Constructivism
Lundy Participatory Research & World Café
Thematic Analysis & Summative Analysis

The research design ensures that knowledge obtained is likely to accurately reflect teacher perceptions of the Junior Cycle reforms. The data collected provides enough depth and detail to draw reasonable conclusions to explore the research questions.

1.6.   The Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation has been divided into six chapters.

Chapter 1: introduces the study, context and aim of the research. It also presents the research objectives and argues for the significance of the study.

Chapter 2: presents a review of the literature, in relation to curriculum reform in the European context. It also provides a short critique of teacher engagement with educational reform.

Chapter 3: details of the Junior Cycle Framework and the reforms themselves, and an account of the state bodies involved in developing and delivering the Junior Cycle.

Chapter 4: outlines the research methodology, including the overarching theoretical framework and research design.

Chapter 5: presents data findings and analysis from the five World Café gatherings.

Chapter 6: introduces a critical discussion and interpretation of the findings from the data and outlines the limitations and contributions of this research study.

Chapter 7: outlines the concluding findings and details further research opportunities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This goal of this research is to examine teacher engagement with educational reforms as they unfolded between 2014 and 2019 in Ireland. It gathers teacher perceptions around the challenges and benefits of the reforms, the teachers' changing role, and the assessment changes. Through participatory research methodologies and qualitative analysis processes, the aim of this research is to establish teachers' perceptions of the extent to which two significant goals of the reforms have been achieved. The first is to explore teacher perceptions of the extent to which the goal of student-centred learning has been achieved; the second is to discover their perceptions of the extent to which high-stakes summative exams have been replaced at the lower second level.

To place this research in a broader research context, a review of the literature in relation to international reform at lower second level has been undertaken. This will provide a lens through which to view and interpret the reforms in Ireland, and more specifically, the data gathered from teachers participating in this research. The experiences of teachers from other jurisdictions provide validation for Irish teachers implementing changes here. There are valuable insights to be gained from understanding how those at the sharp end of the implementation perceive the value of the process and the implications it might have for student learning.

2.2. Educational Reform the Wider Context

Thirty three OECD countries had introduced major educational reform at the second level in the last 10 years. Figure 1. below indicates some of the OECD countries where educational reforms have been introduced (Pont, 2018). The Irish education system is following this global trend, introducing a curriculum incorporating skills, values, competencies and knowledge. Teacher professional development is central to introducing these changes and has received huge investment in all jurisdictions. The figure below illustrates this trend.

Curricular reform: Making the content of learning more relevant

UK: Curriculum for Excellence (Scotland), and Welsh Curriculum for Life

Sweden: New curriculum (2011)

Finland: Curriculum reform (2014)

Netherlands: ...culum ...16)

France: Redistribution of learning time

Japan: Course of Study

Denmark: National Common Objectives (2009)

Italy: Curriculum guidelines (2012)

Slovenia: Updated curricula (2012)
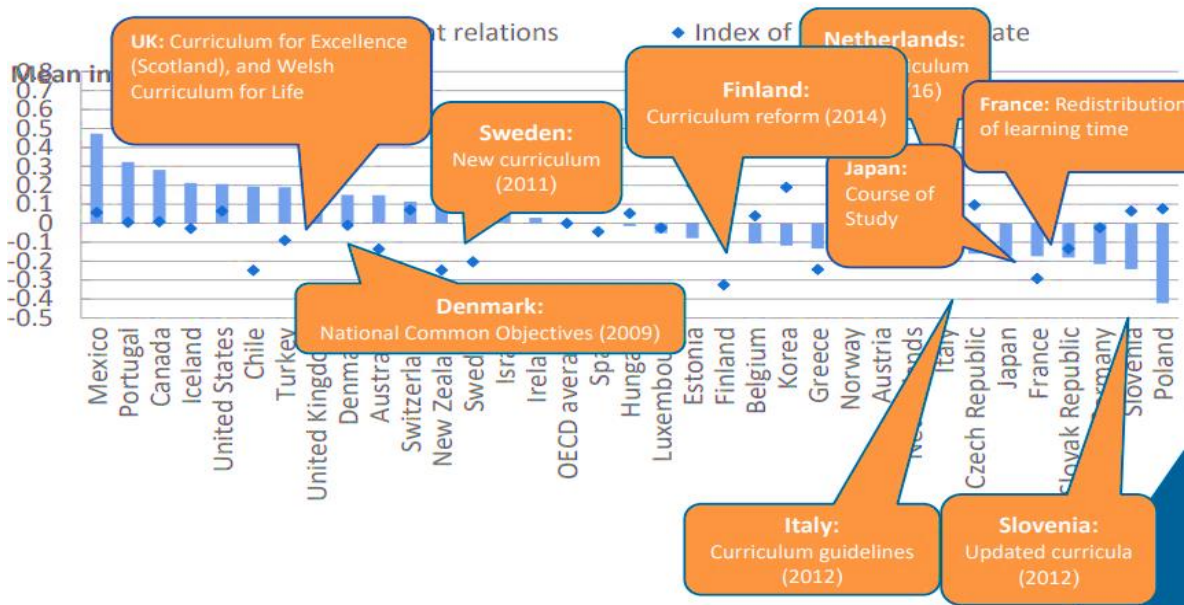
Figure 1: OECD Countries Engaged in Educational Reform

Global trends are driving the pace of educational change to equip students with the 21st-century skills they will need. Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education and Skills for the OECD, frames this drive for change: "In a technology-driven society, students need the cognitive, social and emotional skills and values of human beings to harness digitalisation and shape the world for the better" (Schleicher, 2018, p. 14). In an increasingly computerised world, skills that are easy to teach are easy to digitise. We need to teach fostering creativity and imagination with new pedagogy and curricula.

2.3. Teacher Engagement with Curricular Reform

The implementation of educational reform internationally has resulted in research focusing on teacher engagement with the reform process. Finland, Germany, the Czech Republic, and our near neighbours Scotland have all recently undergone curricular reform. The research highlights common issues and potential sources of stress faced by teachers. Elo (2003) noted that the challenges and difficulties faced by teachers can become a source of frustration and anxiety. Teachers involved in the change process may be significantly challenged by the demands of new pedagogy, along with the knowledge and competencies that accompany them

(Chaplain, 2001). Germeten (2011), Lainas (2010) and Lasky (2005) noted the impact of an increased teacher workload due to the reform process. Swiss teacher concern for student learning and feelings of poor self-efficacy were also reported (Ittner, 2019). These findings concur with those of Saunders (2013) who noted that teaches emotional responses to professional development directly impacted their use of new instructional processes. Research into Finnish teachers' experiences with reform highlighted that "work stress is hazardous for occupational well-being and may put the reform's success at risk" (Tikkanen, 2020, p. 546).

Multiple factors have been reported as potentially impacting teacher engagement with curricular reform. Gender, position within the school, length of teaching service, and knowledge of curriculum reform have all be noted (Janík, 2018). Implementation strategies are considered to have a significant impact on the potential success of curricular reform (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves, 2012).

Educational change according to Fullan (2016) refers to teacher capacity to initiate, establish and integrate advancements in the educational and pedagogical field. Curricular reform if it is to succeed must draw teachers into the process. Research shows that the success of curricular reform may depend on the implementation process (Fullan, 2007; Petko, 2015). One common strategy is referred to as top-down where centralised reforms are led by policymakers and implemented by teachers. According to Chow (2013) top-down strategies often fail because teachers do not take ownership of the reforms, feeling they have been imposed on them. The second is bottom-up, where teachers act to address a perceived need in their own school, making decisions at ground level to implement changes to benefit their students. The Teaching and Learning in the 21st Century initiative (TL21) running in many Irish schools is an example of this kind of bottom-up approach. Fullan (1994) suggests these bottom-up strategies though successful at a local level, can fall short due to lack of support at an administrative and governmental level.

A hybrid of both a top-down bottom-up approach incorporating elements of both strategies has proven to be successful, as demonstrated in the Finnish educational reform process. (Tikkanen, 2020; Pietarinen, 2017). According to Tikkanen (2020) 'Integrating the initiatives from the administrative level, such as determining general

goals and offering support, school leadership and teacher participation' (p 547) offers the optimum approach to the implementation of curricular reform. This strategy involves the inclusion of many stakeholders in the change process.

2.4. Curriculum Reform in Europe

Curriculum reform has been underway across Europe using different implementation strategies. Park (2013) noted that curriculum reform is dependent on successful teacher engagement and that the teacher experience of the reform process itself may influence teacher willingness to embrace a changed curriculum. Ketelaar (2012), researching Finish curricular reform, suggested that the implementation process itself can impact how teachers perceive the value of the reform. A study of teacher engagement in Europe may add to the understanding of Irish teachers' experience of the reform process.

2.4.1. Finland

Data collected from a large-scale survey in Finland, following recent curriculum reforms, found that positive teacher engagement had been successful in addressing problems faced in everyday school life (Tikkanen, 2020). A top-down-bottom-up strategy had been employed. The collaborative nature of the implementation process "had an important function as a facilitator of collective, cumulative learning" (Tikkanen, 2020, p. 557). The research is in line with previous research by Priestley (2015), indicating that teacher and educational leaders engaging together supports the reform process and buffers reform-related stress. Earlier research by Pietarinen (2017) supports these findings noting that a top-down-bottom-up implementation strategy had resulted in the success of the reform process in Finland.

2.4.2. Germany

Research by Hubner (2021) into teacher engagement with German curricular reform in 2018 suggested that high quality professional development along with the provision of support materials were valued by teachers and supportive of changes in teacher knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes. The finding is supported by other studies into teacher engagement with curricular reform see Fullan (2016), Borho (2010) and Darling Hammond (2017).

Research has shown that multiple systemic, social, cultural, and economic factors effect teacher engagement with curricular reform thus making it difficult to compare different jurisdictions (Hargreaves, 2012). In addition, the German education system is characterised by a three-track school system, which may further complicate comparisons with other European countries: The high track Gymnasium geared towards high-ability students, the intermediate track schools Realschulen and the comprehensive schools Gemeinschaftsschulen with predominantly low to intermediately high performing students.

Hubner (2021) commenting on the German reforms, concluded that teachers who understood the reforms and saw value in them for themselves and their students were positively disposed to engaging with them. Support structures and professional development for teachers were noted as key in the successful implementation of the reforms. The collaborative nature of the implementation of curricular reforms was noted as a significant factor in their success.

2.4.3. The Czech Republic

Janík (2018) researching curriculum reform in the Czech Republic noted that it had not delivered the expected or hoped for impact on educational practice. The research surveyed teachers in the wake of the reforms to evaluate their engagement. The intention was to identify the factors underlying the inability of the reforms to deliver the benefits for schools and students that had been anticipated.

The results indicated that the most significant factor in teacher resistance was insufficient teacher participation with the curricular reform process. Teachers expressed feelings of being "alienated executors of someone else's plans" (p 67). The implementation strategy was perceived to be top-down in nature, failing to involve teachers in the kind of collaborative educational reform process advocated by Hargraves (2012) and Fullan (2016).

Janík's research with the Czech experience is supported by Pešková (2019), who noted that the "more teachers engaged with curriculum documents the higher self-efficacy they have and the greater their tendency to accept curriculum reform" (p 88). This supports the importance of the provision of effective professional development for teachers as part of the implementation process.

2.4.4. Scotland

The Scottish curricular reform process sought to "combine top-down government prescription with bottom-up school-based curriculum development by teaching professionals" (Priestley, 2010, p. 23). The strategy was in line with best practice as advocated by Hargraves (2012) and Fullan (2016) that promote teacher agency and ownership of the reforms.

According to Priestley (2013) teachers broadly welcomed the changes. His research reported that while most teachers welcomed the underpinning philosophy of the curriculum and pedagogical changes, some issues, such as time and resourcing for instance, hindered teachers' full engagement. The research suggested that teachers were engaging with the changes however he noted that "enactment is not the same thing as faithful implementation" (p 50). The implication is that more time was needed for teachers to fully grasp the nature of the reforms and that "greater opportunities for sense-making about new curricular and pedagogic ideas" (p 50) would be needed.

The research into the Scottish experience supports Parks' (2013) assertion that curriculum reform is influenced by teacher engagement with the reform process. The success of the Finish reform process would also indicate a top-down bottom-up style of implementation supports teacher agency and in doing so creates a supportive environment for change (Pietarinen, 2017).

2.5.   Teachers as Agents of Change

Research has consistently shown that teacher-proofing curricular reform is not possible (Priestley & Sinnema 2014). It is in the classroom that reforms succeed or fail and as such, teachers must be considered and supported as agents of change. Implementation gaps occur when policymakers do not engage teachers in the reform process. Attempts at a top-down policy change, in the hope classroom practices will change in line with the new policy, has proven futile (Cuban 1998). There is a recognition that it was the teacher enactment of curricular policy that had a key influence on school improvement (OECD, 2005). In Ireland the Junior Certificate introduced in 1989 suffered from a lack of structured investment in teacher

education, and as a result, some commentators would suggest, failed to bring about the desired reforms (Gleeson, 2010).

This shift in teacher education was a key feature of the Scottish experience of curricular reform. The intention was to develop a climate of reflective practice among teachers. The Scottish Executive (2000) invited teachers through CPD experiences to re-evaluate the aims and values of their classroom practice, and to share and develop ideas about teaching and learning. Though the intention was to develop teachers' professional practice, it is not clear from the literature that Scottish teachers fully embraced the initiative. There is a need for clarity of purpose around the rationale for the reforms and the CPD methodologies employed if teacher engagement is to be secured. Research regarding teacher engagement with reform indicates that "early engagement in the processes of reform provided confidence in their preparation for new system changes" (Willis et al., 2019, p. 181).

Priestly (2013), in his work exploring the experience of Scottish teachers with the reforms process, highlighted some of the difficulties faced by teachers. Teachers argued that the gradual introduction of subjects, for instance, led to difficulties, rather than smoothing the process of change (Priestley, 2014). Due partly to this staggered introduction of subjects, not all colleagues were at the same implementation stage. Different subject departments had different understandings around the new language of reporting. The lack of clarity resulted in a return to the old style of reporting to parents. The staggered introduction may have caused more difficulties than it solved, with one Scottish teacher described the situation as vague and confused.

The current wave of reform places much emphasis on teacher development and particularly on the development of collaborative professionalism. Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018), avid proponents of this new level of teacher innovation and improvement, suggest that engaging teachers in this way is crucial to the success of the reform process. Several strategies were employed both in Scotland and Ireland to achieve improvements in teacher professionalism, such as structured, ongoing CPD, along with the introduction of an accountability system and metrics to measure the educational effectiveness of schools and teachers. Priestly et al. (2015) noted two particular strategies: Teacher development, which was provided in Scotland

under the title of Continuous Professional Formation; and the introduction of an accountability system, the use of metrics to measure the educational effectiveness of schools and teachers. Both acted as a driving force in the change process.

The Canadian Teachers Federation commissioned a study to evaluate teacher engagement with their reforms and noted that teachers struggled to cope with the volume of changes (2014). They found that the extent and pace of change, higher expectations and accountability, along with fewer resources and supports provided to and for students, had placed enormous stress on teachers

2.6. Changing Teacher Perceptions

Black (2018) puts the case that teachers drive learning by what they and pupils do in classrooms. The multiple decisions, organisational and pedagogical, that a teacher makes in their classroom on a day-to-day basis ultimately determine the kind of learning that takes place. There can, however, be a disconnect between what teachers believe they are implementing and what is actually happening in the classroom. Samuelowicz and Bain (2001) demonstrate that there are fundamental differences between teaching-centred and learning-centred orientations to teaching and learning, and that teachers' beliefs and practices in the classroom are closely linked. They suggest that many efforts to improve teaching are based on assumptions about the links between teaching and learning. There is, the authors suggest, a need for more research into the teachers' understanding of how teaching and learning are linked.

Kember (1998) takes the view that fundamental changes to the quality of teaching and learning are unlikely to happen without changes to teachers' conceptions of teaching. A 2012 study by Budgea and Cowlishawb built on Kember's work, finding that, despite teachers presenting a range of learning experiences to students in what they believed to be student-centred formats, the students, when asked about their experience, reported significant teacher-led elements and teacher talk throughout the class. There was a mismatch between the teachers' intention to deliver student-centred learning and the student experience. It was suggesting a significant difference between student and teacher perceptions of what was happening in the classroom. There may be a disconnect between theories in use and theories in

action. They concluded that what teachers say about their practice, despite their intentions, does not always equate with the learner experience. This research also found that, although teachers generally had a student-centred belief about teaching and learning, it varied widely across subject disciplines.

Black (1998) has warned of the danger of poor implementation of strategies due to teachers' lack of understanding of the purpose and rationale behind them. New curriculum and pedagogical changes take more time to prepare for and implement. He argues that changing pupil behaviour and embedding self-directed learning is time-consuming. Teachers must take risks in the belief that such investment of time will be worth it in the long run. Black (ibid.) warns that poor understanding and delivery of innovative pedagogy can damage the change process and may be harmful to student learning. Research suggests that initial engagement with the early stages of the reform impacts the subsequent effectiveness of teacher implementation of the changes. The Scottish experience highlighted some difficulties encountered by teachers there, particularly in relation to the staggered roll out of subjects and lack of clarity around the reforms. Priestly (2010) suggested that in his opinion the Curriculum for Excellence had been "highly damaging to the teacher professional autonomy and the systemic flexibility that the new curricula claim to be promoting" (p27).

Fullan (1985b) suggested that change programmes which engage teachers in the hope of first changing their attitudes and beliefs will lead to the desired changes in pedagogy. This was the strategy in the Scottish implementation process. Guskey (1986) suggests an alternate model for change. He argues that changing teacher classroom practices first will lead to a change in beliefs and attitudes about the nature of student learning. He suggests that introducing new teaching strategies and pedagogy, a range of new materials or a changed curriculum, will deliver the desired changes.

Research from Guskey (2002) suggests that for educational reforms to be embedded, it is often necessary to bring pressure to bear on teachers to continue the reform process, especially on those whose motivation to change is poor. Other researchers concur with this belief, noting the need for pressure to be part of the

change equation (Huberman (1988), (Crandall, 1983) and Fullan (1985a)). Pressure can be applied through professional interactions with colleagues and management within the school setting. External pressure can be applied from teacher professional bodies and government agencies. The question of how much pressure and the delicate balance between incentive and stress may play a factor in teacher support for the reform process.

Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) refer to the importance of developing a culture of collaborative professionalism. Teachers, they contend, will be most likely to transform teaching and learning through organised evidence-based collaborative inquiry. The importance of harnessing all stakeholders for the process of educational reform is well documented. Fullan (2013) has identified a need to harness and develop the human, social and decisional capital among educators, thus building capacity and a culture of learning within schools. Building professional collaboration in Irish schools may provide an impetus for change, or it may be perceived as another pressure on already overwhelmed teachers.

Persuading teachers to change their beliefs around assessment reforms in Junior Cycle is the focus of research by Murchan (2018). He contends that teachers in Ireland were not convinced by international examples of active teacher involvement in high-stakes assessment. Research on best practices internationally did not sway the majority of teachers to embrace changes in their teaching practices. He argues that the complex issues surrounding this reform are wider than educational concerns and have much to do with local political, social and economic factors.

According to Murchan (2018), Irish teachers contend that historically, their relationship with students and parents has been based on supporting and preparing their students for someone else's exam. They argue that the assessment changes including the introduction of formal, but formative classroom-based assessments in the new JC curriculum, radically alter this highly valued and respected relationship. This, they argue, could have unforeseen and damaging effects on student-teacher relationships.

In his conclusion, Murchan defers to Bell and Stevenson (2006), who argue that changes to education policy are messy and complex. Ultimately, it results from compromise, negotiation, dispute and struggle, with all participants striving to secure their individual objectives. The messy nature of reform has also been noted in the Welsh and Scottish reform experiences. Bloomer (2019), a member of the review group responsible for the *Curriculum for Excellence*, suggested that lack of clarity had led to a lack of professional self-confidence among Scottish teachers that greatly hindered the reform process (Evans, 2019). The introduction of the classroom-based assessment, and its function in developing student learning without adequate explanation, may be an example of such 'messy' policy implementation in the Irish reform process.

2.7.   Teacher Resistance to Change

If it is as Black and Wiliam (2018) suggests, that the multiple decisions teachers make in their classroom on a day-to-day basis ultimately determine the kind of learning that takes place, then understanding teacher resistance to change is crucial. Guskey (2002) and Fullan (1985b) have put forward theories on how to implement change: introduce the reforms and teachers, when they see the benefits, will buy in; or alternatively, introduce a teacher education programme, change teacher attitudes first, and then they buy in. Both suggested the use of a "carrot and stick" approach involving peer pressure and external monitoring, and a robust inspection programme.

In relation to veteran teachers versus newly qualified teachers, Huberman (1988) and (Hargreaves, 2005) identified differences in teacher engagement with reforms based on their years of service. They noted that, of the veteran teachers, those positively disposed engaged well, but focused on their own students rather than the organisational level of the whole school. Those negatively focused may have been deterred from engaging because of previous experiences of reform that failed to deliver the promised benefits. Longer-serving teachers also expressed a greater desire to have a meaningful discussion with policymakers and school leaders about the changes than their younger counterparts (Snyder, 2017).

Kuhle (2010) carried out a large-scale survey with teachers to establish their attitude to using feedback from student results in standardised tests (Lernstandserhebungen) to reflect on their own practice. Although teachers were willing to engage with the reflective process, a significant number believed that it would not inform their own teaching practice, and 40% believed that the data was of no use at all. In his analysis of German teacher engagement with this kind of performance improvement strategy, Terhart (2013) identified six reasons for the lack of teacher engagement: lack of time; my practice is fine; reforms never work; that's not applicable in the real world; let the young ones get on with it; and what's in it for me. He argues that there is a perfectly normal reaction, and we must look for a deeper meaning behind this resistance. He suggests that we ask: "What does 'failure' actually mean in this context?" (Terhart, 2013, p. 497).

Cuban (2011) proposes that policymakers and teachers judge educational reform differently. Policymakers look at systemic change, at effectiveness and efficiency, at a macro level, whereas teachers consider the micro-level. Cuban contends that teachers make judgements with a focus on students and classrooms. Will the changes solve the teaching and learning issues I currently have? How much time and effort will it require to show dividends for students? How can I adapt this to best suit my students? The disparity in approach may make it difficult for teachers and policymakers to engage with each other. This may lead to unnecessary conflict, creating a barrier to engagement with reform.

2.8. Conclusion

There are lessons to be learned from the international experience of implementing educational change. Bloomer, chair of the Education Committee of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and a member of the review group that wrote *A Curriculum for Excellence*, considered the Curriculum for Excellence to have "fallen well short of its potential" (2019). It was his opinion this was in part due to the poor engagement of teachers and the wider community in the reform process. The importance of creating an environment of collaboration and inclusion as in a top-down bottom-up approach to curricular reform has been well documented.

Multiple factors may affect the success of educational reform. The European experience has demonstrated the important role of the style of the implementation process in teacher acceptance of, and engagement with curricular reform. The Finish reform process indicated that a top-down, bottom-up style of implementation best supports teacher agency and creates a supportive environment for change (Pietarinen, 2017). This chapter summarises teacher engagement with curricular reform across Europe and internationally.

Factors influencing teachers' ability and willingness to engage with change were outlined. The importance of teacher collaborative teacher engagement highlighted by (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018) suggests a way forward that is inclusive and progressive. Teachers' concerns primarily focus on their students and initiatives that make a difference in their classrooms (Cuban 2011). Understanding the feelings and needs of teachers around curricular reform may shed light on Irish teachers experience of and engagement with curricular reform.

Whatever the reasons for success or failure, or resistance to educational reform, it is important that we explore them. Seven years into the Junior Cycle reform in Ireland, very little research is available reflecting the Irish teachers' experience. This study presents a picture of Irish teachers' experiences around the implementation of Junior Cycle reforms and goes some way to closing a gap in the research.

3. Reform at Lower Second-level Education in Ireland

In this chapter I will provide an overview of the Irish lower secondary school system along with an outline of the principal features of the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015.

3.1.1. Brief Overview of the Irish Lower Secondary School System

Lower secondary, known as Junior Cycle, refers to the first three years of post-primary education. Typically, students are between 12 and 16 years of age; compulsory schooling in Ireland is to the age of 16. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is the statutory body responsible for developing curricula, pedagogy and assessment practices. According to the Department of Education and Skills (DES), almost all students in Irish schools complete lower second-level education and progress to Senior Cycle (DES, 2020a).

The Junior Certificate currently being replaced has been in operation since 1989. It succeeded the Intermediate Certificate, which had remained relatively unchanged since the Intermediate Education Act in 1924. Both were principally knowledge-based curricula. Pupils were expected to receive a sound, broad general education at the second level. The Junior Certificate introduced skills and personal development elements to the second level. It was designed to equip students for the Senior Cycle, as fewer were now completing their education after the lower second level. The breadth and balance of the curriculum at this level were intended to give students a wide range of educational experiences. The skills of numeracy, literacy and oracy received particular attention. The curriculum included social and environmental education, science and technology, and modern languages (DES, 1989, p. 3). Originally, this programme was designed with some elements of school-based assessment. However, this was dropped by the time the first cohort completed the first cycle in 1992, highlighting school-based assessment as a potential future challenge for curriculum reform.

The statutory body, the NCCA, is tasked with curriculum research and reform. As early as 1999, the NCCA reported areas of concern in relation to the new curriculum.

The review process held in 1999 noted the dominance of rote learning and recommended the introduction of low-stakes examinations (NCCA, 1999b). Following consultation with stakeholders throughout 2000, overlap and overload within the content of the curriculum were identified as being an issue of concern. In 2004, the NCCA published an update to the review. It highlighted three areas for development: a rebalancing of subject syllabi; the introduction of assessment for learning (AfL); and the introduction of structures to support students during the transition into the second level (NCCA, 2004). The recommendations and measures put in place by the NCCA were intended to address perceived poor student participation and experience, evidenced by the significant number of students, particularly boys, taking only subjects at the lower level. It had what was reported as a demoralising effect. Failure experienced by students in the early stages of their education was found to be difficult to overcome (Smyth, 2009). This, along with a large body of international research (CEDEFOP, 2009; OECD, 2005), led to the development of a new framework for lower second-level education in Ireland. The report *Towards a framework for Junior Cycle* was published by the NCCA (2011) as a blueprint for change.

Figure 2, below, gives an overview of the key areas identified by the Junior Cycle review as in need of modernisation or reform. It provided a foundation for developing the Junior Cycle programme, finally introduced as the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015.*

Figure 2: Key Recommendations from the Junior Cycle Review 2014

Launching *A framework for Junior Cycle* (DES, 2012), the then Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn, announced a radical programme of reforms that would "place the needs of our students at the core of what we do". The assessment would be moved centre stage and become "a key part of teaching and learning across the three years of Junior Cycle and provide high-quality feedback to students and parents". The Junior Cycle, he said, "is no longer a high stakes exam" (2012).

There was considerable resistance from the teacher unions following the launch of the 2012 JC, and a compromise, the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*, was later launched by Education Minister Jan O'Sullivan. The assessment changes had caused serious concerns for teacher unions, which raised significant apprehensions about teachers assessing their own students – long-held taboo in Irish education (Coolahan, 2014; Murchan, 2018). The new Subject Specifications and assessment arrangements were introduced in schools in September 2014, with English as the first subject to be rolled out.

The launch of the Junior Cycle was the culmination of 13 years of research and development by the NCCA. Table 2, below, charts the significant stages of this development.

Table 2: Policy Development towards Junior Cycle Reform

Policy Development towards Junior Cycle Reform	
1999	The Junior Cycle review: progress report: issues and options for development. NCCA
2004	Update on Junior Cycle review. NCCA
2005	Interim report on the developmental initiative in assessment for learning in Junior Cycle. NCCA
2005	Assessment for Learning. Report on Phase 2 of the developmental initiative. NCCA
2007	ESRI research into the experiences of students in the third year of Junior Cycle and in transition to Senior Cycle Summary and commentary. NCCA
2008	Rebalancing of Junior Certificate syllabuses. Report on the consultation. NCCA
2009	Junior Cycle curriculum and assessment: a question of identity? Document presented to the Council. NCCA
2009	Innovation and identity: towards a new Junior Cycle. NCCA
2012	Framework for Junior Cycle. DES
2015	Framework for Junior Cycle 2015. DES

3.2. Key Elements of Junior Cycle Framework 2015

Junior Cycle reform has been heralded as one of the most significant changes in Irish education since the introduction of the Junior Certificate in 1989. It is designed to meet the needs of all learners and was announced by Minister of Education and Skills, Jan O Sullivan, as a new framework for future developments in the provision of second-level education in Ireland. It follows other educational jurisdictions in introducing a skill- and knowledge-based curriculum. The aim is to place the student at the centre of the learning process and introduce a modernised curriculum for all subjects. The NCCA, in the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* document, describes its reforms as setting out a programme of how teaching, learning and assessment practices will develop in the first three years of post-primary education (2015, p. 2). Following global educational trends, it contends, the changes will equip Irish students with the 21st-century skills they require. In order to appreciate the magnitude of the changes, and how they impact both teachers and students, it is essential to outline some of the key changes to the existing Junior Certificate. The

following section summarises the key reforms, as outlined in the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* document.

3.2.1. A Balance between Knowledge and Skills

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* outlines the curriculum and assessment arrangements that will provide students with learning opportunities that achieve a balance between learning subject knowledge and developing a wide range of skills and thinking abilities. The NCCA strategy will mean that learning in the Junior Cycle will be informed by:

1. Eight principles that underpin the entire *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*.
2. Twenty-four statements of learning that are central to planning for, the students' experience of, and the evaluation of the school's Junior Cycle programme.
3. Eight Key Skills that are required for successful learning by all students.
4. A dual approach to assessment.

The structure of the new Junior Cycle is summarised in Figure 3, below.
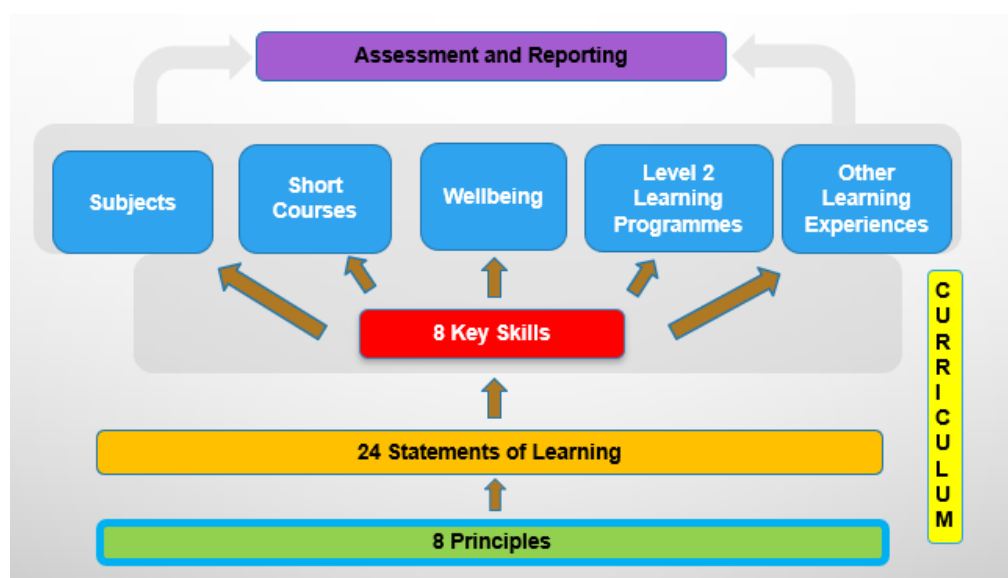
Figure 3: The Structure of Junior Cycle. JCT

3.2.2. Key Skills

As a response to the changing needs of students and society, the eight Key Skills of the Junior Cycle are embedded in the learning of every subject. "They will be brought to life through the learning experiences encountered by students and will be evident

in the assessment approaches used in the classroom and in examinations"(DES, 2015, p. 13).

The eight Key Skills that teachers are required to explicitly embed in their teaching practice are:

- Managing Myself.
- Staying Well.
- Communicating.
- Being Creative.
- Working with Others.
- Managing Information and Thinking.
- Being Literate.
- Being Numerate.

3.2.3. Assessment Changes

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* presents a dual approach to assessment that supports student learning over the three years of Junior Cycle, and measures achievement at the end of those three years. This dual approach reduces the focus on one, externally assessed examination, and increases the prominence given to classroom-based assessment (CBA) and formative assessment. Teachers will employ ongoing assessment practices, that is, formative assessment as day-to-day classroom pedagogy. There will be CBAs for most subjects. Students will produce a form of research paper or presentation following three weeks of classroom activities. The material will be corrected by the students' own teacher, using national standards and moderated by the subject department during a Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meeting. There are specific arrangements for "practical" subjects detailed in Subject Specifications, which may vary due to the nature of the ongoing work produced by students in the classroom. Art, Music, and Technology develop skills and competencies in which students create artefacts or demonstrable skills over the Junior Cycle, and which are considered an ongoing CBA. Assessment Tasks (ATs) based on the CBA material in third year, are worth 10% of their final grade in most subjects; practical subjects 2015 receive a higher percentage for the AT. This AT is set and corrected by the State Exams Commission (SEC).

A terminal exam is one two-hour common paper in all subjects except Irish, English and Maths which are assessed ah both higher and ordinary level. This is set and corrected by the SEC. A new grading system will replace the existing grades. Table 3, below, presents a summary of assessment changes and associated grading in the new Junior Cycle.

Table 3: Summary of Student Assessment Grade Weighting

Subjects	Practical (PT)/ Artefact (AT)	Two-hour Terminal Exam
General Subjects: Irish, English, Maths, Geography, History, Classics, Religion, Business Studies, Science, Modern Foreign Languages	AT 10%	Exam 90%
Music, Graphics	PT 30%	Exam 70%
Home Economics	PT 50%	Exam, 50%
Wood Technology, Applied Technology	PT 70%	Exam 30%
Visual Art	PT 100%	Exam 0%

3.2.4. Subject Changes

Most students study 10 subjects or a combination of short courses and a reduced number of subjects. Irish, English and Maths were initially the only compulsory subjects. However, in 2020, the then Education Minister Joe McHugh also made history compulsory. He said, "We need to afford young people the chance to learn from our chequered history and appreciate how knowledge of the past can shape the future" (Donnelly, 2020). The minister had asked the NCCA to review the optional status of History. They did and recommended no change. The Junior Cycle was designed to deliver 24 statements of learning and move away from a focus on subjects. Despite this the NCCA was forced to reintroduced History as a compulsory subject. Gleeson (2021) noted that it appeared the intervention might have undermined the NCCA's intention to focus less on subjects and more on skills and student learning.

Syllabi are replaced by Subject Specifications detailing the learning outcomes and assessment practices for each subject. Learning outcomes are "statements of what a

learner knows, understands and can do after completion of learning" (CEDEFOP, 2009, p. 17). Their introduction was in line with educational changes internationally and formed part of the modernisation of the curriculum. They are considered more leaner centred, focusing on skills and competencies rather than a list of what should be taught (Biesta & Priestley, 2013).

Students will also engage in an area of learning entitled Wellbeing. This was introduced for students starting the first year in 2017 and by 2020 would provide 400 hours of timetabled curricular instruction in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Physical Education (PE), and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE). Schools may also offer instruction in areas of specific identified needs, for example, literacy or nutrition. From 2021, CBAs will become part of these subject areas, in line with assessment across all subject areas.

JCT was charged with developing and implementing CPD to support teachers in unpacking the learning outcomes and mediating content and skill development to their students. The NCCA recognised this as a considerable task, noting that the level of teacher understanding involved to do this successfully would be considerable. Studies from the Scottish experience, suggested there was a need to support teachers to achieve a high level of understanding around the changes and the need for them. Going through the motions, merely implementing a changed curriculum, was not enough; a deep understanding of the rationale behind the reforms was necessary if real change was to take hold. "It is not enough to change practice; teachers need a deep understanding of the curriculum as a holistic, multidimensional entity" (Priestley, 2013).

If JCT was to be unsuccessful, the danger was that teachers would continue to interpret specifications and learning outcomes as they had the old subject syllabi. There is considerable research noting that, without change in teacher practice, there is little chance of educational reform succeeding Fullan, (1993), and Guskey,(2002). There might be a surface change, but the goal of a radical mind shift among teachers would fail to materialise (Biesta et al., 2017). The successful roll-out of the Junior Cycle would depend both on the quality of CPD provided by JCT and on the level of teacher engagement with that CPD.

3.2.5. Level 2 Learning Programmes and Priority Learning Units (PLUs)

As part of the new Junior Cycle, schools can now include Level 2 Learning Programmes designed for a small number of students with particular special educational needs. It was envisaged that a selection of short course modules would be provided to develop the basic, social, and pre-vocational skills for the students. It would be possible for these to be offered alongside Junior Cycle subjects.

3.2.6. Reporting a Broader Picture of Learning

Each student will now receive a Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA), which replaces the Junior Certificate. The JCPA will capture all the different assessment elements undertaken over the three years of the Junior Cycle. It includes all CBAs and the subject grades for terminal examinations, set and corrected by the SEC. This will also include other areas of learning, such as school-based sports or debating with which the student has engaged over their three years in the Junior Cycle.

3.2.7. Greater Professional Collaboration between Teachers

A significant element of the reforms is a greater emphasis on Teacher Professional Collaboration. The development of a collegial professional culture is part of the overall strategy of teacher education and is supported by CPD delivered by JCT. Teachers will require a higher level of cooperation to implement certain aspects of the assessment reforms in the Junior Cycle. Following CBAs, all teachers will engage in a SLAR meeting. The meeting is designed to moderate student grading to provide consistency across subject departments. Teachers will share and discuss samples of their students' work and build a common understanding of the quality of student learning. The final descriptor awarded to the student will be their teachers' decision.

Assessing the level of student achievement in a CBA, teachers employ an on-balance judgement using Features of Quality provided by the NCCA. The Features of Quality outline the elements required for student work to be awarded one of four level descriptors (see Table 4, below), which are specific for each subject. The "in

line with expectations" descriptor details what a student at this stage of learning should be able to demonstrate or achieve.

Table 4: CBA Descriptors

Exceptional
Above Expectations
In Line with Expectations
Yet to Meet Expectations

3.2.8. Teacher Time Allocation

A time allocation of one 40-minute period per week in class contact time has been given to teachers to facilitate both the SLAR meetings and the increased department planning required by the new curriculum. This equates to 22 hours of professional time within the timetable for each full-time teacher each year. Professional collaboration is a key element of the new Junior Cycle and is supported by the Teacher Professional Collaboration strand of School Self Evaluation (SSE).

3.2.9. Teaching and Learning

The further integration of formative assessment will underpin the Junior Cycle as a normal part of teaching and learning in the classroom. To facilitate the type of learning, the role of the teacher and the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship will evolve to become more student-centred. Since teachers are leaders and facilitators of learning in the classroom, their role will grow as methodologies that develop student Key Skills are delivered. These methodologies will be supported by CPD and resourced by JCT on their online platform.

3.2.10.   How Will Teachers Be Supported in the Changes in Practice?

The Junior Certificate introduced in 1989 had suffered from a lack of structured CPD to support its introduction (Gleeson, 2010). In 2012, along with the launch of the *Framework for Junior Cycle*, the DES announced the establishment of a dedicated CPD support service. JCT was given the task of supporting schools in implementing the new *Framework for Junior Cycle*. They would provide school support services to assist teachers in implementing the Junior Cycle programme, by providing high-

quality CPD and relevant learning and teaching resources. Subject specific CPD would be provided on an ongoing basis to teachers, in a range of venues, Education Centres and in schools. A series of whole-school CPD offering training in the broad areas of assessment for learning, reporting and Wellbeing would also take place. School leaders would be provided with separate CPD focused on leadership and change implementation during the introductory phase, approximately eight years.

The comprehensive programme of CPD was intended to develop teacher capacity, enabling them to unpack the new learning outcomes and deliver them through a new student-centred methodology. JCT emphasised the importance of the Key Skills and their incorporation into the curriculum. Padraig Kirk, Director of JCT and responsible for all Junior cycle in-service, considered that "the shift to a learning-outcomes-based specification [was] perhaps one of the most significant changes at classroom level" (Kirk, 2018/19, p. 26). It was critical that teachers were sufficiently informed and supported to implement this kind of radical change. Failure to embed the changes in the lower second level would not deliver the level of reform the Irish education system required.

3.2.11. *Wellbeing*

Introduced as a central pillar of the Junior Cycle framework is a commitment to supporting student wellbeing. "Wellbeing in junior cycle is about young people feeling confident, happy, healthy and connected" (DES, 2015, p. 22). Wellbeing encompasses three existing subjects: PE, CSPE and SPHE. Schools will be required to provide 400 hours of timetabled curricular Wellbeing classes across the three years of the Junior Cycle.

Six wellbeing indicators have been identified to support a common understanding of wellbeing, as it is related to the Junior Cycle. The *Wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice* states that teachers are to "use opportunities to promote wellbeing across the curriculum" and " use various teaching and assessment methods that promote a sense of achievement" (DES, 2019, p. 22). The Wellbeing Indicators should be visible in classrooms and incorporated as part of teacher professional practice in developing and delivering curricular material. Wellbeing

should be present in all aspects of school life, culture, curricula, policy, planning and relationships, throughout the school community.

Figure 4: Wellbeing Indicators

3.3. The Key Drivers of Junior Cycle Change

3.3.1. Student-centred Learning

A principal goal of Junior Cycle reform is to fundamentally change approaches to curriculum and assessment that would improve student learning experiences. *Towards a framework for Junior Cycle* (NCCA, 2011) identified the direction these reforms should take. A central element of the changes would put students at the centre of the learning experience. ESRI research by Emer Smith in the longitudinal study *Growing up in Ireland* (2006) identified issues around student experiences of school. Student disengagement in the second year was found to have detrimental effects on future school achievement. Introducing a more purposeful second-year experience, it was felt, would support students to stay engaged and build their capacity for future achievement. It was believed that the introduction of CBAs would create a focus for the year.

A review of the Junior Certificate (1999a) by the NCCA, identified AfL, as a means of improving learner experience and outcomes. Already part of teaching practice in other OECD countries, its introduction here was seen as a priority. The literature supporting the value of formative assessment to improve the student experience and outcomes is substantial (Absolum, 2011; Black & Wiliam, 2004; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005; Shepard, 2000; Wiliam, 2009).

Formative assessment as part of Junior Cycle reform as intended to build student-teacher collaboration using quality, structured feedback empowering students to participate in their own learning. Wiliams' five pillars of formative assessment were used throughout teacher CPD to illustrate this new learning relationship (2009). Table 5, below, illustrating the five pillars, was used in CPD and delivered to all second-level teachers by JCT.

Table 5. Five Pillars of Formative Assessment (Wiliam, 2007)

	Where the learner is going	Where the learner is	How to get there
Teacher	Clarifying, sharing and understanding learning intentions	Engineering effective discussions, tasks, and activities that elicit evidence of learning	Providing feedback that moves learners forward
Peer		Activating students as learning resources for one another	
Learner		Activating students as owners of their own learning	

Within this dissertation, the concept of *student-centred learning* is understood as aligning with the model of Brandes and Ginnis (1986) that was utilised by the JCT in the CPD they provided to school leaders. This model can be used to identify what student-centred learning would look like for the learner, with formative assessment placing students at the centre of learning. According to this model:

- The learner has full responsibility for her/his learning.
- Involvement and participation are necessary for learning.
- The relationship between learners is more equal, promoting better growth and development.
- The teacher becomes a facilitator and resource person.
- The learner experiences confluence in his/her education (affective and cognitive domains flow together).

3.3.2. Changed Role for the Teacher

Introducing student-centred learning would mean a change in the traditional role of the teacher. A much-repeated phrase that alludes to teachers moving "from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side" (King, 1993, p. 30) identified this as a move from teacher-led, chalk-and-talk to student-focused, active learning methodologies. Within this new learning relationship, it was hoped that students would flourish, and a modern progressive era of Junior Cycle learning would take hold. The minister announced that the *Junior Cycle framework in 2012* was clear about the direction of the changes: "I want the junior cycle to place the needs of our students at the core of what we do. I want to improve the quality of their learning experiences and outcomes" (Quinn, 2012).

The driving force behind this kind of reform would be a suite of assessment changes intended to reshape the role of the teacher. The NCCA (2011) noted that for significant change to occur, dependence on a high-stakes terminal exam would have to change: "Unless the examination at the end of junior cycle changes, what happens in the three years before it will simply stay the same" (p. 8). The introduction of CBAs, it was thought, would reduce the influence of the terminal exam and provide for other assessment opportunities. CBAs would introduce the element of skill development and create a focus for the second year. The plan was to move away from a high-stakes, terminal exam and move to ongoing assessment and CBAs (DES, 2012). This move to CBA would see most subjects receiving 40% of their final grade awarded by their teacher and 60% by a terminal exam. The plan was not without its opponents.

Two unions represent Irish teachers: the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) representing the voluntary secondary school sector and the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) representing schools under the Education & Training Board (ETB), community and comprehensive schools. These unions heavily resisted the reforms, expressing concern that it would significantly change the valued relationship between teachers and students (Murchan, 2018). The principal concerns for the unions included: teachers assessing their own students; maintaining the integrity of externally set and graded exams; the increased workload for teachers; and the

maintenance of the traditional relationship between teacher, students and parents (Murchan, 2018).

This opposition led to ongoing negotiations with teacher unions, which saw the TUI accept a compromised version of the assessment procedures. The 40/60 assessment arrangements were removed, as was the onus on teachers to assess their own students for terminal grade purposes. The ASTI did not initially accept the new arrangements and refused to engage with any reforms. Despite this, JCT began delivering CPD and the introduction of the first Junior Cycle Subject, English, went ahead in September 2014. Without the support of ASTI, representing approximately two-thirds of Irish teachers, many students experienced new specifications without the new assessment elements. In dual-union schools, some teachers engaged, and some did not, giving very different experiences for students in the same year groups. Whether this disrupted start had implications for long-term teacher engagement with the reforms may never be possible to determine. Final agreements were reached in 2017, after the first student cohort had completed one full cycle and taken the first Junior Cycle exam.

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015,* which facilitated teacher union agreement, was a compromise, maintaining CBA and a terminal exam. The State Exam Commission (SEC) would retain responsibility for setting, assessing and certifying students' terminal examination material (DES, 2015). CBAs would take place in the second and third years. They would demand significant changes to the teacher role and classroom practice. They would be formative, designed to develop specific skills. They were also intended to facilitate grading skills and competencies that could not easily be assessed in traditional exam formats. There would be practical as well as oral skills assessed through the CBA. A summative assessment would be graded by the teacher but not form part of the terminal SEC award. The decisions regarding student grades would be made collaboratively at a designated teacher meeting, a significant change in practice for teachers.

A SLAR meeting was to be held by each subject department. Descriptors based on national standards would be applied to samples of student work. Following a discussion, moderated by the subject department coordinator, teachers would award

grades to their students. Working collaboratively in this way is a new departure for Irish teachers. Irish schools do not have well defined subject departments, and the subject coordinator is a voluntary role. While CPD would be provided for coordinators, this level of responsibility and professional collaboration posed challenges for Irish teachers.

The CBA in the third year would provide an opportunity for students to sit an SEC graded assessment worth 10% of the final grade for most subjects. The AT, comprising a 40-minute reflection based on the skills and competencies developed through the CBA, would be supervised by the class teacher. Teachers had previously not supervised their own students for SEC exams. Practical subjects had different arrangements, as practical work and artefacts created during the second and third years were assessed for terminal grading purposes. Music, for example, provided for 70% of the terminal exam grade to come from the written paper and 30% from the practically demonstrated instrument or vocal performance. Details of subject assessment arrangements were published in the *Assessment guidelines* accompanying each Junior Cycle Subject (DES, 2015). The significant changes would demand considerable re-education and readjustment for teachers.

The new Subject Specifications were introduced only as new subjects came online. A suite of classroom methodologies incorporating formative assessment principles and new assessment practices designed to support a changing teacher role were rolled out through the CPD delivered by JCT. The integration of 400 hours of timetabled Wellbeing subjects was central to the new Junior Cycle. Teachers would be responsible for being aware of and incorporating new Wellbeing Indicators into their classroom practices. They were also required to develop lesson plans addressing the eight Key Skills, informed by the Wellbeing Indicators, and to use active learning methodologies. It was a radically new experience for Irish teachers.

3.3.3. A Move Away from High-stakes Terminal Exams

Towards a framework for Junior Cycle noted that, "Unless the examination at the end of junior cycle changes, what happens in the three years before it will simply stay the same." NCCA (2011, p. 8) The culture of dominance of terminal exams in Ireland is widely acknowledged (MacPhail et al., 2018; Murchan, 2018) and the well-known

phrase that "what gets tested gets taught" (Coolahan et al., 2017) would imply that if Junior Cycle were to remain exam-focused, teachers would continue to focus on exam success. The purpose of the Junior Cycle was to build student capacity through skills and knowledge development. The goal was to address some of the criticisms of the previous Junior Certificate, such as its narrow focus and poor learner experience for some students (Smyth et al., 2006).

The CBA was designed to develop Key Skills, but also in part to reduce the pressure on students in relation to terminal examinations. The original plan was that they would be worth 40% of a students' terminal grade (NCCA, 2011). However, in the final version, *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*, an AT worth 10% in most subjects, was introduced. The terminal exam would be one two-hour written paper and form 90% of a student's terminal grade for most subjects. It might be suggested that this was a small change from the terminal 100% exam graded Junior Certificate which it was replacing.

Assessment at Junior Cycle would be of three types: formative, summative and ongoing assessment. Teachers would receive instruction and resources to support them in the use of formative assessment practices. The ongoing and formative assessment would move learning forward, helping the teacher to tailor their teaching to the needs of their students (Wiliam, 2007). The summative assessment would remain at prescribed points in a school calendar. Though it was suggested that CBAs would replace some house exams, there was some flexibility for schools in making decisions that best suited their student needs. (DES, 2015). Figure 5, below, illustrates the assessment over the three years of the Junior Cycle.
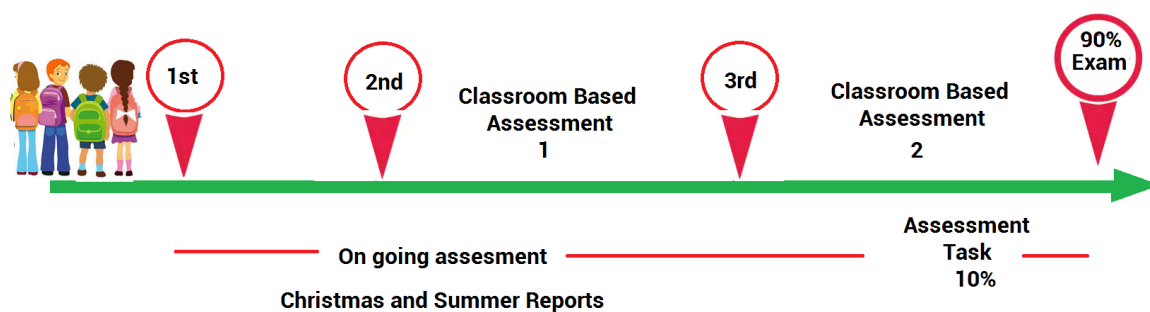
Figure 5. Assessment in Junior Cycle

Teaching strategies such as no-grade marking (Guskey, 1994) were introduced to teachers during JCT CPD. A suite of 24 teaching and learning strategies were modelled and supported with online resources. It was hoped that the combination of these strategies and the CBAs would change teacher practice (Fullan, 1985b; Guskey, 2002). The SEC would remain responsible for setting and grading the terminal exam. Reflecting the commonly held belief that externally-administered exams are an essential element for reliable evaluations of student achievement (Coolahan et al., 2017).

Some research suggested that the maintenance of a terminal exam providing 90% of the final grade might disadvantage students who already struggle. Coolahan *et al.* (2017) pointed out: "students who excel linguistically and logically are at a significant advantage" (p. 89). In most subjects, a two-hour written exam and a 40-minute written AT will provide the terminal student grade for Junior Cycle. Despite the Junior Cycle reforms, the authors of *Towards a better future. A review of the Irish school system* concluded that "the terminal examination still remains the dominant mode of assessment" (Coolahan et al., 2017, p. 76). Given that the *Framework* itself states that "all decisions should be informed by the principles of inclusive learning" (p24), this ongoing reliance on a terminal examination could be seen to undermine the ambition to make Junior Cycle a more equitable and inclusive experience for all students. The thorny issue of assessment continues to be challenging for the new Junior Cycle.

Junior Cycle began its roll-out in 2014. English, the first subject, along with a programme of CPD, had begun. Due to industrial action, only about a third of the country's teachers engaged fully with the changes. The remainder were using the new English Specifications, but without engagement with some assessment practices. In September 2017, with union agreement found, all teachers were fully engaged.

The staggered introduction of subjects meant that not all teachers were undergoing the change process together. However, from September 2019, all teachers involved in Junior Cycle would be engaged in implementing the significant changes outlined in the *Framework* document. It presented an opportune time to engage with teacher

perspectives in relation to the impact of the reforms on student learning. Figure 6, below, outlines the roll-out of the subjects in the reform process. Science and English teachers had completed at least one three-year cycle. Teachers only received Subject Specifications and Assessment Guidelines as their subjects came online. All teachers had received in-service around the framework, as well as rationale and formative assessment methodologies and the new area of learning Wellbeing.

PHASE 1

ENGLISH
Introduced to first years in 2014-2015
For certification in autumn 2017

PHASE 2

SCIENCE AND BUSINESS STUDIES
Introduced to first years in 2016-2017
For certification in autumn 2019

PHASE 3

IRISH, MODERN LANGUAGES AND ART,
CRAFT & DESIGN
Introduced to first years in 2017-2018
For certification in autumn 2020

PHASE 4

MATHS, HOME ECONOMICS, HISTORY,
MUSIC AND GEOGRAPHY
Introduced to first years in 2018-2019
For certification in autumn 2021

PHASE 5

TECHNOLOGY SUBJECTS, RELIGIOUS
EDUCATION, JEWISH STUDIES AND CLASSICS
Introduced to first years in 2019-2020
For certification in autumn 2022

Figure 6: Junior Cycle Subject Roll-out

3.4. State Bodies Involved in Junior Cycle

There are a number of state agencies responsible for developemt, delivery and oversight in the Irish education system. The figure below outlines the agencies involved in the rollout of Junior Cycle reform. Each acts as a separate entity however there is a degree of cooperation between agencies.

Figure 7: State Bodies involved in Irish Education.

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           │ Department of Education and Skills│
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│ National     │   │ State        │   │              │
│ Council      │   │ Examinations │   │ The          │
│ for Curriculum│  │ Commission   │   │ Inspectorate │
│ and Assessment│  │              │   │              │
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           │ Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) │
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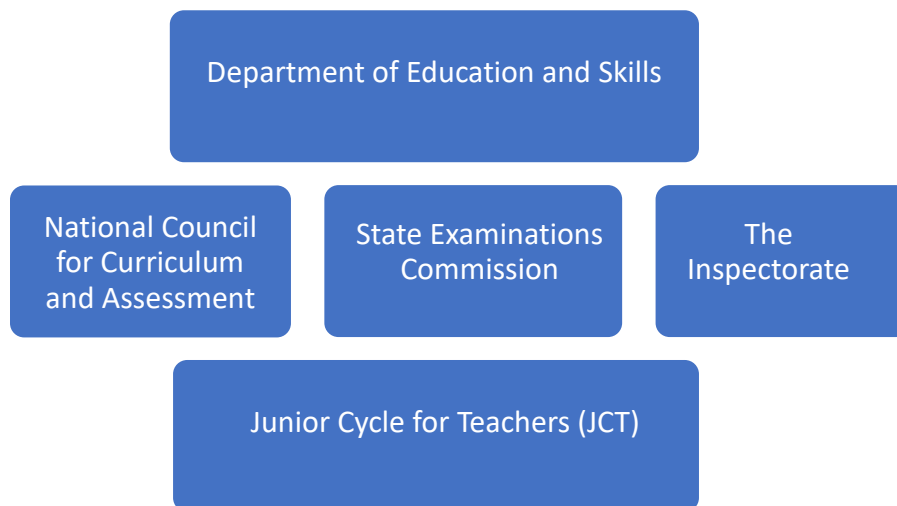
3.4.1. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

The NCCA was established in 2001. Its primary function is "to lead curriculum and assessment development and to support the implementation of changes resulting from this work" (DES, 2021c). The NCCA is made up of representatives of the educational stakeholders and industry, trade unions and government nominees. However, it is the responsibility of the Minister for Education and Skills to direct policy in the areas of curriculum and assessment (MacPhail et al., 2018).

The roots of Junior Cycle reform have been well articulated by MacPhail et al. (2018), Printer (2020) and Murchan (2018). *Towards a framework for Junior Cycle* (NCCA, 2011) was the culmination of research and a re-evaluation of the needs of students at the lower second level. The NCCA had identified flaws in the Junior Certificate, introduced in 1989.

The NCCA had engaged in a consultation process during the development phase of the reforms. It is worth noting that teacher engagement with that consultation process was poor. Printer (2020) estimated that only "0.6% of the estimated 30,000

post-primary teachers in Ireland at the time of the consultation" (Printer, 2020, p. 325) took part. There was, however, a teacher union presence: 7 of the 25 members of the consultancy panel were members of the TUI and the ASTI. The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2012* was met with heavy resistance, for reasons already described, and a compromise programme of reform *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* was agreed and rolled out.

The NCCA, having developed the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* document, continued to develop Subject Specifications and Assessment Guidelines, as the subject roll-out began. Teacher in-service designed by JCT began in 2013 with English. The whole-school CPD delivering training on the framework and rationale for Junior Cycle and formative assessment would follow in September 2015. Thus, the whole-school CPD began without Subject Specifications or Assessment Guidelines being available for all subjects. Considering the research into the Scottish reform process, which noted that some teachers were disengaged with the early reform CPD because their subject was not yet live (Priestley (2013)), it is not unreasonable to consider that this may have also had a negative impact on Irish teachers.

3.4.2. Junior Cycle for Teachers

JCT was established in July 2013. Its function was "to provide high-quality CPD & resources supporting schools to implement the new Junior Cycle framework". The first JCT newsletter in February 2014 described its website as a "collaboration between the NCCA and JCT, providing a one-stop-shop for all things Junior Cycle" (JCT, 2014). This collaborative partnership saw JCT, under the directorship of Padraig Kirk, develop and deliver CPD based on the material produced by the NCCA.

3.4.3. The State Examinations Commission

A key component of the delivery of lower second-level education has been external assessment. This external assessment involves the setting of examination papers, supervision, and grading for each subject. The SEC is responsible for this external assessment element at Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate. They are responsible

for developing and delivering examination papers and marking schemes. Part of their remit is to deliver sample papers for each subject. At the start of the roll-out of CPD, there were no samples exam papers or marking schemes available to JCT from the SEC.

The State Examinations Commission (SEC) is responsible for developing, assessing, accrediting and certifying for all second-level examinations. It is a non-departmental public body under the aegis of the DES. Under the new assessment arrangements for Junior Cycle, the SEC is responsible for grading the AT, practical components of specific subjects, and the terminal exam in all subjects. The AT is a reflection paper, the format of which was designed by the NCCA. It is supervised by the class teacher and returned with the students' terminal exam paper to the SEC for marking. Terminal exam papers are designed and graded by the SEC. Sample papers for new subjects are usually made available in the year they are to be first introduced.

Although the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* was a significant deviation from the envisaged assessment policy, it was seen by some as a first step in the right direction (Coolahan et al., 2017). Maintaining the integrity of an externally administered exam has been an important issue for teachers and the public alike (Murchan, 2018). The perception of Junior Certificate as a high-stakes exam may continue to impact perceptions around Junior Cycle. MacPhail et al. (2018), discussing the value of high-stakes exams at this level, suggested that "the outcome of such examinations appear not to have a significant bearing on the students' remaining years at school" (p. 14). However, in 2021, due to the need for calculated grading for Leaving Certificate as a result of COVID-19, the DES considered Junior Certificate grades to be "strong predictors of Leaving Certificate performance" (DES, 2020a, p. 15). The need for reliable and independent evidence of student attainment meant including the Junior Certificate and Junior Cycle results as part of the calculated grade process. The position of externally assessed examinations remains a thorny issue in relation to reform at lower second level. The role of the SEC in delivering trusted, externally authenticated results of student achievement remains an important element of second-level education in Ireland.

3.4.4. The Inspectorate

School Self Evaluation (SSE), designed as a collaborative, reflective process of internal school review, was introduced in 2012 (Inspectorate., 2016). During the roll-out of the Junior Cycle reform, SSE formed an element of the content delivered as part of CPD provided by JCT. The SSE mechanism provided a structured process, whereby teachers reflect on aspects of both collaborative and individual teacher practices. "It is an evidence-based approach which involves gathering information from a range of sources and making judgements to bring about improvements in students' learning" (p. 9). The evaluation involved whole-school teacher meetings. Using the guidelines from *Looking at our school 2016: a quality framework for post-primary schools* directed school communities to examine their practices in relation to teaching and learning. The school management was responsible for the progression of SSE and was required to record the school's progress under each of the strands. O'Brien et al. (2017) detail the international research and rationale underpinning SSE and its provision. Since the introduction of the reforms, "a conscious effort has been made to integrate school self-evaluation more effectively with other initiatives, including the roll-out of Junior Cycle changes" (Hislop, 2017, p. 13).

The Inspectorate is a division of the DES responsible for evaluating primary and post-primary schools and centres for education. Chief Inspector Harold Hislop has noted that external inspection is a valuable and accepted part of the education landscape, carried out in a spirit of collaboration, and supports best practices of professionalism in education (Hislop, 2012). There are three kinds of second-level school inspection: whole-school, subject and incidental inspections. At the post-primary level, inspectors visit schools and observe classroom practice. These inspections continued throughout the introduction of the Junior Cycle, while teachers were coming to grips with the new practices.

According to Guskey (2002), "Pressure is often necessary to initiate change among those whose self-impetus for change is not great" (p. 388). Fullan (1985) also noted the need for pressure to be part of the change equation. "Successful change involves pressure, but it is pressure through interaction with peers and other technical and administrative leaders" (p. 396). It may be that a more integrated

approach was employed to support the embedding of the reforms at Junior Cycle. The intention may have been that SSE, increased school inspection, and ongoing CPD provided by JCT would provide an impetus for change not seen before in Irish educational reform. Figure 8 below illustrates this integrated approach driving the changes at Junior Cycle.
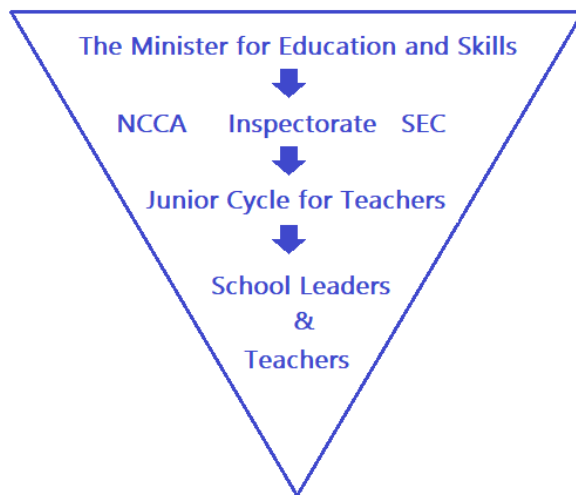
Figure 8: Junior Cycle Implementation Structure

3.5.   The Roll Out of Junior Cycle

The roll-out of CPD was hampered by the decision of the ASTI not to accept the revised Junior Cycle framework. As a result, only TUI teachers engaged with the CPD provided though all teachers were required to teach the new curriculum. The effect this had on teacher perceptions around Junior Cycle reform is difficult to gauge. The literature around implementation of reform acknowledges that engagement with reform is complex, "especially in the case of reforms that propose changing the core of the practice" (Spillane & Jennings, 1997, p. 154). Early engagement with CPD is considered important to the success of lasting curricular change. Willis et al. (2019, p. 245) concluded that "knowledge gained from their early engagement in the processes of reform provided confidence in their preparation for new system changes". The ASTI resumed participation in September 2017, an intensive programme of catch-up CPD was offered by JCT. It is difficult to quantify what, if any, effect this had on the teacher engagement or perceptions of the reforms.

Teacher professional representation during the NCCA consultation did not prevent industrial action at the start of the roll-out process. Research by Gleeson (2021) into educational reform in Australia and Ireland noted that the "separation of national curriculum and teacher professional bodies in both countries constitutes a recipe for fragmentation" (p. 492). Further fragmentation may have occurred because JCT was delivered material only as it was made available by the NCCA and the SEC. There was limited information available during the initial subject CPD in relation to Subject Specifications, Assessment Guidelines or indeed exam papers. The SEC traditionally only makes sample papers available until the year the exam is to be taken. This might have meant that JCT was not in a position to respond to teacher requests for information.

3.6. Conclusion

This review outlines the comprehensive suite of changes outlined in *The Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*. These curricular and pedagogical changes require significant changes in teacher professional practice. A review of the literature regarding teachers and the change process provides insights into the rationale for and the execution of the professional development programme put in train by JCT. The part played by each of the state agencies was also explored. During provision of the initial whole school CPD, JCT was not always able to provide teachers with specific information around assessment or curricular changes. The involvement of multiple agencies may have had unintended negative repercussions on teacher engagement.

The literature dealing with the implementation of curricular reform across Europe identified the manner of the rollout as significant. The success of the Finnish reform process was in part due to the top-down and bottom-up nature of its implementation. This successful engagement of teachers with the implementation process was noted to be a significant factor in teacher acceptance of curricular reform as a whole.

The literature provides a lens through which to explore Irish teachers' engagement with the Junior Cycle reform process. Gathering the perceptions of Irish teachers as they engaged with curricular and pedagogical reforms could provide valuable insights into the Irish educational reform implementation. Informed by the literature and the Research Advisory Group (see 4.6.2), suggested a range of questions for

discussion by a sample of teachers. It was felt these questions would provide a rich data source with which to address the following research questions.

Question One: To what extent did teacher conversations reflect the development of more student-learning environments, as expressed by the Junior Cycle Reform framework?

Question Two: Did teacher conversations identify opportunities and/or barriers to the Junior Cycle Reform's goal to replace the high-stakes summative exam system at the Junior Cycle level?

4. Methodology

4.1. Introduction

This research emerged from researcher observations made as a practising teacher, teacher educator and Junior Cycle coordinator in a large secondary school. The researcher, a practising second-level teacher since 1987, has experience of three lower second-level curricula: Intermediate Certificate, Junior Certificate and currently Junior Cycle. Observations of teacher engagement with new initiatives and curricular changes over that period provided insights into teacher perspectives on curricular reform. The role of Associate for Assessment, with JCT, from 2015 to 2018, provided research background on two fronts: firstly, researching formative assessment and the role, it plays in supporting student learning; second, researching teacher engagement with curricular reform and how best to mediate the assessment changes. The first-hand observations as a member of JCT delivering teacher in-service from 2015 to 2018 prompted the author's interest in establishing accurate teacher perceptions of the reforms.

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* ushered in a suite of educational reforms that would radically change lower second-level education in Ireland. Not since 1989 had teachers been asked to implement such significant reforms. Following on from the Literature Review, this research focused on three aspects of these changes. Embedding formative assessment that practices placing the student at the centre of learning would entail a changed role of the teacher and significant changes in assessment. The changes at Junior Cycle were intended to move the lower second level away from an exam focus to a student-centred learning experience. This was a radical change from Junior Certificate. Its success would hinge on teachers changing their professional practices and implementing a range of new AfL strategies. This would imply that successful reform depended on teachers becoming the agents of change for the Junior Cycle.

The critical role of the teacher in educational reform is well established. Teachers' agency, according to Fullan (1993), is fundamental to educational change. He argues for a new understanding of teacher professionalism that will lead to ongoing improvements in student learning. Teachers, he says, are an immense, unused

resource for radical and ongoing improvement of educational reform. Hattie (2003) argues that educational reform which focuses on curricular or policy changes implemented in a top-down manner is futile. What matters most is what teachers do in their classrooms. Placing teachers at the centre of the Junior Cycle process was designed to create a teacher-led reform process in Irish education. To date, seven years into the reform process, the teacher voice has largely been absent. The aim of this research was to bring what Lundy (2007) describes as audience and influence to the teacher voice, in relation to the impact that implementing Junior Cycle reform would have on student learning.

This study holds particular significance for the author, who is a researcher-practitioner. Working with colleagues rather than subjects informed the research methodology. The research design reflects a constructivist methodology throughout. The co-constructed approach involves teacher participation at all levels of the work. This supports the accuracy and validity of the piece and maintains a high degree of reflexivity on the part of the researcher. The underlying principle of Lundy's model for participatory research is supported by incorporating a Research Advisory Group (RAG), the World Café style data collection, and a qualitative analysis to interpret the research data.

4.2.   Research Objectives

The first Junior Cycle subject, English, was introduced in 2014. The purpose of this study was to explore teacher engagement with Junior Cycle reforms over the last seven years from the teacher perspective. To achieve this, teacher perceptions following their experience of classroom implementation of subjects, collaborative practices initiated by the reform, and engagement with Junior Cycle continual professional development (CPD), would be gathered. The data collected would provide evidence with which to explore two research questions (below) that emerged following the initial research stages and a review of the literature.

Question One: To what extent did teacher conversations reflect the development of more student-learning environments, as expressed by the Junior Cycle Reform framework?

Question Two: Did teacher conversations identify opportunities and/or barriers to the Junior Cycle Reform's goal to replace the high-stakes summative exam system at the Junior Cycle level?

4.3. Rationale

The following discussion outlines the philosophical background behind the methodology chosen for this study. The researcher's primary degree provides background to the choice of the philosophical framework underpinning this research. A primary degree involving the study of Theology, Biology and Sociology may, on the surface, seem diverse, even contradictory. However, each express a search for meaning, each constructs an understanding of reality from very different perspectives. The researcher's history reflects a constructivist approach to the study of human experience. "Constructivist approaches are not a discipline-bound endeavour but rather a horizontal 'meta science' way of thinking that covers a variety of disciplines and interdisciplinary topics" (Riegler, 2012, p. 237). This research was based on a world view that focuses not on ontological reality, but rather on a constructed perception of the world. Neuroscience has revealed how little objective reality there is. If we could engage with an unfiltered reality, we would be astonished by the colourless, odourless, tastelessness that actually exists. "Outside your brain, there is just energy and matter" (Eagleman, 2015, p. 37). This research seeks to uncover an understanding of teacher perceptions of the Junior Cycle reform in the context of the teachers' lived experience. It recognises that it is a constructed perception.

Social constructivism recognises that knowledge is generated through the creation of a unique framework of perceptions. A person constructs their world view from their perspective, and "knowledge is judged for its capacity to fit within the individual's experiential world" (Kemp, 2012, p. 118). We are influenced by all that surrounds us. Therefore, there is no absolute reality. Piaget (1970) believed that human beings construct knowledge and meaning based on their experiences. He sought to identify not only the origin, extent and limits of human knowledge, but how it developed. This is a philosophical framework that sits well with educational research.

Vygotsky (1980) explored how learning is influenced by an individual's beliefs and values, concluding that development is socio-culturally determined. The Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) explores how knowledge is co-constructed and illustrates how collaboration can extend an individual's capacity to learn. This philosophy underpins much of today's professional collaborative practice. It is a philosophical framework that sits well with this piece of educational research.

4.4. Theoretical Framework

Mills (1993) describes a theoretical framework as an "analytical and interpretive framework that helps the researcher make sense of 'what is going on' in the social setting being studied" (p. 103). The choice of the theoretical framework for this work has been determined by a constructivist philosophy leading to the conclusion that the research questions – teachers' perception – are best understood from a socio-cultural perspective using methodologies suited to that environment.

The researcher as a participant-observer could impede objectivity. However, according to Adler and Adler (1987), "going native is a solution rather than a problem" (p. 32). Ethnomethodology proponents suggest that to understand the contextual meanings and avoid distortions, it is helpful to be involved "to the fullest degree" (Alder & Alder, 1987). Maintaining a high awareness of and adherence to research ethics and reflexivity crucial, if a native is researching their peers. Positionality (the imposition of a deliberate, ethical neutrality a researcher must adopt to keep the work objective) is central to this kind of research (Braude,1964). The researcher's ability to engage in self-reflection was a significant requirement, the co-constructed nature of the research methodology adding a layer of external supervision to the research process. A robust theoretical framework and research methodology supported reflexivity, maintained the integrity of the research.

Open interview style data collection would facilitate the rich kind of qualitative data collection required for this research piece. It was found that teachers in previous research tended to analyse and explain their behaviours, rather than just record them. "Therefore, the interview question must help them to speak from their first-person perspective of what it is like for them in specific teaching situations, not as offering rationales for what they do" (Sohn et al., 2017, p. 129). Devising a method to

support teachers to engage in relaxed, open reflective conversations would provide high quality data. It was envisaged that an approach incorporating aspects of Phenomenological research might prove useful. Recording the 'quality and texture of experience' (Willig, 2013, p. 17). seeking to understand the experience rather than the recording the reality of it. The research design follows this theoretical framework and describes data collection and analysis techniques, in line with this overarching structure.

4.5. Research Approach

As a teacher researching teachers, it was important to choose research methods to maintain the teacher voice that is integral in this research. The purpose, Lakomski (1992) pointed out, of choosing one method over another is to ensure that the result of the research reflects the knowledge and not the opinions or beliefs of the researcher. To this end, careful consideration was given to both the theoretical framework and the research design. The research design ensured that the knowledge obtained would accurately reflect teacher perceptions of the Junior Cycle reforms and give enough depth and detail to draw reasonable conclusions to explore the research questions. There are four elements to this design. Initial research for this study was informed by the third-generation Cultural-historical Activity Theory (CHAT) developed by Engeström (1997) from Vygotsky's framework. A mixed-method approach, combining participatory research (Lundy., 2007) with robust thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and summative analysis (Frances Rapport, 2010), was used in the data collection and analysis. Table 6, below, summarises the role of each of these elements.

Table 6: Summary of Research Elements

CHAT.	Explore context and inform possible questions.
Participatory research.	Data collection.
World Café.	Data collection mechanism.
Thematic analysis.	Data analysis.
Summative analysis.	Data presentation

4.5.1. Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

The literature review has shown that education is taking shape in an increasingly complex environment. The OECD acknowledges that these environments are characterised by multiple actors interacting with multiple systems with new and constantly changing demands (Viennet & Pont, 2019). In order to examine the complex interplay between teachers, management, demands of new specifications, increased teacher collaborative practice and student learning, I employed Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT).

The theoretical roots of CHAT are grounded in the work of Vygotsky (1980) and are in line with my theoretical framework. The sociocultural nature of school life requires a theory of analysis that can take multiple influences into account. Using CHAT analysis, it was possible to analyse and understand dialogues, multiple perspectives and networks of interacting activity systems. CHAT provides a framework to examine relationships between societal, instructional and personal dimensions of human development (Hedegaard, 2012). By utilising this holistic research approach, it was possible to explore teacher perspectives of student learning in the context of the current Junior Cycle reform. CHAT has proven to be a valuable tool in educational research. Lee (2007) described the theory as immensely useful in analysing and recording data and identifying change in cultural settings.

Engestrom's CHAT operates as a tool to facilitate the study of practice. It provides a template to explore the influences on a group of people while they are conducting a collective activity. It provides a helicopter view of the activities involved rather than focusing on the individual actors. (Bødker, 1989). The CHAT triangle shown in figure below is populated with the subject, object, rules, tools, community, and division of labour.

Figure 9 CHAT tringle template.

In the case of the introduction of Junior Cycle, this diagram can be used as a tool to explore the multiple interactions between stakeholders, specifications, policy documents and resources involved in the introduction of the reforms.

This study illustrates the interplay between teachers and the elements of Junior Cycle reform, school communities, resources and student learning. There are six elements that interact with each other in the activity. Figure 10, below, presents a simplistic example of some of the interactions in the Junior Cycle reform process.
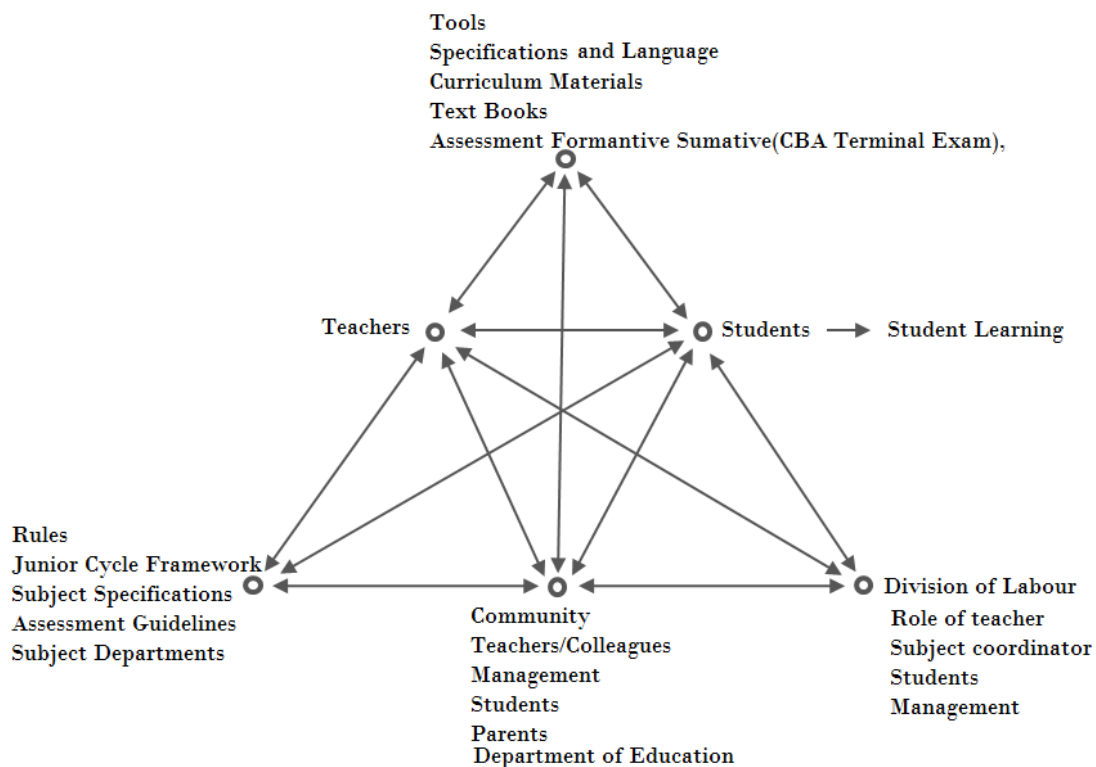
Figure 10: Application of Activity Theory to Junior Cycle Reform, Based on Engestrom's Model

The illustration allows the identification of the multiple factors and stressors at play in any given activity. In this example, the teachers are working from the subject, new

Subject Specifications, new assessment protocols, the tools of their trade. At the same time, they are working with each other in Subject Learning Assessment Reviews, planning as a department and teaching classes, along with their daily interactions with management, parents and the students who are at the receiving end of Junior Cycle

Each of the triangle points and the midpoints represents a specific player or component of the activity. First is the subject: the individuals whose view is being adopted, in this case, the teachers. Second is the object, which is referred to as the "raw material" or "problem space", at which the activity is directed, and which precedes and motivates the activity, in this case, the students. Third are the tools that mediate the activity. They can be materials such as textbooks, subject language, teaching resources, or classroom methodologies integral to implementing Junior Cycle reform. Fourth is the community, referring to the participants in the activity: colleagues, students, parents. Fifth is the division of labour, the assignment of roles and tasks among the community members; power and status are also identified here, such as the management and teacher roles. Sixth are the rules, referring to the implicit and explicit norms that regulate actions and interactions within the system: the *Framework* document and accompanying circulars, Subject Specifications, and Assessment Guidelines. Junior Cycle reform has implications for each of these elements, all of which are mediated through teachers to students and will affect student learning.

In the OECD Working Paper on the implementation of educational reform, Viennet and Pont (2019) describe the implementation process as a dynamic interplay between multiple agencies and stakeholders. This implies intense activity, actors interacting with structures, policies and stakeholders, enacting and introducing change. Research by Barber (2008), Bell and Stevenson (2015) and Fullan (2015) recognises this multifaceted interplay between actors. The authors identify complex interactions and the activities inherent in the implementation of the educational reform process. CHAT allows these players and activities to be isolated and identified. The literature shows that the implementation of educational reform involves getting a large number of stakeholders to cooperate at various stages to produce new curricula and pedagogy for teachers, new operational systems for

school leaders and management, new assessment practices, along with a constant stream of guidelines and clarifications (Viennet & Pont, 2019).

The use of CHAT at the start of this research design identified the elements of a teacher's day-to-day practice supporting a fuller understanding of the reform dynamic from their perspective. The sheer number of tasks and individuals involved in bringing a new subject to life in a classroom is difficult to visualise. CHAT brings a deeper understanding of the role and responsibility of teachers engaged in the reform process. The use of this tool informed the kinds of questions asked in the research and the methods used to ask them.

4.5.2. Participatory Research

Participatory research has been widely used in research involving homogeneous groups. Lushey and Munro (2014) describe participatory research methodologies as methods tailored to the needs of the participants that empower their voice and foster their active engagement with research. Fleming (2011) used this approach to good effect in research involving young people. He concluded that researchers need to acknowledge participants' expertise about their own lives and how best to research with them. Research by Kilpatrick et al. (2007) used participatory research when working with disaffected youths. He explored their views of alternative education using the approach to ensure an equilibrium of power in the research relationship. Empowering participants to have ownership of the research process is in line with the overarching theoretical principles that underline this research.

The Lundy Model (2007) of participatory research was based on Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which formed the basis of the data collection methodology for this research. It was designed to identify where in research children's rights may have been ignored or undervalued. It provides a safe and inclusive mechanism to have the voice of contributors heard. It is applicable in any circumstances where participants in a research area need to be facilitated to fully participate in the research, as opposed to being mere subjects of the research. The Lundy design provides the space for participants to express their views, have their voice enabled, provide an audience for their view, and potentially

give that voice influence. The essential elements of this model are illustrated in Figure 11, below.

Figure 11: The Lundy Model (2007) of Participation (TUSLA, 2015 p. 5)

4.5.3. World Café

Informed by the participatory research model, World Café was chosen as the data collection method for this research. World Café developed, in the mid-1990s as a form of participant-led group discussion Brown, (2005). Participants with a common interest engage in several rounds of dialogue with others in a café style environment. It is useful to visualise multiple focus groups simultaneously occurring in the same venue. Participants circulate, engaging in conversations with groups as they choose recording their thoughts directly onto the tablecloth for subsequent groups to read and reflect upon. The tablecloth become the data source. Refreshments are made available to promote a relaxed atmosphere and a café feel to the event. Research into focus groups concluded that exchanges and conversations between participants often promote deeper discussions that allow new and potentially unforeseen issues to emerge. Femdala (2018) and Papastavrou (2012) suggest that group diversity can reveal different perspectives and ideas, leading to potential new interpretations of the issues by participants. Other research states that where researchers seek to understand people's understandings around shared activities, they should use methods that actively encourage the examination of research questions in a social context (Kitzinger, 1994). We are social beings acting in concert with each other. Methods that reflect this reality, such as World Café, provide a rich source of data.

The format of World Café will further lend itself to co-constructions of deeper levels of discussion around Junior Cycle reform. As a result, the data collected may differ from that provided by focus groups or one-to-one interviews. This data collection method also allows the researcher to step out of the conversations, acting as an observer rather than a participant. This supports reflexivity on behalf of the researcher, particularly as in this case, the researcher may also be a colleague. The possibility of directing conversations and influencing the outcome of those conversations is reduced more effectively than would be the case if a more traditional focus group method of data collection were employed. As with all techniques however, there are limitations to the use of World Café as a data collection method, and these are discussed in 6.4.3.

4.6. Research Design

4.6.1. Development of Research Questions

In line with the theoretical framework and the significance of participatory research in this study a Research Advisory Group was established to support the development of the research questions.

4.6.2. The Research Advisory Group

The involvement of service users in research is well established, particularly in health care. Miller et al., (2006) suggest that the development of a Research Advisory Group (RAG) is a useful addition to the research process. The group can enhance the quality of the research by bringing genuine insight, creating a collaborative process that offers some oversight. Service-user researchers engage in collaborative projects with academic researchers. In line with participatory research principles, the RAG empowers participants to shape the research direction (Beresford & Evans, 1999).

An open invitation to 132 teaching colleagues was made via staff email to recruit a Research Advisory Group. The email outlined the study and the time involved. A number of teachers expressed an interest. The final group comprised seven teachers from a wide range of subjects areas: Science, Modern Foreign Languages (MFLs), Physical Education (PE), Maths, History and Geography. Professionally, the

years of service ranged from newly qualified teachers to those who had 30+ years' experience. All were engaging with the implementation of Junior Cycle reform; all had attended CPD in their subject areas and the whole-school training days provided by JCT. The table below outlines the meetings and role played by the RAG in this study.

Table 7: The Role of the Research Advisory Group

Meeting 1.	Initial meeting. Outline of the study and open discussion on key areas of Junior Cycle reform.
Meeting 2.	Consideration of how best to engaged with teachers to elicit their views.
Meeting 3.	A review of the opportunistic survey of staff to inform next steps. Planning alternate data collection method.
Meeting 4.	Planning of pilot World Café and choice of questions to ask participants.
Meeting 5.	A sharing of the World Café data.

The initial meeting in February 2019 took the form of an open discussion based on four key areas of Junior Cycle reform, as outlined in the *Framework* document of 2015:

- Embedding of formative assessment.
- A change in the teacher role in the classroom.
- Changes to assessment and the introduction of Classroom Based Assessment (CBA).
- Introduction of a new area of Wellbeing.

Developing the Research Questions

The complexity of the interactions and the activities inherent in implementing the educational reform process had suggested the use of CHAT analysis. CHAT provided a framework for the analysis of the multiple influences acting on teachers, as they implemented the reforms. CHAT made it possible to identify elements and interactions for the researcher to explored with the RAG. For example, the new assessments were accompanied by a guiding document: the Assessment

Guidelines. Teachers first engaged with their Subject Specifications, then during CPD discussed elements of the document and its implications and agreed as a subject department how to implement the assessment. Finally, they used the assessment in their classroom practice. How the process unfolds across a whole school was significantly influenced by the school management, the guidelines themselves and colleagues. Using CHAT, the actors and elements of any action can be isolated and analysed. This process of isolating elements of the reform process made it possible for the RAG to identify broad areas of teacher concern. The concerns arose from their own experiences and also issues aired by colleagues formally and informally.

The second RAG meeting discussed how best to engage teachers with the research project to further the research. It was decided that an online survey could be sent anonymously to teachers, using Microsoft Forms. A series of open-ended statements exploring teacher feelings and needs around the Junior Cycle could be used to elicit teacher responses. The intention was to have a significant sample size. The group recommended that a sample of schools from each educational sector (voluntary secondary, community and comprehensive, Educate Together and ETB) be represented.

Though the survey was considered a good idea, the RAG had reservations about its efficacy. The group identified some issues around using an online mechanism for data collection.

1. Technological variations. The RAG identified this as an issue for teachers in certain parts of the country where internet access was considered poor. They felt this would exclude many teachers from participating.

2. Low response rate. The RAG noted a degree of online survey fatigue among colleagues. Several researchers have examined the low response rates of online surveys. The possibility of inadequate response rates to online surveys was noted by Dillman et al. (2009). Other research concluded that online surveys at best attain response rates equal to other modes and sometimes do worse (Evans & Mathur, 2005).

The survey was considered a useful tool in further developing questions, but the RAG felt should not be the sole method of data collection in a research piece establishing teachers' response to the implementation of such major school reforms. It was decided to issue a small online survey to our school staff to elicit a broader understanding of the issue that teachers were encountering and their feelings around Junior Cycle reform. This, they felt, could be used to create a selection of questions to be used with another method of data collection – focus groups, for example.

Small Staff Survey

This quantitative element consisted of a short survey that was informed by CHAT analysis, a review of the literature and the RAG recommendations. It was a simple online questionnaire designed to elicit the feelings and needs of teachers around teaching, learning, Junior Cycle reform, CPD and teacher agency. It comprised open text boxes into which teachers wrote their responses. It was completed by eight teachers. A copy of the survey and data collected is included in Appendix A.

Narrowing the Research Areas

The third meeting of the RAG reviewed the data from this survey. The group identified five areas they felt could be explored by groups of teachers in focus groups. Gathering the perceptions of teachers as they engaged with specific aspects of the Junior Cycle reform would the RAG felt provide data with which to address the research questions. The RAG proposed that five questions be asked to explore teacher perceptions around Junior Cycle. Teacher wellbeing had not been a specific question on the initial staff survey. However, it emerged as a considerable concern following analysis of the survey results. The RAG recommendation was included in the final set of table questions for the pilot World Café data collection.

The five questions were:

1. What, from the perspective of Irish teachers, are the crucial elements for successful student learning?
2. What do teachers perceive as the potential benefits and challenges posed by Junior Cycle reform on student learning?

3. What impact do teachers believe the change in the teacher role will have on student learning?

4. How do teachers feel the assessment changes introduced will impact on student learning?

5. How has Junior Cycle reform impacted teacher wellbeing and the consequences for student learning?

The fourth meeting with the RAG focused on moving the data collection forward. Initial work by the researcher suggested World Café as a suitable data collection forum. It maintained the integrity of participatory research. The element of providing space to be heard appealed to the RAG, whose members felt that teachers wanted to talk about their experiences. A revised design was agreed. Data collection was planned to begin in the academic year 2019/2020. The use of World Café would provide an opportunity for teachers to share their collective wisdom (Brown, 2005). The Lundy Model (2007) principles of participatory research would underpin structured group discussions following the World Café style of data collection (Brown, 2005). It was planned that Teacher Education Centres would act as venues for the teacher gatherings.

4.6.3. Pilot World Café

World Café was chosen because it would provide teachers with space and time to explore their feelings and needs around Junior Cycle. It would deliver sufficient high-quality data, referred to as a thick description of the issues. Thick description is a term in qualitative research use to describe an ideal kind of participant data. It is most often associated with Geertz (1973) and ethnographic research. There are many interpretations of its intention. This research used the definition provided by Holloway (1997). He refers to thick description as descriptions from participants reflecting their emotions, thoughts and perceptions around an experience. It supports the construction of a clear picture of the individual, including the context and culture in which they operate. Using a World Café style of data collection would provide the data necessary to address the research questions.

A pilot World Café was held as a trial run to establish if it provided the level of participatory research required and the quality of data necessary for this study. The

work of the RAD fed into the World Café. Figure 12 below summarises the elements of the research design. The arrows indicate the participation and oversight provided by the RAG.
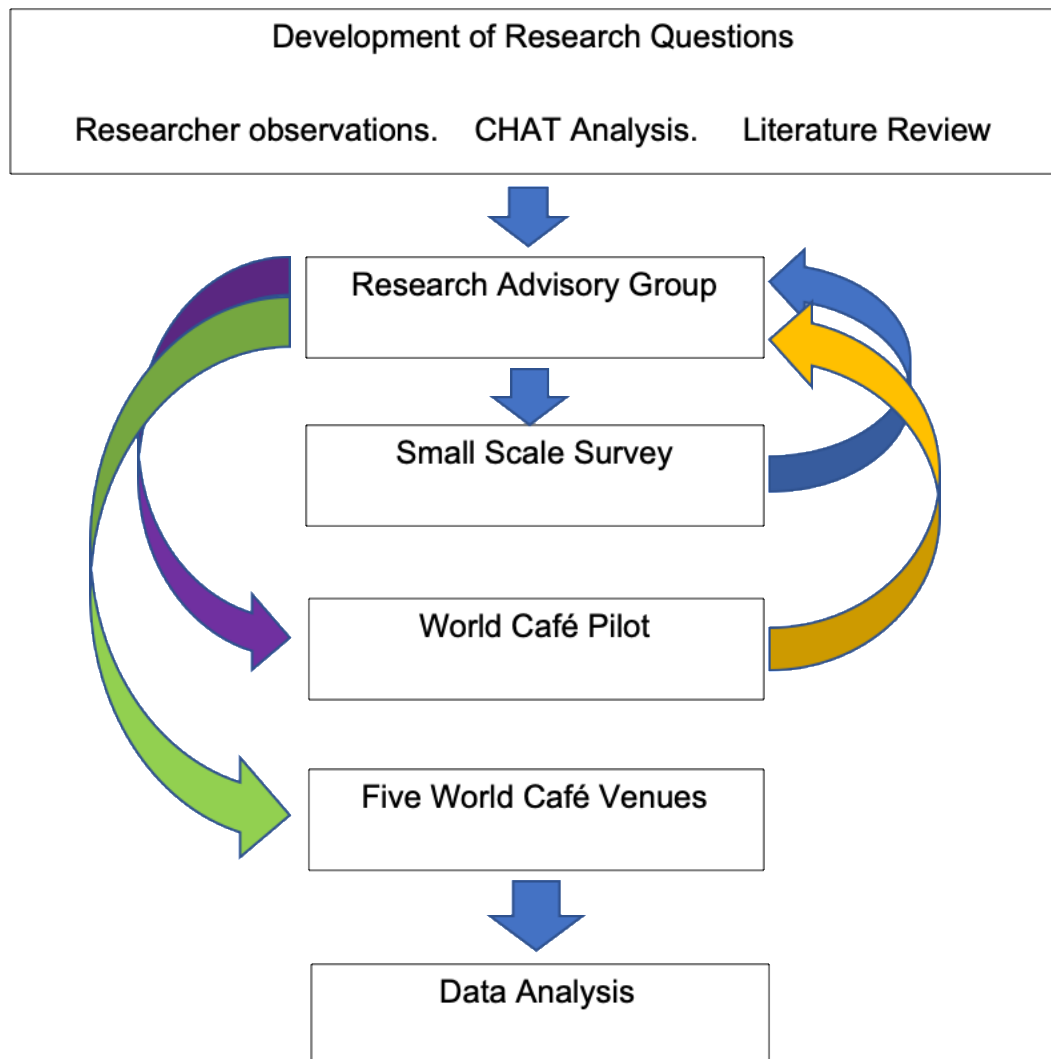
Figure 12:. Research Design Featuring Participatory Elements of the Design

4.6.4. World Café Research Gatherings

Figure 13: World Café Etiquette by Avril Orloff. Reproduced from The World Café Toolkit

World Café style data collection was developed in the mid-1990s as a participant-led group discussion (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). Figure 13 above illustrates the elements of World Café gatherings. It leads to a mosaic of responses prompted by the RAG selected questions and conversation stimuli. World Café is widely used in research related to health and social care issues. It is considered "a simple yet powerful conversational process for fostering constructive dialogue and accessing collective intelligence" (Restall, 2016, p. 3). The purpose of the research was to uncover meaning from the participants' work experiences and classroom practice. The method would reveal that the perceptions and influences directing their actions would provide useful data (Lindeman, 1925).

4.6.5. World Café Layout

The meeting room and tables are laid out in accordance with accepted protocols for the World Café (Koen et al., 2014). The meeting rooms are laid out with large tables to facilitate group discussion. Tables are furnished with tablecloths, pens, paper and

refreshments, if desired. The tablecloths act as notepads, allowing participants to record their comments and reactions directly onto the table. There is usually one topic per table. Participants move between tables at regular intervals. The discussion comments are recorded individually or by a group member acting as an ad hoc recorder directly onto the tablecloth. Having visited all the tables and contributed to each topic, participants return to their starting table. The group is given time to review the reflections and comments recorded on the tablecloth. Finally, the researcher closes by gathering general feedback from each group and receiving verbal confirmation from the participants that their views have been accurately recorded. The participants are thanked for their time and the gathering is closed.

There are limitations to collecting data in this way. As MacFarlane et al. (2017) noted, relying on self-facilitation may mean that not all participants contribute to the tablecloth comments. Nor does it mean that everyone is heard equally. However, this is countered by the volume and saturation of responses.

Pilot of World Café Events

Two World Café data collection events were piloted, one with the researcher present and one with the instructions sent to a second-level school and run by a staff member. The exercise was (1) to establish if the method was potentially a successful data collection method and (2) to investigate the possibility of the method being run in different venues simultaneously and independently of the researcher.

Venue 1: researcher present. The World Café event was piloted with 15 teachers from a wide range of subjects: Science, MFLs, PE, Maths, History, Geography, Religion, Business and English. The session was one and a half hours in duration, and light refreshments were made available. Participants were sent an information pack containing a consent form, a description of World Café, and an outline of the purpose of the research.

Venue 2: researcher not present. This was a second-level school with eight participants from different subject areas. Participants were sent an information pack containing a consent form, a description of World Café, and an outline of the purpose of the research. The session took place over lunchtime (one hour) and was

organised by a member of staff who collected the data and returned it to the researcher.

The pilot highlighted the strength of the method to generate conversations and was successful, insofar as it produced a picture of the group's perceptions in relation to the Junior Cycle questions. However, it was not possible to quantify how many participants held each of the views expressed. The data collection was good in both venues. The exercise also suggested that the presence of the researcher provided for better and more reliable data collection. The initial trial successfully attracted teachers to discuss Junior Cycle reform, providing a space for reflection and generating discussion. The teacher feedback in relation to the methodology was very positive.

Organising the World Café gatherings following this methodology would provide the kind of social inquiry recommended by Glassman (2012), who suggested that quality inquiry should be cooperative, non-authoritarian and informal. The purpose of the inquiry is to uncover meaning from participants' experiences, revealing the perceptions and influences that direct their actions (Lindeman, 1925). The pilot groups demonstrated the power of this form of cooperative venture to deliver an insight into teachers' lived experience of Junior Cycle reform. The depth of knowledge and experience in the group added to the richness of the research data.

A series of World Café events in which second-level teachers were invited to share their perspectives on student learning in light of Junior Cycle reform would be organised across the country. The plan was to approach the 21 Teacher Education Centres across Ireland and use them as World Café venues. Research by Morgan (2007) and Kruger (1994) has suggested that three to six different data groups are sufficient to reach saturation, with each group meeting once. The multiple gatherings would support the validity of the research by providing sufficient participant responses to ensure saturation (Onwuegbuzie, 2009).

The picture below shows teachers engaging in a pilot World Café in 2019. The participants' engagement levels were excellent, and the conversations held at each

station revealed interesting results (Appendix F and G). Participants found the event enjoyable and commented on the relaxed nature of the discussions.

Figure 14, below, shows participants engaging with each station of the pilot World Café.

Figure 14. Pilot World Café Style Data Collection

4.6.6. Lessons from the Analysis Pilot World Café

The data analysis was in line with strategies used for focus group analysis. Each Café event would constitute a unit of analysis (Morgan, 2007). Thematic analysis developed by (Braun et al., 2014) is suitable for use in the analysis of focus groups, but also in the analysis of many types of data. Onwuegbuzie (2009) also informed the initial research design. He described the analysis of multiple focus groups as emergent-systematic focus group design, where multiple focus groups are used to explore and verify research questions. The replication of the World Café style data collection events across the country aimed to provide a high degree of exploration and verification.

Keyword-in-context, which examines how words are used in context with other words (Fielding, 1998), was also be used in the data analysis. In the initial survey material, the words "overwhelmed", "strain", "confusion", "anxious", "annoyed", "frustrated", "more work" and "rushed" occurred across eight responses to the question of what

feelings teachers expressed around Junior Cycle reform. The RAG used this analysis to identify issues of concern and develop stimulus material for use in future Café events. Based on the analysis, the group concluded that teacher wellbeing constituted a significant factor and that it could impact student learning.

Some methodologists advocate for descriptive counts of categories. Onwuegbuzies (2009) suggests that counting the frequency of comments can provide useful information regarding consensus and dissent among the group members. He says that because a group holds a particular viewpoint, it does not make it a compelling or important viewpoint, but merely identifies its presence in the data. He argues that recording the frequency of comments enhances the data by providing a fuller picture of the opinions within the group. Thus, recording the frequency can support inferences made from the data about levels of consensus. In the example above, six out of eight teachers surveyed expressed feelings of strain, confusion, and anxiety. The number of responses indicated that it was a significant issue. This data influenced the RAG to include wellbeing as an issue for further discussion.

4.7. The World Café Data Collection

4.7.1. World Café Layout for the Five Venues

Figure 15: World Café Meeting Room Table Layout

The meeting room and tables were laid out in accordance with accepted protocols for World Café (Koen et al., 2014). Figure 15, above, illustrates the table setting. Each gathering had five large tables with plastic tablecloths, pens, Post-its and a large bowl of sweets. The plastic tablecloths were used to allow participants to record their comments and reactions directly onto the table. Each table had a question relating to one of the five areas suggested by the RAG. A corresponding reference to the Junior Cycle *Framework* document (see Appendix E) was included to keep the focus on Junior Cycle and prompt teacher discussion. A list of the questions and the corresponding discussion prompts is included in Appendix F. Teachers chose tables as they entered, with groups of 7-12 teachers per table. There was flexibility for each group to nominate a recorder, or a group member might act as an ad hoc recorder. Otherwise, individuals were free to record their own thoughts and comments. Participants were encouraged to read any comments on the tablecloths before starting their discussion. This provided a kind of ongoing conversation between groups. Participants moved through all tables at 10-minute intervals. The discussion comments could be recorded individually on Post-its, for those who wished to comment but perhaps not openly discuss their feelings. Drawings were also used as illustrated in Figure 16 below. On returning to their starting table, the group members were given five minutes to review the reflections and comments recorded on the tablecloth. A short closing led by the researcher gathered general feedback from each group and received verbal confirmation from the participants that their views had been accurately recorded. The participants were thanked for their time and the gathering closed.
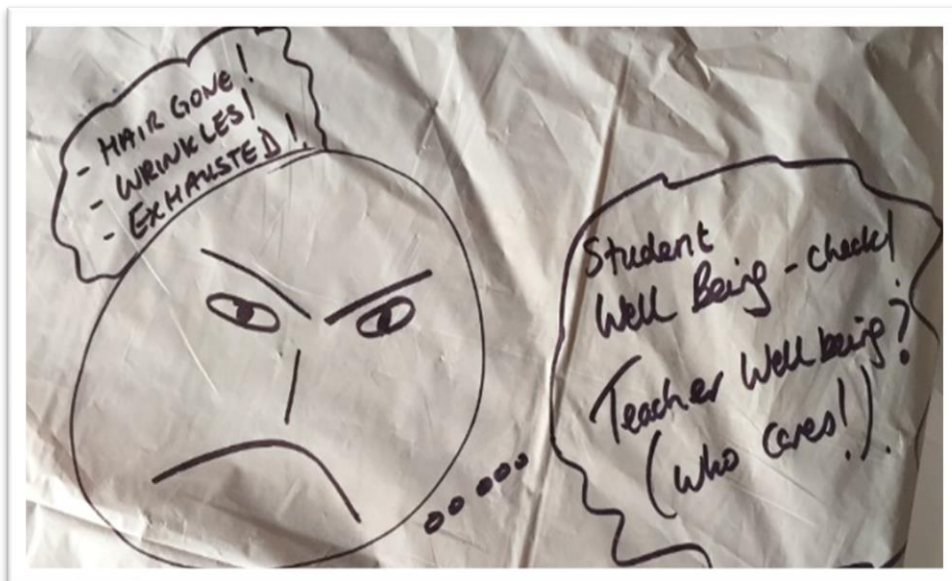
Figure 16: Sample Response from One Tablecloth

The nature of World Café is to ask open questions and prompt discussion. Not all teachers present recorded individual comments, though they were free to do so. Following, at times, robust discussion, one or more members of the group recorded the feelings of the group. Post-its were made available to facilitate participants who wished to make their own private comments. This was prompted by the literature, where MacFarlane et al. (2017) noted that it was good to facilitate participants in recording their comments privately, as some may feel self-conscious and uncomfortable discussing their views with others.

There are limitations to collecting data in this way, as noted by MacFarlane et al. (2017). Despite the intention that all participants world contribute, this may not happen. There was also no guarantee that discussions would be held respectfully and courteously. As an observer, I noted that participants were professional in their approach to the discussion. There was a relaxed, even jovial atmosphere in most venues, the bowl of sweets lightening the mood somewhat. Not all participants contributed to each table topic. However, the volume of responses and the saturation of responses lent substantial credibility to the data collected. Some teachers did not comment, as they felt their feelings were already adequately represented. Notes could be amended, commented upon, and sometimes contradicted by the following group. Teachers often placed a tick beside comments with which they agreed. These ticks were noted in the data analysis.

Unlike online surveys like those used in the Czech (Pešková, 2019) research, it is impossible to identify trends in the data associated with teacher with gender, years of service, subject or sector. This limitation led to the analysis of the data by question rather than by venue. There was no attempt made to make comparisons across the venues.

Figure 17, below, shows one of the tablecloths. Comments and tick are evident.
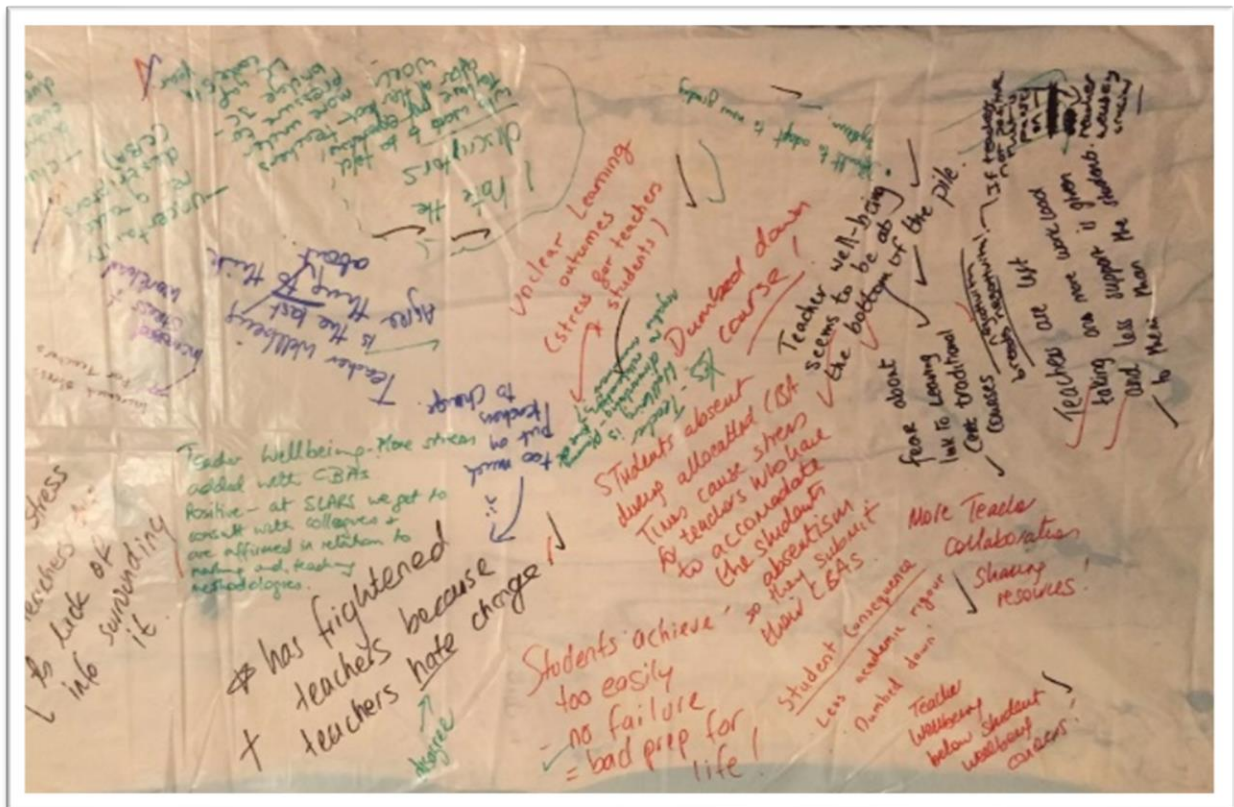
Figure 17: Tablecloth Sample of Comments

4.7.2. Recruitment of Participants

The aim was to hold five to seven World Café gatherings with the support of the network of Education Centres across the country. Invitations to teachers were sent to schools and advertised on the centre websites. Five Education Centres offered to host World Café gatherings in their regions. Correspondence sent to the centre directors is included in Appendix C. There was a disappointing response from teachers, and only two Education Centre venues went ahead, as a minimum of 10 participants is required by the centres to facilitate the hosting of an event. Three

venues were organised as part of whole-school staff days. These school communities were happy to participate as part of their reflection process on their engagement with the Junior Cycle. Participant consent was obtained prior to any data collection. The participants' personal anonymity, and that of the venue or place of work, was put in place.

4.7.3. The Participants

The raw data was collected between May 2019 and March 2020 in five venues, with a pool of 282 teacher participants. This generated 125 individual group conversations (five venues, five questions, five rounds of discussion). The teacher cohort was very diverse. Years of individual experience ranged from newly qualified teachers to those who had 30+ years' experience. Most subject areas were represented. The teachers came from three sectors: Voluntary Secondary, ETB, Community, and Comprehensive schools.

Covid-19 restrictions following March 2020 made further data collection impossible. As a result, it was not possible to include the Educate Together schools in this research piece. It is not possible to estimate what, if any, effect this may have had on the research data. The level of consistency across venues would suggest a degree of consensus among teachers generally. There was no attempt to identify trends based on the educational sector. Whether industrial action during the early roll-out of the reforms impacted teacher perceptions is impossible to say. This could possibly provide an area for further research.

There was no opportunity to include Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) in this research. Therefore, it is not possible to explore whether staff in these schools had a similar or different experience from the staff in other sectors. This remains an area for further research.

Differences in teacher perceptions in relation to Junior Cycle reform based on their sector was not considered as part of the research. The Education Centres were mixed teacher groupings and showed no substantive differences in their responses than the other groups. There was a high degree of similarity in data between all five gatherings, indicating that a high degree of saturation was achieved. World Café

events were held in different parts of Ireland as illustrated in Figure 20 below, establishing a broad picture of teacher perspectives across the country.

Secondary School East Coast 67-participant pool	Community School South East 132-participant pool	ETB School Midlands 62-participant pool
	Teachers Centre Dublin 8-participant pool	Teachers Centre South East 13-participant pool

Figure 18: World Café Participants

4.8. Treatment of Data

The five World Cafés present the opinions and perceptions of a sample of Irish teachers. The data collected at all five venues was considered as one data set. The World Café style of data collection does not facilitate the attribution of comments to individual teachers or support analysis of response by, gender, years of service, type of school or subject areas. The limitations of World Café as a data collection method are discusses in 6.4. The data represents a snapshot of a sample of teachers' opinions and perceptions as they engaged with the Junior Cycle reform process between 2014, its introduction and 2019, when the data was collected. The data was analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2013, 2020) by question across all five venues. The questions posed at the venues were:

What do teachers perceive as the potential benefits and challenges posed by Junior Cycle reform on student learning?

What impact do teachers believe the change in the teacher role will have on student learning?

How do teachers feel the assessment changes introduced will impact on student learning?

How has Junior Cycle reform impacted teacher wellbeing and the consequences for student learning?

4.8.1. Thematic Analysis

The goal of this study was to capture the feelings and needs of the teacher sample in relation to their engagement with the Junior Cycle curriculum reform process. Similar to Phenomenological research, this piece's purpose was designed to uncover the 'quality and texture of experience' (Willig, 2013, p. 17). It is seeking to understand how the participants experienced an event rather than the reality of what happened. According to Willig, it is not essential that the participants' description accurately reflects what happened. It is their perception that is being recorded. Willig notes that the method used for data analysis should be fit for the project's purpose and in line with the overall research design. Braun and Clark (2021) suggest that Thematic Analysis as a suitable method for this kind of data analysis because it offers a structure to analyse 'the patterns of meanings across the data' (p2).

Braun &Clark (2021) identify a family of Thematic Analyses approaches tailored to specific circumstances. The Thematic Analysis employed in this study is a reflexive approach where the themes are developed from codes as a "pattern of shared meanings underpinned by a central organising concept" (p3). Themes emerge organically informed by the researchers understanding of the data and the literature. Braun notes that it is an "inherently subjective process" (p3) and requires the researcher to follow a six-step process to support accuracy and validity in the analytical process:

1. **Familiarisation with the data**. The process of transcribing the data from the tablecloths gathered from each table into MS Excel spreadsheets provide opportunities to explore the data. Notes were taken at each venue and were read in conjunction with the transcripts. Tablecloths provided a very visual picture of teacher perspectives and added to the understanding of the participant comments.

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2. **Generation of initial codes**. Initial codes are generated by reading and rereading the data. Patterns and similarities between comments are noted. These are grouped to form a code.

3. **Searching for themes.** Codes are grouped together, creating a general theme.

4. **Reviewing themes.** Themes are reviewed. Both the raw data and the codes are revisited to ensure that all codes have been included in the emerging themes.

5. **Defining and naming themes.** The themes are examined to clarify and refine them. Patterns and relationships between themes are identified. Thematic maps are used to visually represent these patterns. A final review of all themes is made, to ensure they accurately reflect the data.

6. **Producing a report.** The story of the data is told using the themes as headings. Conclusions and inferences can then be drawn to create meaning and a coherent narrative.

A full worked example exploring teacher perceptions about the changed role of the teacher is detailed in 5.1.2 to 5.1.7.

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2014) provides a highly structured approach to the analysis of data. It is a "robust, systematic framework for coding qualitative data" (p. 2). It has been useful in identifying patterns in the descriptions provided by participants in healthcare research. Themes are identified as specific patterns that emerge through the examination of the data (Joffe, 2011). A study assessing self-assessment performance feedback among nursing staff (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) found the technique effectively uncovered meaning from the data. They concluded that it provided a high degree of clarity in revealing how the themes were generated from the raw data.

4.8.2. Summative Analysis

Though not traditionally associated with qualitative research, there is a value in the use of quantitative techniques. Summative analysis presents qualitative data in a way that is easily accessible and has proven to be very effective (Morgan, 1993a). In this research, it is used to support reflexivity and the validity of the Thematic

Analysis, and it also provides a visual summary of the data findings. Rapport (2010) noted that summative analysis can illustrate the data in a way that maintains the integrity of the participants' narrative while it moves the story forward. The method makes it possible for others to engage with the data effectively in a summarised presentation.

Some researchers advocate for descriptive counts of categories. Onwuegbuzies (2009), for example, suggests that counting the frequency of comments can provide useful information regarding consensus and dissent among the group members. However, because a group holds a particular viewpoint, it does not in itself make it a compelling or important argument in relation to the entirety of the data. It simply notices and records it. Researchers argue that recording the frequency of comments enhances the data by providing a fuller picture of the opinions within the group. Thus, recording the frequency can, they suggest, support inferences made from the data in relation to consensus. World Café is participant-led: it is the group that guides the discussion and records their findings (Schwartz, 2016). The data can be fragmented and repetitive, and the use of frequency counts was a useful tool in identifying patterns within the data. There are limitations to the use of World Café as a data collection method, and these are discussed in 6.4.3.

4.9. Triangulation

Triangulation uses multiple methods or multiple sources of data in qualitative research to test validity by comparing data from different sources. Denzin (1978) and Patton (1999) categorise four types: (a) method triangulation; (b) investigator triangulation; (c) theory triangulation; and (d) data source triangulation. This research incorporated ethnographic and phenomenological methodologies to collect qualitative data. The research design incorporated both qualitative and quantitative summative data analysis methods.

This process provided a degree of triangulation broadly in line with Denzin and Lincoln (2013), who described triangulation as "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (p. 129). This was in line with the ethnographic tradition of using multiple sources of data to create an accurate picture of teacher perceptions around Junior Cycle. Five World Café venues were held, recognised as

an effective method to ensure valid data collection in social research. Using multiple methods to examine the same research problems provides a degree of comparable data (Jick, 1979). The method is most often associated with the integration of surveys and fieldwork. Jick (19790, described this method as a useful package and used it in research to investigate stress levels among a group of employees.

This research design involves the use of two sources of data collection: an online survey, which was a minor source; and World Café style group sessions, which was a major source. There were concerns for limiting data to one heavily weighted source because it may provide only a partial insight into the phenomenon being studied (Carter et al. 2014). As a result, the research was informed initially by an online survey followed by large-scale, face-to-face data collection. Field notes and observations accompanied World Café events, but essentially this is the principal source of generating data. Ethical approval was also granted for individual interviews that were intended to follow the online survey. Depending on the quality of data provided through the World Café, the option to incorporate follow-up interviews with some participants was retained. Research shows that different methods, group versus individual interviews, provided different perspectives. Kaplowitz (2000, 2001) found that interview participants were more likely to discuss sensitive topics and stimulate discussion about different topics when compared to focus group participants (Carter, 2014). There may be an argument for using both group and individual methods of data collection in this research. However, using multiple World Café gatherings in different parts of Ireland, to establish a broad picture of teacher perspectives on student learning, in light of Junior Cycle reform, provided ample saturation and triangulation of results.

4.10. Ethics and Reflexivity

4.10.1.   Reflexivity

Wanda Pillow (2003) has described four reflexive strategies, which, she argues, work in tandem, giving the researcher a level of self-reflection and self-awareness that promotes authenticity and accuracy in research. Incorporated into the research framework, these factors will keep the researcher honest in the pursuit of their goal. They also provide a framework to evaluate the validity of the research work.

Reflexivity as Recognition of Self: Researcher Know Thyself

Recognising the researcher as distinct from the research, some researchers state their connection to the research at the beginning, so that the reader can read the work understanding the author's identity Peshkin, (1988). As a teacher researching teachers, a native as it were, I chose my research design to create space for other voices to co-construct the research piece. I hold with Adler (1987), that "going native is a solution rather than a problem" (p. 32). It creates a unique position, where the search for meaning is enhanced by a native being integral, but not alone, in uncovering the research. Figure 19, below, shows the points at which other voices contributed to the data collection and the research process.

| Online data collection | Research Advisory Group | World Café Lundy Model (2007) of Participatory Research |

Figure 19. Development of Data Collection and Research Process

Reflexivity as Recognition of the Other

The use of both the Lundy Model (2007) and World Café ensures that the researcher allows the participants and research to speak for themselves Trinh (1991). Pillow (2003) acknowledges that there are many levels on which researching colleagues may be difficult for the insider. There may be difficulties where there is an inequality between researcher and participants. The design of this study has been crafted to ensure partnership in all aspects. The use of RAG and World Café participation supports this. Trinh (1991) outlined a strategy for including groups such as the RAG, whose members co-developed the research focus and directed the researcher at each research stage. The research design of this work ensures the recognition of the other in each stage of the process, planning, collection of data, and analysis.

Reflexivity as Truth

A sound research design and research methodology ensure a process where the voice of the participants is heard. Trinh (1991) implies that reflexivity can be implemented as a science to ensure that truth gathering is done with integrity. Pillow (2003) supports the view that as long as the researcher has the necessary techniques in place and carries out the research soundly and methodologically, there will be authenticity and integrity in the work. The choice of methodology and data analysis methods are supportive of Pillows criteria for reflexivity.

4.11. Thematic Analysis and Summative Analysis

Braun identifies the method of Thematic Analysis used in this research as a reflexive approach (2021, p. p3). Acknowledging it as a subjective process, they identify a six-step approach to the data analysis process (Braun, 2013) as discussed in 4.5.4. Thematic analysis and thematic maps create a structure that allows a coherent narrative to emerge from the data. The framework for data analysis is considered appropriate for use with the World Café data collection method (MacFarlane, 2017). Lo¨hr (2020) employed a similar method of data analysis in her study investigating World Café as an effective participatory qualitative data collection method.

Baurun (2020) acknowledge issues around reflexivity for researchers using reflexive Thematic Analysis. They argue that the method is sound if the analysis is sufficiently grounded in the data rather than pure induction. This method they suggest is appropriate where one researcher undertakes the research. They note that "a research team is not required or even desirable for quality" (p6). They suggest that the onus is on the researcher to develop competency and understanding through reading and following the guidelines provided.

This research's data (teacher responses) is numbered and identified by question. Benefits of Junior Cycle reform, for example, are identified by the letter B, and samples of the teacher comment detailed alongside the code that ultimately forms a theme in the data. This process supports the grounds of the analysis in the data.

There is a dual approach to the data analysis process using Summative Analysis outlined in 4.5.5. This dual approach supports a robust and transparent approach to

the analysis whilst acknowledging the limitations of World Café as a data collection method (see 6.4.3).

Reflexivity as Transcendence

Pillow (2003) suggests that the researcher can transcend their subjectivity and cultural bias through reflexivity. The research design was structured with this understanding of reflexivity as its underlying principle. Holding the three previously outlined areas of reflexivity as strategies will ensure that a piece of work has academic integrity and that it has credibility as a contribution in educational research.

The table below outlines the practical steps taken by the researcher during the research process to support reflexivity.

Table 8: Steps taken to insure reflexivity.

Using the Lundy model participatory research gives voice to participants to influence and guide the research process.
The Research Advisory Group codevelop the research questions.
Maintaining external supervision of the research study through regular consultation with the Trinity College research supervisor.
The use of the World Café as a data collection tool. The researcher acts as an observer only. Discussion and data recording is in the hands of the participants.
Thematic Analysis supported by Summative Analysis supporting reliability and transparency in the data analysis.

4.11.1.   Ethics

The ethical framework enables the researcher to foresee ethical problems that may occur and work through any issues that may present themselves as the research progresses (Flinders, 1992). Three areas of responsibility were identified for this research piece:

- To the participants.
- To the community of educational researchers.
- To educational professionals, policymakers, and the general public.

The *Trinity College Dublin policy on good research practice* (2018) document was followed in all aspects of this research. Ethical approval was granted for this research (Appendix H). The participants in this research were adults, and Level One approval was applied. Consent forms were provided to all participants, in accordance with the policy. Additionally, all material and references in relation to the RAG, surveys, interviews, and World Café material were de-identified, to prevent data from being attached to any schools or individuals.

Both the theoretical framework and data collection methods are clearly outlined and in line with best practices. The Lundy. (2007) model of participation, based on Article 12 of the UNCRC, formed the underlying principle for the data collection methodology. The work was grounded in sound ethical principles, in line with Trinity College Dublin's policy. Ethical reflexivity is a core feature of qualitative research. As a teacher researching teachers, I am conscious of my responsibilities in this regard. By adhering to Trinity College Dublin's policy, this work will give a credible audience and influence around the teacher voice in relation to Junior Cycle reform and its impact on student learning.

4.12. Chapter Summary

The research emerged from the researcher's own experience and observations as a teacher and teacher educator during the initial stages of Junior Cycle reform. Informed by a review of the literature, two research questions emerged that spoke to the key aims of the reform:

Question One: To what extent did teacher conversations reflect the development of more student-learning environments, as expressed by the Junior Cycle Reform framework?

Question Two: Did teacher conversations identify opportunities and/or barriers to the Junior Cycle Reform's goal to replace the high-stakes summative exam system at the Junior Cycle level?

As a practising teacher, I was concerned with exploring teacher perceptions of the impact of the reform on student learning. In considering the theoretical framework

and research methodology, I believed that maintaining the integrity of the teacher voice was paramount. Conscious of the need for a high degree of reflexivity, I chose the framework and methodologies that I felt embraced the fact that I was a teacher researching teachers.

This research was designed to study teacher engagement with Junior Cycle reform, with a constructivist approach evident throughout the work. The research methodology used the Lundy. (2007) model of participatory research as a guiding principle. The participatory nature of the research is evident in the use of a RAG and World Café data collection.

CHAT provides a tool to identify the complex interactions at play in educational reform. Thematic and summative data analysis provide a robust framework to extract meaning from the data. Adherence to the academic and ethical guidelines detailed in the Trinity College Dublin policy document makes this a coherent and credible piece of research. Figure 20 below summarises the elements of this research.
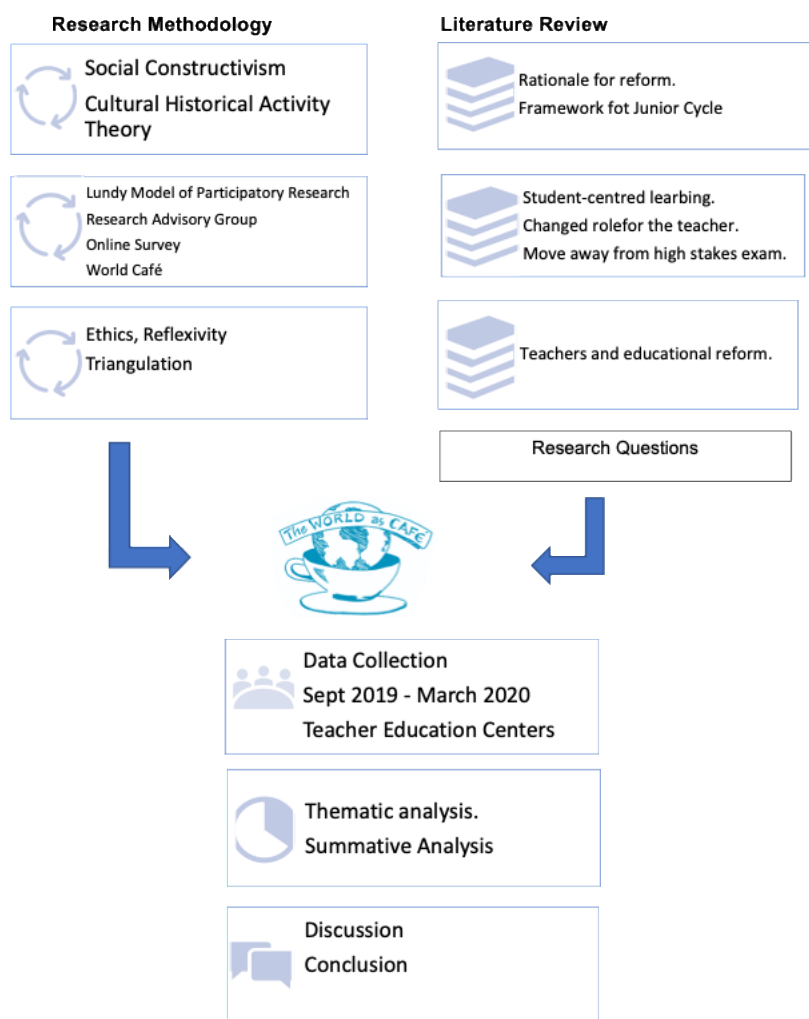
Figure 20: A Summary of the Research Design. A Study of Teacher Engagement with Junior Cycle Reform

5. Data Analysis and Findings

5.1. Changed Role of the Teacher

This chapter will provide an analysis of the responses to each of the World Café questions, and will use the emerging themes to address the research questions. There is one detailed example of the process of analysis using the first of the World Café question, this process is replicated for each of the subsequent questions

5.1.1. Context

Significant changes in the teacher role in the classroom were considered essential to place the student at the centre of learning in Junior Cycle. See 3.3.2 for details concerning this changed role.

At the World Café gathering, teachers were asked to discuss and record comments concerning their changed role in response to this question: "What impact do teachers believe the change in the teacher role will have on student learning?"

5.1.2. Stage 1. Familiarisation with the Data

Initially, the data collected from the tablecloths, in response to the above question, was transcribed onto an MS Excel document. Handwritten notes, made by the researcher as an observer, at each gathering were reread to re-familiarise the researcher with venues and the tenor of the gathering. Transcription of all sets of data provided the researcher with another opportunity for immersion in the data. Bird (2005) recognises this as a critical phase when working with qualitative data, informing early stages of analysis. The comments, once grouped in codes, were given a reference "R", representing Teacher Role, and were numbered. This process allows for comments to be identified and referenced back to the question that generated them.

5.1.3. Stage 2. Generation of Initial Codes

The codes came from the participant observations, comments and reflections. For example, **evidence more student engagement** became a code for a group of similar comments, including "students are more interactive" (R6) and "more student-teacher cooperation" (R11). In addition, the data contained 74 individual data

segments, and some participants had added ticks indicating agreement with particular comments. Initial coding revealed 38 identifiable codes, which were colour-coded and grouped using the MS Excel filtering facility. Ticks beside a comment were noted as incidences of the code allocated to that comment. Following review and refinement, 22 significant codes were identified. Appendix J details the codes, the teacher comments supporting the code, and the incidence of the codes.

5.1.4. Stage 3. Searching for Themes

At this point, themes begin to emerge, as patterns in the data become apparent and groupings of codes became themes. The 22 significant code categories were condensed into initial themes that explain the data's story. The themes emerged as patterns showing the relationships between the codes. The theme **changes in behaviour among teachers,** emerged from codes describing the use of varied methodologies, an increase in student-teacher cooperation and the development of the awareness among teachers of a new student role in the learning process. Another theme identified was **student change in behaviour**, with more active engagement, independent student learning, and ownership of learning (Frances Rapport Ph, 2010).

Table 9, below, illustrates the theme that emerged from the initial 22 codes and identifies a further 7 codes in addition to the 2 highlighted above. The emerging evidence shows that many teachers believe the change in the teacher role has had a significant, positive impact on student behaviour and learning. Themes emerging suggest that teachers face challenges in carrying out this new role and are hindered by a lack of resources thereby impeding implementation. The data suggests concern for the quality of learning now being delivered. Highlighted here is the comment, "Is it fun or learning? Can students differentiate?" (R15) A significant number of teachers questioned if their role in the classroom had changed at all: "The teacher still sets the agenda and leads the learning" (R57).

Table 9: Initial Themes. Teacher Role.

Codes (193 incidences)	Initial Themes
Active engagement. 9 **Independent and ownership of learning. 29** **Varied methodologies. 16** **Increases student and teacher cooperation. 21** **Awareness of student role. 24**	Changes in teacher behaviour. Changes in student behaviour.
All activity poor learning. 5 **Foundational learning not present. 3** **Changes do not support Senior Cycle demands on students. 2**	Concern for quality of learning. Poor connection with Senior Cycle.
More demands on students are stressful for them. 4 **Lack of time to support individual students. 2** **Some students are not capable of independence. 7**	Increased workload and stress for some students.
Confusion around reforms. 4 **Fear of loss of control. 4** **Feelings of being undervalued. 2** **The role has not changed. 6** **The teacher leads the learning in the classroom.27**	Confusion around the reforms. The teacher role is unchanged.
Availability of technology. 4 **Resources not provided. 5** **Workload increased. Time pressure. 3** **CBAs and administration. 9** **Reduced student-teacher contact time. 4** **Books leading learning. 3**	Lack of resources is impeding implementation. Time constraints are putting pressure on teachers, impacting students.

A thematic map is a visual representation showing how codes interact with each other to form themes. It also reveals the complexity of the analytical process. Themes emerged from groups of similar codes: one code may be significant in more than one theme. The interaction between codes and themes related to the change in teacher behaviour brought about by introducing new methodologies and formative assessment practices is illustrated below, in Figure 21, below. A table implies a linear relationship, while the map provides a fuller three-dimensional picture of a complex interplay between teacher perceptions and their implications. The map is very dense, and in order to tell the story of the data, further refinement was needed.
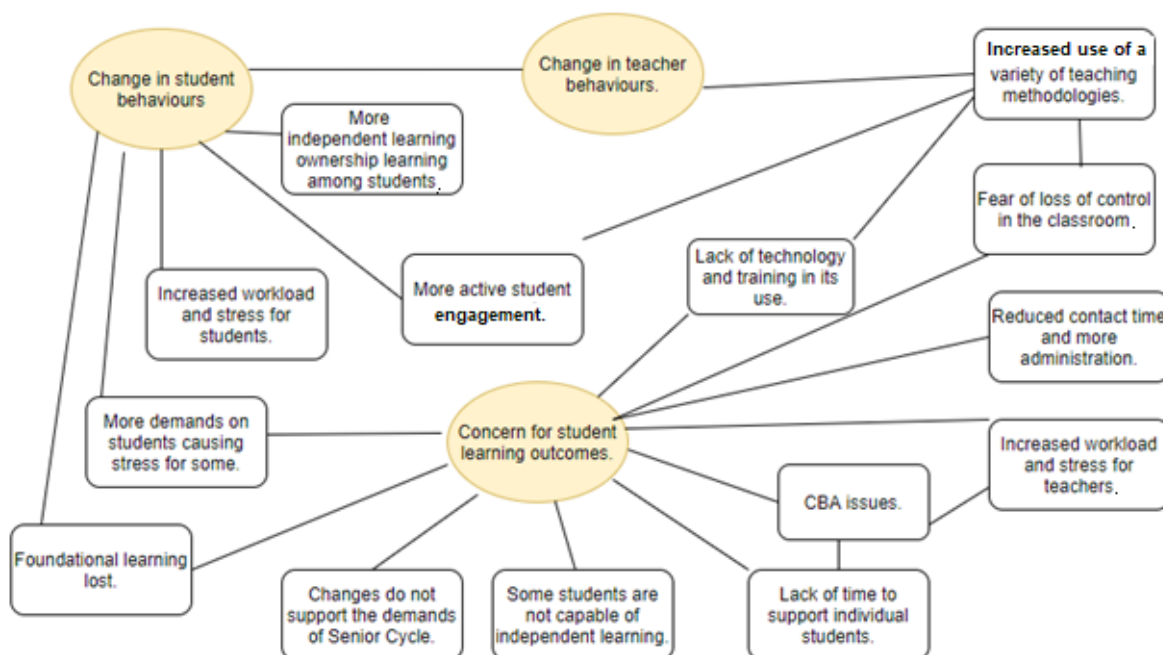
Figure 21: Thematic Map. Interaction of Codes and Themes the Changed Role of the Teacher

5.1.5. Stage 4. Reviewing Themes

This process, according to Braun and Clarke (2013), has two elements. First, re-examining the codes, checking for consistency in each theme; and second, critiquing the themes and the interactions between them. This is done to ensure that the complete data set is reflected in the findings and to maintain the richness of the teacher comments. At this stage, nine themes were present supported by the data

the incidences corresponding to each code are represented in brackets. The themes are as follows:

1. Changes in teacher behaviour. (61)
2. Changes in student behaviour. (38)
3. Concern for quality of student learning. (8)
4. Poor connection to Senior Cycle (2)
5. Increased workload and stress for some students. (15)
6. Confusion around the reforms. (10)
7. Teacher role is unchanged. (6)
8. Lack of resources, impeding implementation. (18)
9. Time constraints putting pressure on teachers, impacting students. (5)

Themes indicating student and teacher behavioural changes can be refined into a more specific theme: the **implementation of student-centred learning**. A subtheme of marked **changes in student and teacher behaviour** was added, to reflect the level of change that had occurred in the classroom. Perhaps this can be attributed to the introduction of more varied teaching methodologies during teacher CPD. The data records ample teacher comments, confirming their belief that "Students are more involved in their own learning and taking more ownership of their learning" (R3). Teachers noted an increased awareness of the student as a partner in the teaching and learning relationship, which had possibly not been as evident or valued before. Placing students at the centre of learning had been one of the stated goals of the reforms and would seem to have been achieved.

Concerns around the quality of learning and the change in the classroom dynamic can be said to have caused some concern. As this teacher articulates: "I have NEVER taught as little in my life at this level, felt we are doing it for the sake of doing it" (R22). There is considerable data to support this as being a significant theme. Some teachers were concerned that increased activity in the classroom might have distracted some students, rather than enhancing their learning. "Is it fun or learning can students differentiate, do both, distracting" (R15).

A third theme emerging from the data concerns confusion and lack of clarity around both the changed role of the teacher and the implications this might have for teaching and learning. Some teachers saw no real change evident in the reforms, as illustrated by this participant, who stated: "Teachers are still leading learning and setting the subject plan" (R60). At the same time, others expressed confusion over the "lingo" used during CPD. There was apprehension among some, that new methodologies would be an "uncomfortable space for teachers when students are working together and talking" (R35). These comments indicate a considerable variation in teacher understanding of their new role. **Lack of clarity and confusion around the reforms** brings these comments together as a coherent theme.

A subtheme, the **lack of time and resources,** emerged as significant. A participant commenting on time pressures and increased workload noted: "Teachers are having to prepare and correct way more work" (R40). As teachers come to grips with new specifications and methodologies, it is not surprising that time should be viewed as a factor. However, some teachers expressed concerns that there was less time to support students because of the curricular changes. Lack of classroom resources was putting teachers under pressure. Comments such as "constant photocopying" (R47) and "The teacher can't be all and bring all, pens, markers, research" (R46), illustrating increased demands on teacher time and workload. These issues significantly impacted teachers and, consequently, the quality of student learning in the classroom.

5.1.6. Stage 5. Defining and Naming Themes
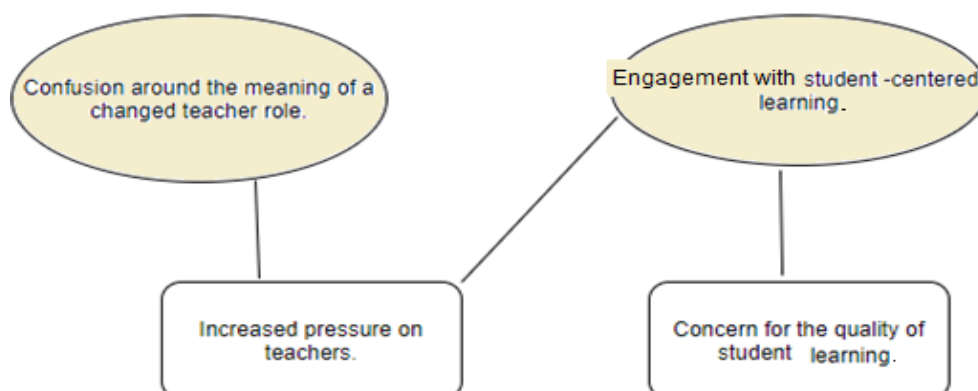
Figure 22: Thematic Map of the Changed Role of the Teacher

Figure 22 illustrates that what emerges are two major themes: a move towards **student-centred learning** and **confusion around a changed teacher role**, together with two subthemes: **increased pressure on teachers** and **concern for the quality of learning** for some students.

Ninety nine instances of teachers referencing more student engagement, student ownership of learinng, awareness of the students role in lerning would suggest significant teacher engagement with student-centred learning. It appears to have come at a cost to teachers in terms of increased pressure and workload. Teachers expressed concern that this change has compromised learning outcomes for some students, who find this level of engagement difficult. There was significant confusion expressed around the changed role of the teacher. In forty-one instances, teachers expressed the feeling that the role had not changed significantly. Lack of clarity around the language and meaning of the teacher role delivered through CPD was evident. Though many teachers had embraced the new methodologies, they did not accept that their role had changed. The issues around time pressure and resources may, some teachers indicated, have hindered the ability of some students to engage fully with the reform, causing increased pressure and some stress for teachers.

5.1.7. Stage 6 Telling the Story of the Data. The Changed Role of the Teacher

Student-centred Learning

The introduction of 24 formative assessment strategies during whole-school and subject-specific CPD has had a marked effect in the classroom. In answer to the question on the impact of the changed role of the teacher on student learning, the most significant response indicates a more active classroom and more engaged students. One teacher commented: "Students are more involved in their learning and taking more ownership of their learning" (R3). The majority of teachers commented on a greater degree of cooperation in the classroom and were more aware of the role of the students in their learning. The inclusion of direct instruction for teachers in formative assessment may have heightened their awareness of the students' role in moving learning forward in the classroom.

Concern for Student Learning 0utcomes

A more active classroom had been broadly welcomed as a positive effect of the Junior Cycle reforms. However, there is some concern over the quality of learning delivered by this change. Teachers expressed concern that students could not differentiate between being active and actively learning. One teacher commented: "I feel the students are learning less science, and they are not prepared for the current Leaving Cert." (R23). This comment falls into a large category of codes related to poorer learner outcomes. The perceived over-emphasis on methodology, rather than on course content, posed concerns for some teachers. Ten instances of the code **foundational learning not present** indicates the level of this concern among many teachers. "We need foundational learning, and rote has its place, Neuroscience says so" (R13).

Teachers expressed frustration and concern with the lack of detail in the specifications and methodologies that some believe dilute learning. This language teacher captures the mood: "I have NEVER taught as little in my life at this level" (R22). Clearly, more active methodologies were being delivered, but the value in terms of student learning was uncertain. This category of codes, questioning the quality of learning and the disconnect with the current Leaving Certificate, was highlighted in all five World Café questions.

Lack of Clarity, and Confusion around the Reforms

The rationale for moving from high- to low-stakes exams not being clearly understood may account for some of the frustration. Grades have declined, which may lead teachers to question the value of the reforms being introduced. In 2019, Junior Cycle results in English and Science saw a drop in the higher grades, which may have been interpreted as evidence of the poorer quality of learning. Teachers were seeing the new "broader learning" not being rewarded with better or equivalent grades. Despite CPD highlighting the shift from a high-stakes to a low-stakes curriculum, as outlined in the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) teachers may continue to measure success by exam results. The role of the teacher and that of the Junior Cycle in a restructured second-level reform may need to be clarified.

Some teachers did not consider that there had been a significant change in the teacher role. Comments from their in-service, such as, "we keep being told we are doing this anyway" (R74), led some to believe there was no change required. As a result, some felt there was no significant role change; therefore, there was no change in learner experience. Some firmly held the view that the teacher has always facilitated and led the learning. What level of engagements students were experiencing in these classrooms before CPD is impossible to know. It is possible that practical subjects, which had not been introduced at the time of data collection, had already experienced high levels of student engagement and self-directed learning, and little change was expected there.

The quality of teacher engagement with CPD can only be estimated. The excessive use of acronyms and the new lingo caused frustration for some. JCT provided a glossary of terms in the learning logs that accompanied the CPD. However, the use of acronyms and new terminology during the CPD days did confuse and irritate some teachers. Figure 23. below, illustrating one teacher's frustration around the new "lingo".
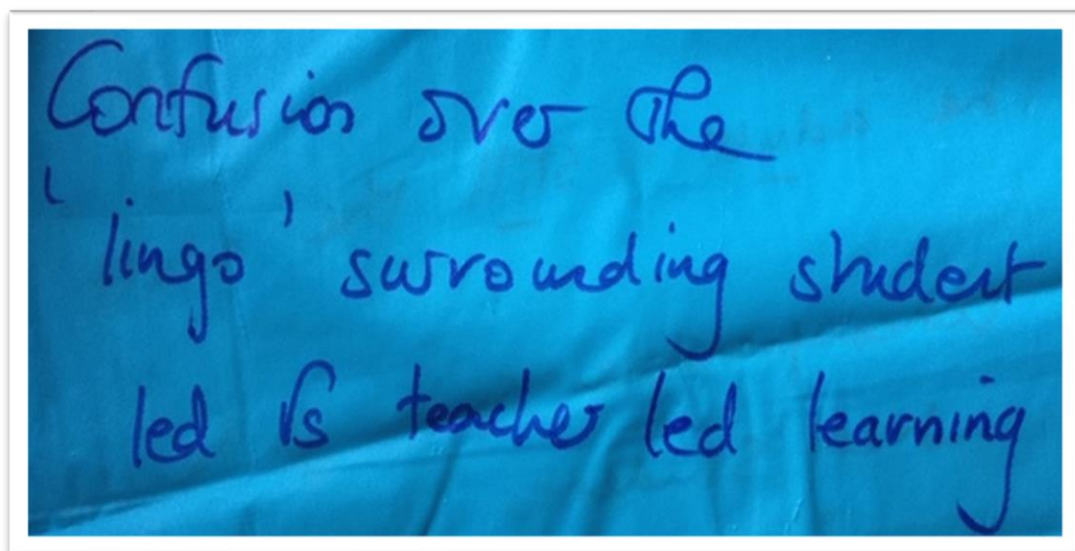
Figure 23. Comment from Tablecloth. Confusion over the "Lingo"

Comparison of codes from all five research question data sets indicated significant confusion and lack of clarity among teachers on several fundamental reforms. At the time of this data collection, all teachers had received whole-school CPD concerning

the framework and rationale, and the active methodology strategies had been modelled and practised on these occasions. Comments like "Not all learning has to be fun, some learning must be done by rote to lay a base, a foundation" (R30) indicated an "either or" understanding of the reforms – either all interactive and student-centred or all traditional chalk and talk. Though it was not stated in the literature or CPD around classroom methodologies, some teachers appear to have taken the emphasis on active engagement to exclude or negate the value of more traditional teaching strategies. One teacher was adamant that "students can't rote learn" (R33). There was an implication that teachers felt they had been doing the wrong things. This may have led to frustration and a feeling of being professionally underappreciated. "The value of what we were doing before is not being recognised" (R31). This is perhaps more evidence of lack of clarity around reform rationale, than that of being unappreciated as professionals.

The Scottish experience of a phased introduction of subjects may shed light on this lack of clarity. At the time of initial CPD delivery, most subjects had not yet been introduced. It could be argued that the relevance of the rationale for the change was not fully engaged with at that time. Priestley (2013) noted, that the gradual introduction of subjects might have led to some difficulties. Teachers reported that some school departments had spent time developing a shared understanding of the terminology and teaching practices, while those whose subjects that had yet to come online had not. In the case of Irish teachers, a lack of clarity and consistency emerged as a result. Comments such as the one quoted, "confusion over the lingo student-led vs teacher led" (R28), may indicate a level of confusion among teachers here in Ireland, regarding their role in the classroom. No doubt, confusion led to a degree of discomfort in the classroom.

Increased Pressure on Teachers
Several comments in the data indicated logistical issues might be impeding the implementation process. Comments such as "More time and digital resources" (R42) highlighting that some felt they were trying to implement changes that lacked sufficient resources to allow teachers to function in the newly envisaged role. Lack of resources and large class sizes may have created frustration and a sense of being

overwhelmed by the changes. This comment typifies the feeling, "The teacher can't be all and bring all, pens, markers, research."

Though a grant for IT has been made available to schools, the data revealed a deficit in IT and skills to use it. Lack of resourcing in terms of materials has made implementing CBAs very difficult. Ideally, a student would choose their own area of interest, which the teacher would support with appropriate resources. The logistics of working with up to 30 students in a classroom, with differentiated needs and with less contact time per subject than in Junior Certificate, has created significant stress for teachers and students. "CBAs with 24 different students can't be 24 different topics." There was evidence that students too were struggling to cope with independent learning demanded by CBAs. Teachers expressed the concern that students without good home support would struggle to keep up with their peers. CBAs have highlighted a significant disparity between disadvantaged students and the rest of the cohort. "Students are now even more polarised if they are disadvantaged, no internet/device or IT skills."

The difficulties, time commitment, and lack of resources to implement the Junior Cycle were all cited as limiting the ability of teachers to engage with their changed role in the classroom. The data showed codes indicating significant evidence that lack of time and increased workload presented a new pressure for teachers. "Time, Time, Time!" The move to independent learning, teachers felt, was leaving some students behind, as they did not have the personal resources to cope without significant teacher support. "Some students lost don't know how to take ownership" of their learning. Data codes indicated that reduced contact time per subject had not been reflected in a reduced curricular workload. Teachers noted an inability to scaffold student work sufficiently, or to differentiate for weaker students due to time constrains and large class sizes. The teacher comments in Figure 24 illustrate this point.
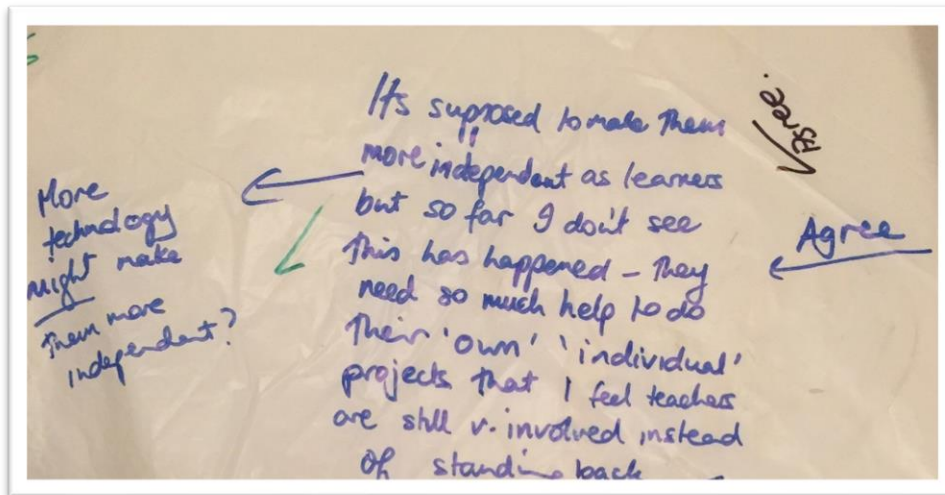
Figure 24: Tablecloth Comment. Students Are Finding It Challenging to Take Ownership of Learning

5.1.8. Summary Comments

Has there been a change in the role of the teacher? If so, how has it impacted student learning? From the analysis of data, presented there is no definitive answer to either question. Two strong categories emerged that seem to contradict each other. There has been a change in student engagement, and more active, student-led learning is happening. There is less agreement around the effect that is having on student learning. It does not appear that teachers are confident as yet that changed practice in the classroom is delivering better learning outcomes for students. This may lead them to question if a change in their role is necessary.

A theory regarding why this should be the case may relate to the traditional view of Junior Certificate as preparation for Leaving Certificate, and the high value placed on exams. Teachers of English and Science saw a reduction in the highest grade awarded in Junior Cycle, compared with Junior Certificate, with fewer distinctions as compared with the former A grade. Guskey (1986) argues that teachers are more likely to embrace change when they begin to see evidence of its success. The theory that emerges is that, despite a move to student-centred learning, without evidence of success teachers may not be convinced of the value of the reforms in delivering better student outcomes.

Despite extensive and ongoing CPD from JCT, there was evidence from the data that there was an inability or unwillingness to see a changed role for the teacher in the classroom. This might be explained by a lack of teacher engagement with CPD or the staggered introduction of subjects fragmenting the implementation process.

Logistical difficulties, class size, and reduced contact time and resources may have undermined teacher confidence and ability to embrace a changed role. The impact this is having on student learning cannot be quantified. Much of the Junior Cycle curriculum is intended to be active and engaging, requiring considerable resourcing. Collaborative planning and teacher meetings are integral to implementing CBAs, now embedded in every subject. According to one teacher, the result of this is: "more paperwork, more reporting, more meetings, more planning, and more headaches, therefore negatively impacting student learning" (R35).

On balance, teachers have engaged with the changes and their role as facilitators of learning. As one teacher noted, "There is more student-teacher cooperation in the classroom" (R11). The benefits for students and teachers from a positive classroom relationship should not be underestimated. The final word is left to this teacher: "I'm positive, really. I think kids are generally happier in school these days than they were, say 20 years ago" (R12).

5.2. Assessment Changes.

5.2.1. The Context

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* made significant changes in the approach to assessment see 3.2.3 for details of these changes.

The question posed at the table was, "What impact do teachers feel the assessment changes will have on student learning?" At this point in the Junior Cycle roll-out, only English and science teachers had completed full three-year cycles. Business Studies and Irish teachers were in year two. Visual Art along with MFLs, were in year one. All subjects had received three full days of whole-school CPD, outlining the assessment changes and the rationale for the changes.

5.2.2. The Codes

The data was transcribed and analysed as in the previous example. The capital letter A, representing assessment, is used to identify teacher comments associated with this questions. In total, 20 clearly identifiable codes emerged from the data with a total of 158 incidences. Ticks beside a comment were noted as incidences of the code and allocated to that comment. Appendix K illustrates the initial codes, incidences and samples of teacher comments.

5.2.3. Themes

The question posed at the table was, "What impact do teachers feel the assessment changes will have on student learning?" Each element of the changes was discussed, along with the logistical issues around their implementation. From the teacher comments, it was clear that the assessment changes had caused considerable concern. There was no broad welcome for the changes in terms of delivering better student outcomes. A positive impact was attributed to the introduction of formative assessment, as well as an appreciation of classroom practices that promoted student skills development. However, these fell well short of teachers endorsing the changes.

The following six broad themes emerged the incidences relating to each theme is represented in brackets:

1. The positive impact on student learning. (23)
2. The negative impact on student learning. (52)
3. Logistical difficulties. (12)
4. Issues around specific assessment changes. (27)
5. Subject-specific issues. (18)
6. Lack of clarity among teachers about the changes. (20)

On reviewing the initial themes, it was evident that there was a pattern of concern for the ability of the reforms to deliver better learning outcomes for students. Clarity on why this was felt was not evident from the broad themes. A combination of factors was at play, which were essential to identify, in order to capture the complete picture

of teacher engagement with the new assessment practices. Subthemes naming the issues that were of concern created a clearer picture of teacher perceptions.

The introduction of the CBAs prompted one teacher to ask: "CBAs effort v outcome?" (A128). Issues around CBAs warranted a major theme questioning the **value of CBAs**. The reasons teachers noted for the concerns were noted as subthemes. Logistical difficulties were mentioned as an impediment to teacher engagement with CBAs. This comment referred to the fact that "resources needed to engage in different forms of assessment, not available" (A107), which had added to teacher workload.

A second major theme, **concern about the ability of the reforms to deliver better learner outcomes,** was linked to the introduction of CBAs. A range of issues emerged as subthemes here, "less able students find it more challenging" (A104), effects on extracurricular activities, and a concern about a perceived growing gap between senior and junior cycles. "No preparation for Leaving Certificate where oral is hugely important" (A84), a participant comment, linked a concern for Leaving Certificate, as well as airing subject-specific concerns.

The other areas highlighted were the CBAs themselves and logistical difficulties associated with them, and the stress placed on students due to the ongoing nature of the assessments. The issue of attendance posed difficulties for some students. Those involved in extracurricular activities might find completing CBAs difficult. With all subjects on stream in 2019, there will be CBAs and ATs in most subjects, many happening simultaneously. It may be difficult for some students to engage with CBAs in some subjects, while moving on with new material in others.

Despite what might seem a negative view of assessment, there was considerable mention of positive learning outcomes for students from formative assessment and the active methodologies embedded as part of CBAs. The thematic map in Figure 25, below, illustrates the relationship between the major and subthemes.
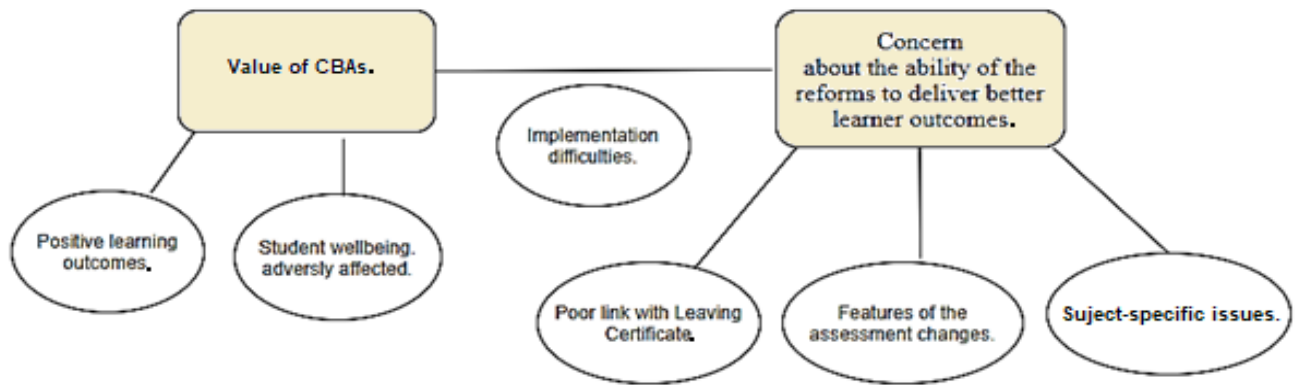
Figure 25: Thematic Map Showing Emerging Themes and Subthemes in Assessment

The task here was to consider if all the data was represented by the themes and subthemes illustrated by the thematic map. Figure 25 illustrates two dominant themes and the incidence of teacher comments related to these was high. However, teacher comments revealed 20 incidences of teachers expressing confusion about assessment reforms. This indicates a third major theme, **lack of clarity and confusion around the assessment reforms.** Three clearly defined themes were noted and are illustrated in figure 26 below.
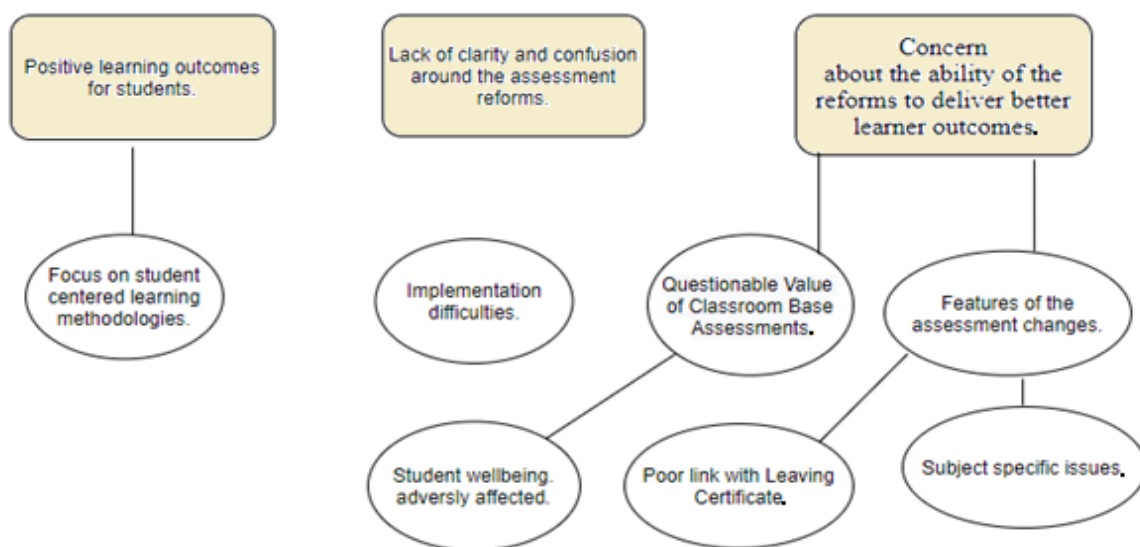
Figure 26: Thematic Map Showing Full Picture of Teacher Perception of Assessment Reforms

Figure 26, above, now fully illustrates teachers' perceptions of assessment reform in the Junior Cycle. Three major themes with seven subthemes had emerged. It is speculation to suggest that **lack of clarity and confusion around the assessment**

reforms (20 incidences) may have contributed to **concern about the ability of the reforms to deliver better learner outcomes** (115 incidences see Appendix K for a complete breakdown)**.** The subthemes illustrate elements teachers considered significant in themselves, but which they also related to the major themes. The third major theme supported by teacher incidence of comments was a clear recognition of the **positive learning outcomes for students** (23 incidences). The next step in the analysis tells the detailed story of the data.

5.2.4. Telling the Story of the Data

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) recognises assessment change as "the most significant change in the new Junior Cycle (p.35). The document goes on to say that assessment practices "should have as its primary purpose, the support of student learning" (p. 35). Much of the data collected at the World Café gatherings would suggest that teachers believe the assessment changes may not be supporting student learning in the way the reforms intended. Figure 27, below, illustrates an example of data making this point.
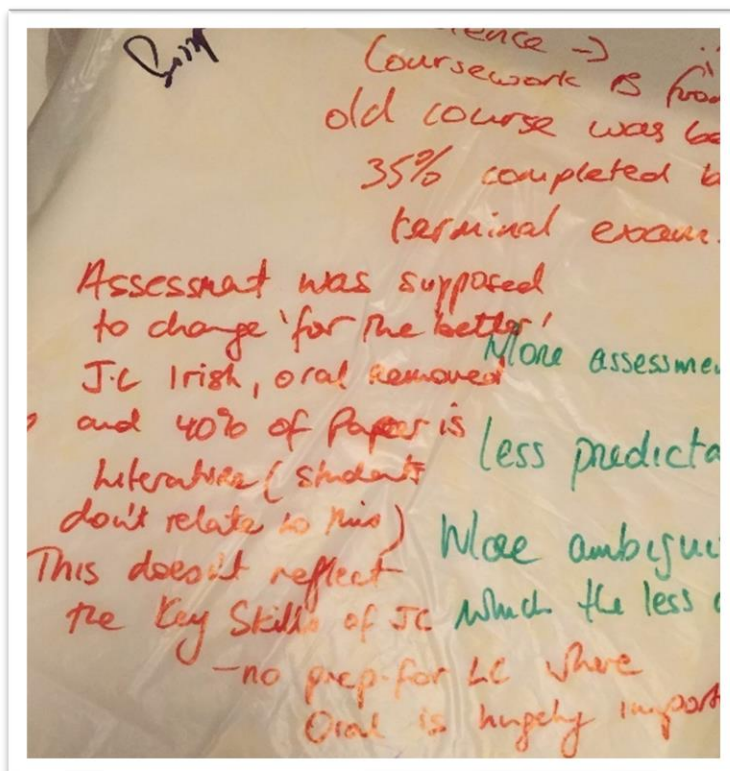
Figure 27: Sample of Teacher Comments. Assessment

Three themes had emerged from the analysis of the data, as follows:

1. Positive learning outcomes for students.
2. Lack of clarity and confusion around the assessment reforms.
3. Concern about the ability of the reforms to deliver better learner outcomes.

Positive Learning Outcomes for Students

Participants recognised the value of formative assessment practices, as noted here: "more reflection included as part of assessment good for student learning" (A19). There is a welcome for a more student-centred approach. More "student-led" (A29) and "encourages critical thinking (A25) are comments illustrating a change in teacher practice and a move to a more student-centred approach in the classroom. The data suggested that the goal of placing the student of learning had been achieved.

Concern about the Ability of the Reforms to Deliver Better Learner Outcomes

Despite the recognition of many positive outcomes for student learning, reservations were expresses about the quality of the reforms to deliver better learner outcomes. Several factors contributed to this perception.

CBAs are a significant part of the Junior Cycle programme. There were 16 incidences expressing concerns around the CBAs and At. CBAs are a crucial feature in the development of the Key Skills and were initially intended to have value in a student's terminal result. However, in the final roll-out, this was not the case in all subjects. An AT was introduced in most subjects, worth 10% of the student's terminal result. It is a reflection paper based on the skills developed and demonstrated by the student during the CBA, but not the CBA material itself.

Teachers expressed concern about the ability of all students to engage equally with this process. The number and ongoing nature were considered potentially detrimental to student wellbeing and learning outcomes in other subjects. "Constant CBAs (September 2nd year to end 3rd year) students unable to focus on the content of all subjects if carrying out CBAs in others" (A125). There were 15 incidences noted in the data, highlighting the stress this would place on students. Teachers questioned if the format of CBAs and ATs was indeed replacing a low-stakes exam

system. "CBAs meant to be low stakes but are to replace house exams" (A118), this increasing pressure on students and teachers.

Logistical difficulties, class size, resources, time, and student attendance were identified as significant impediments to the implementation of CBAs. "Resources are needed to engage in different forms of assessment, and they are not available" (A17). Figure 2d, below, notes one teacher comment: "CBAs impact on class teaching time, very stressful trying to complete a course" (A129). The reduction in contact time for subjects raised here was reflected in several teacher comments.
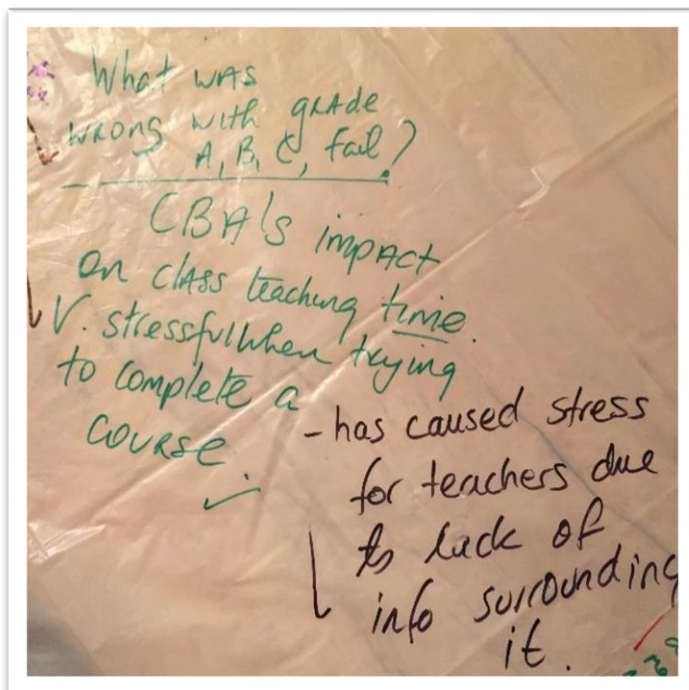
Figure 28: Sample of Teacher Comments. CBA

Science and MFL teachers expressed specific concerns. Science teachers noted that 35% awarded for practical aspects of Junior Certificate Science had been lost. There are no marks allocated for the oral component of the MFLs. In a skill-orientated curriculum, teachers were surprised at these changes. Some felt that the integrity and depth of learning in their subject had been adversely affected by these changes. Both subjects now had a 40-minute, written AT based on the second CBA. In MFLs, the fact that this could be answered in English was concerning to the

teachers, as they felt there was a dilution of the language element of their course. "No oral exam to the detriment of spoken language" (A6).

Other practical subjects have seen the percentage of final grade marks for project and practical work increase significantly. Home Economics is now at 50% for student practical work and Wood Technology is at 70%. With the emphasis firmly on promoting Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), teachers were perplexed by the inconsistency in some assessment changes. Ireland's *Strategy for foreign languages in education 2017-2026*, along with the *Action plan for education 2016-2019*, committed the Department of Education to "enable learners to communicate effectively and improve their standards of competence in languages" (DES, 2020c, p. 25). The changes to Irish and MFLs do not support this intention in some teachers' opinion. The comment in Figure 29, below, clearly indicates some teachers' frustrations over the changes to assessment in their subject.
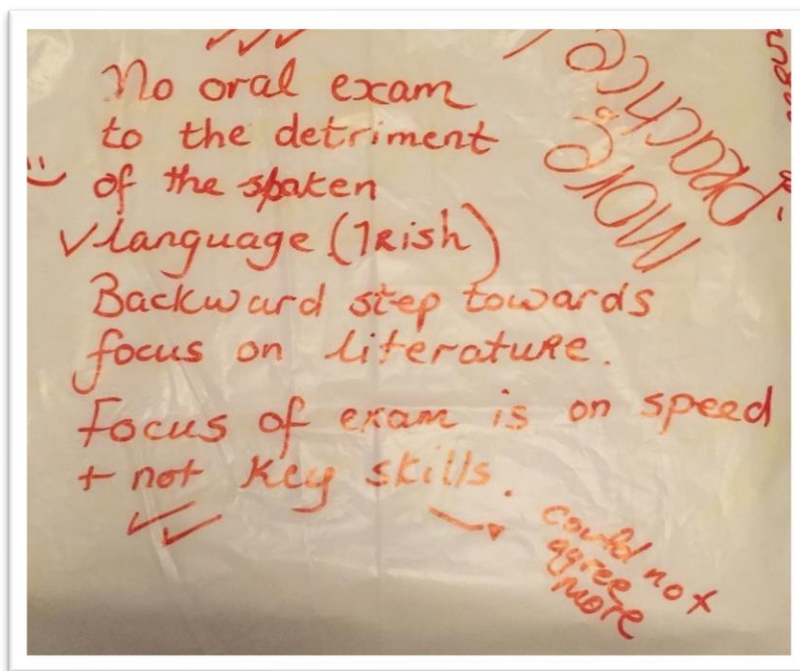
Figure 29: Sample of Teacher Comments – Assessment. Changes to Orals

"Less-academic students struggle with stimulus-based exam questions (less clarity)" (A105). Common-level papers led some to question if the new assessments were accessible to all students. Teachers were concerned that some would struggle, while others would be "going into Senior Cycle with diluted ideas of content required" (A80), with the change failing to benefit learner outcomes at either end of the learner spectrum. Moving to one paper in all subjects was also a concern. "Two exam

papers squished into one two-hour exam: huge volumes of content will be left out students will begin to take pot luck on topics to study" (A73).

Assessment has traditionally been synonymous with an exam for Irish teachers. Culturally, we are familiar with the results of terminal exam as the measure of achievement. Poor preparation for Leaving Certificate was cited several times as a concern: "No preparation for Senior Cycle" (A81). This perception may be linked to a number of issues: concerns for the quality of the curriculum in the Subject Specification, issues with the changes in assessment, or confusion around the reforms.

Lack of Clarity and Confusion around the Assessment Reforms

The role of the Junior Cycle in developing learner capacity, as opposed to preparation for Leaving Certificate exams, may not have been well articulated or well understood during CPD. The move to low-stakes assessment was intended to foster learner confidence and develop Key Skills, not simply to replace the Junior Cycle exam. The *Framework* document argues that "there is a substantial body of research evidence to show that educational outcomes for students can be improved by broadening the approach to assessment" (p. 35). Perhaps more needs to be done to convince teachers that this is the case.

"Regardless of teaching level, most teachers define their success in terms of their pupils' grades" (Harootunian, 1980). Traditionally, student success has been measured through formal exam results. English was the first subject to be examined in the new Junior Cycle. Junior Certificate English 2016 was the last year of the old course. Almost 10% (9.7%) of higher-level English students received the top result, an A (85-100%). In 2017, the results for Junior Cycle English showed that a distinction (90-100%) in higher-level English was achieved by only 1.8% of students. It was a result that was difficult for some English teachers to accept and may have become a factor in their engagement with Junior Cycle reform. This experience was similar for Science in 2018, perhaps leading teachers to question the quality of learning delivered by the reforms.

There may have been a lack of engagement with the philosophy underpinning Junior Cycle, as presented during the schedule of CPD. Some teachers expressed considerable anxiety and felt that there was a lack of clear guidance. As this teacher put it, "Teachers are trying hard to do the right thing but hard to know what that is" (A48). The role of the Junior Cycle in developing learner capacity, moving away from high-stakes exams and moving towards student-centred learning, may only have been partially achieved.

5.3. Potential Challenges and Benefits of Junior Cycle

5.3.1. Context

Teachers were asked to focus on the challenges and benefits of the reforms concerning student learning and outcomes. The staggered nature of the introduction of Junior Cycle subjects meant that in May 2019, some teachers (of English and Science) had taught a full three-year cycle. Some teachers were in year one or two, while others were unaffected by the subject changes. As a result, not all teachers could comment from personal experience in their subject area. All teachers had received the whole-school CPD introducing the rationale for change and formative assessment training. Some subject-specific CPD had also begun in the other subjects.

The comments were referenced with "C" (Challenges) or "B" (Benefits) and were numbered, making it possible to reference each to the question that generated it. Checklists were in evidence on tablecloths, as teachers weighed up the benefits and challenges, as shown in Figure 30, below.
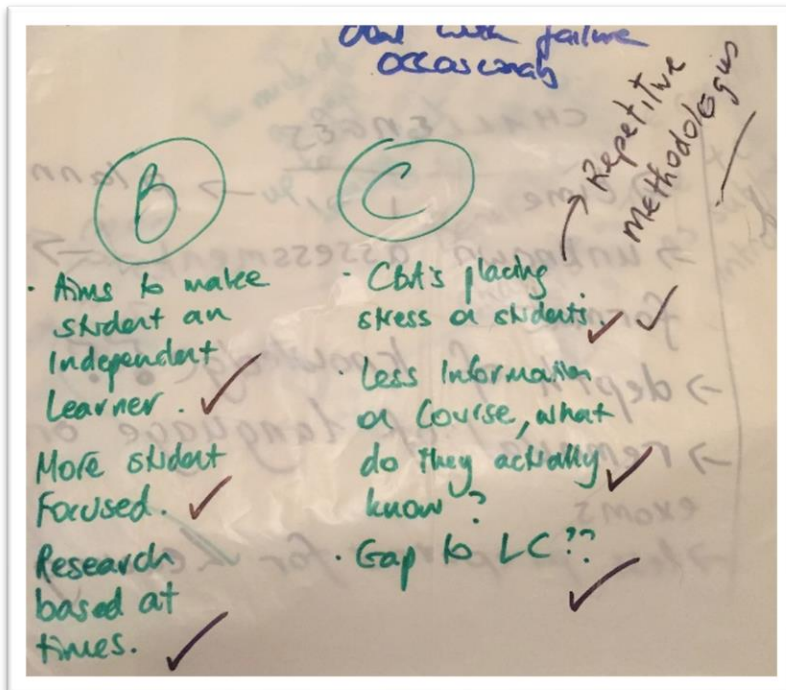
Figure 30: Benefits and Challenges. Tablecloth Excerpt

5.3.2. The Challenges. Codes

The initial codes were drawn from the participant observations, comments and reflections. **Lack of guidance,** for example, became a code that included comments such as "lack of concrete answers in relation to assessment" (C4) and "poor teacher understanding of how to teach in ways that suit the new exam" (C19). The data contained 167 individual data segments relating to Challenges (C) and 117 relating to Benefits (B). In addition, some participants had added ticks indicating agreement with comments, and these were included as incidences of the code. There were 27 codes broadly identified as challenges and 9 codes identified as perceived benefits of Junior Cycle reform for student learning. Details of the codes and incidences Challenges and Benefits of Junior Cycle Reform are illustrated in Appendix L.

5.3.3. The Challenges. -Themes.

Three overarching themes emerged from the data: **negative impacts on student learning**, **curricular reform poorly considered**, and **implementation issues**.

Codes formed organic groupings under these initial themes. The process of identifying patterns within the data began with a thematic map. Using a thematic map to visually show how codes interact with each other allowed more themes and subthemes to emerge. Codes could be related to more than one theme. Three initial themes presented an oversimplified picture of teacher perceptions around the challenges posed by the reforms. The detail within the data was revealed in a complex map. It was difficult to identify patterns from the initial thematic map, as shown in Figure 31, below. The map is very dense, and the interconnected nature of the codes and themes required further refinement.
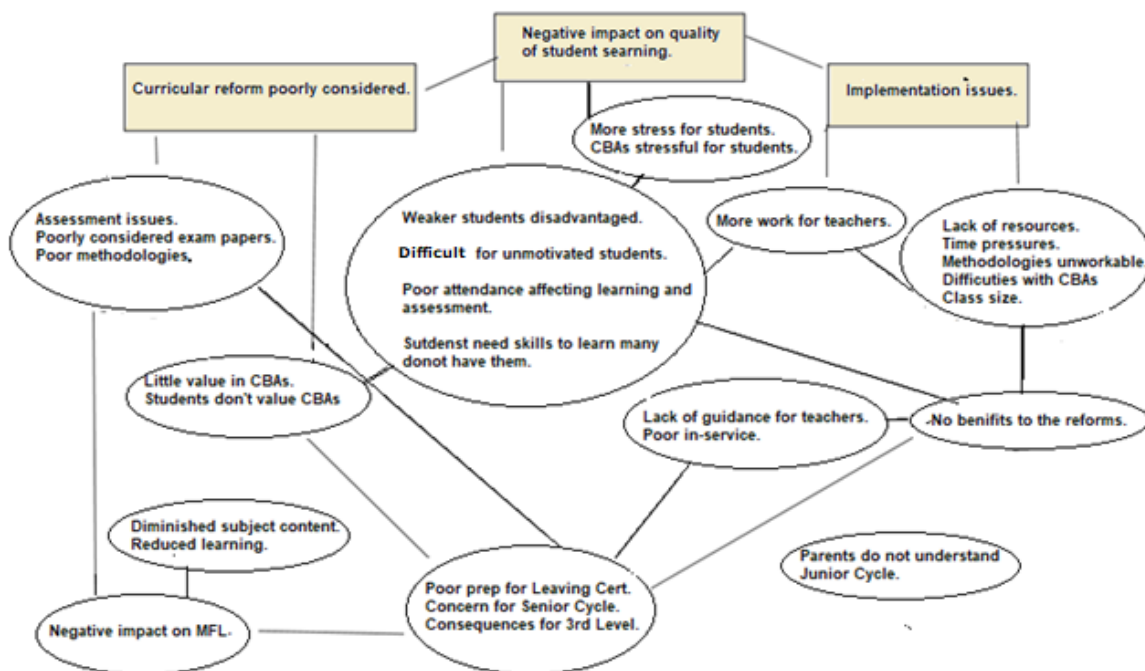
Figure 31: Thematic Map. Challenges for Junior Cycle Reform

A review of the thematic map indicated the presence of nine themes. The process of reviewing the themes began with a close analysis of the thematic map showing all the codes. A rereading of the data confirmed that all teacher comments were represented by the codes, which were grouped into themes. The three initial umbrella themes of **negative impacts on student learning**, **curricular reform poorly considered**, and **implementation issues** remained with the addition of eight subthemes. The subthemes teachers perceived as challenging along with the number of incidences for each in brackets are listed below:

1. Significant concern for weaker and disadvantaged students. (21)
2. Increased workload for teachers. (9)
3. Logistical issues. (24)
4. Specific concerns around the value of CBAs. (18)
5. Significant concerns for student readiness for Senior Cycle. (48)
6. Negative impact in MFLs specifically. (4)
7. Concerns around the efficacy of the reforms. (20)
8. Teachers reporting no benefits for students from the reforms. (6)
9. Lack of guidance for teachers. (13)

The thematic map below identifies a further refinement the between the themes and the subthemes.
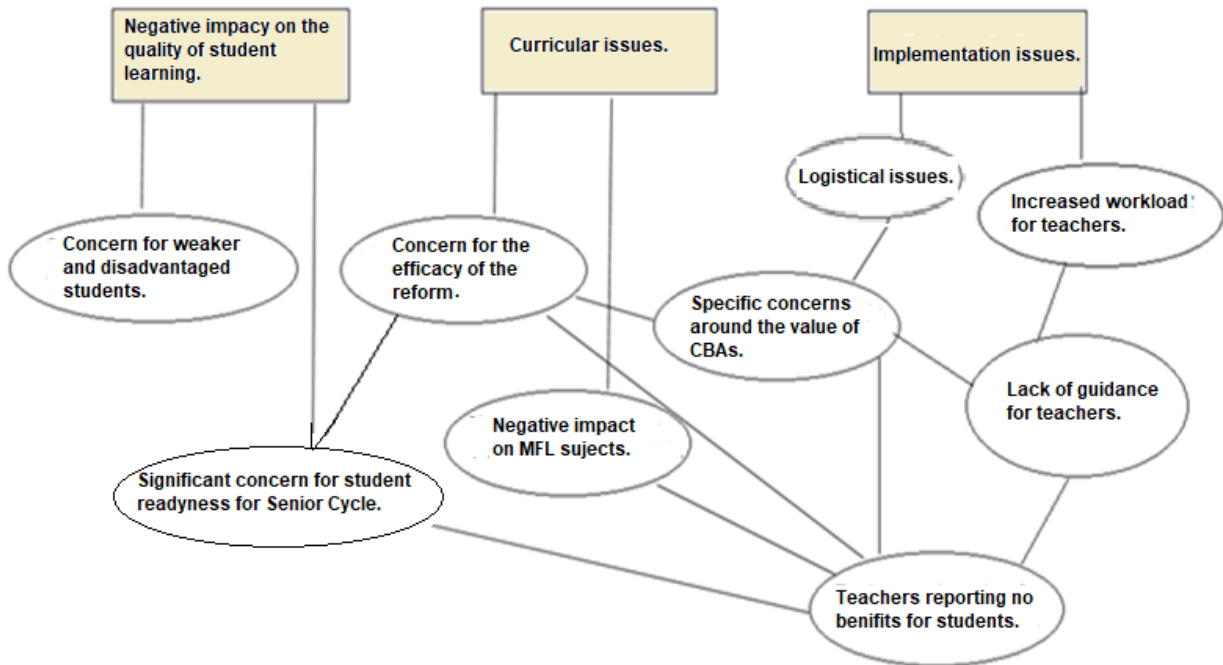
Figure 32: Thematic Map. Reviewed Challenges for Junior Cycle Reform

Three major themes were identified with refined subthemes linking them, as illustrated in Figure 32, above. The major themes are:

1. Negative impact on student learning.
2. Curricular issues.
3. Implementation issues.

The major themes are intertwined, as are the subthemes. The numerous entanglements indicated the complexity and number of changes to teaching, learning and assessment brought about by the reforms. For teachers, there had been implications in all aspects of their professional practice. A challenge noted by participants, and forming a major theme throughout, was the perception that the reforms had a **negative impact on student learning**. Teachers' comments reflected a strong concern around the quality of learning in Junior Cycle. One teacher noted: "I don't think students learn in a meaningful way that will be of value to them for Senior Cycle" (C153). What was also significant was the widely-supported belief that some students will find accessing the curriculum more difficult. As this comment puts it, "The Junior Cycle reform is less inclusive for students with Special Educational Needs" (C 35). The teacher comments in Figure 33, below, endorsed this perception.
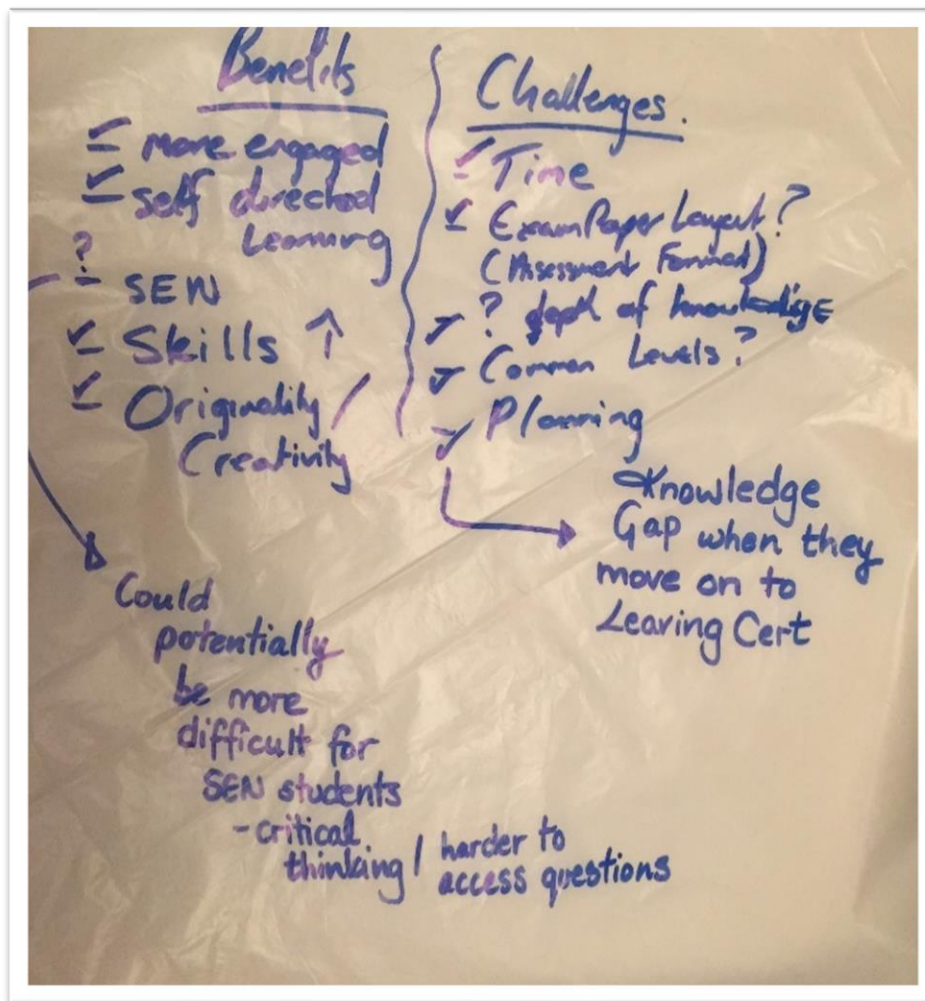
Figure 33: Teacher Comments. Challenges

The reliance on entirely written tasks and exams in the awarding of terminal grades in most subjects led some teachers to question if some students would attain success at all. As mentioned here, "Students need to be more literate all written tasks and written exam" (C27). Another teacher, in relation to students with special needs, stated: "There is too much reading involved. It is extremely unfair to present them with such an exam" (C35).

Depth of learning linked to the change in the curriculum was mentioned in relation to poorer learner outcomes. "Content of course is not preparing students for Leaving Certificate" (C135) was a comment endorsed by a significant number of participants. This concern is linked to a second major theme of **curricular issues.** Further comments in relation to readiness for Senior Cycle intimated that "Students will find the Leaving Certificate far more difficult, as the Junior Cycle will no longer prepare students adequately" (C148).

Pressure on both teachers and students to complete multiple CBAs has caused considerable anxiety. One teacher, very animated by this concern, noted: "It creates more frustration and stress for them. More stress created overall, as now, as well as STILL having a terminal exam the students have the ADDED pressures of CBA's AND an Assessment Task in most subjects" (C178). Concerns around CBAs occur across all three major themes.

Curricular reform poorly considered was highlighted in several comments, making it an overarching theme. The following four areas were highlighted by participants as causing concern:

1. **Specific concerns around the value of CBAs**. These included the repetitive nature of the methodology, along with their inclusion in most subjects. Students might become bored by the repetition. One teacher highlighted a common concern. "As more and more subjects introduce a project element, it will become increasingly difficult for students to complete tasks, may require [they do] fewer subjects" (C121). Following the full subject roll-out in 2021, students may be doing multiple CBAs in second year and multiple CBAs, an AT and mock exams in the third year. For those doing Irish, it is both CBAs in the third year. Students

with poor attendance or involvement in extracurricular activities, taking them out of class during the school day, may have their CBA and AT seriously impacted. Many teachers felt the workload attached to CBAs was unwarranted, due to their minimal value in student grades. This comment illustrating frustration: "Time taken to do CBA's is time missed for teaching & learning. What's it all worth? A MERE 10%, so what's the point in doing them?" (C99).

2. **Negative impact in MFLs specifically.** There was considerable criticism for the removal of marks for the oral component of language subjects. It was felt that this reduced the importance of the spoken elements of the language and discriminated against the learner with good language skills unmatched by their written skills. The depth of learning in subjects, teachers felt, had been diminished. One participant noted "too much focus on skills rather than knowledge" (C173). The new course in Science was criticised for awarding 10% for the third year AT, replacing the 35% for course work and practical work awarded in Junior Certificate. Science, teachers felt, was no longer being treated as a practical subject. In a skills-focused Junior Cycle, teachers in these subjects felt that oral skill and scientific skills had been downgraded.

3. **Concerns around the efficacy of the reforms** resulting in **significant concerns for student readiness for Senior Cycle** are two subthemes echoed across the teacher responses to naming the challenges for student learning. Teachers expressed that there were shortcomings in student assessment, specifically the CBAs, as already articulated and the new exam format. There was a concern that weaker students would struggle to access exam papers. "Common level is still too hard for weaker students and holds back the stronger students" (C122). Common level-curriculum and exams, some teacher felt, were not serving learner needs at either end of the learning spectrum.

4. **Implementation issues** with subthemes of **increased workload for teachers** and **logistical issues**, including class size, adequate time, and an increased teacher workload, also emerged. In the opinion of teachers, they had become significant impediments to delivering the kind of learning envisaged by the reforms. The following comment captured the feeling and challenges well. Major challenges are large class sizes, unless the teacher is a wizard and can differentiate amazingly well and provide unique, individualised tasks for 30

different students. The "ideal" of the new Junior Cycle is great, but in practice, based on my last few years of it, it hasn't worked" (C122).

The practical elements of running CBAs were again drawing criticism. The recognition is that the principle is sound, but teachers feel that the logistical requirements, in terms of class sizes, room sizes and resources, do not seem to have been considered.

A final subtheme of **lack of guidance given to teachers** emerged. Noted in the codes, and perhaps shedding light on a possible source of teacher concern for student learning, was the level of guidance provided for teachers. Teachers commented on the "lack of concrete answers in relation to assessment" (C125) given during CPD. This perception impacted each of the major themes and was included as a subtheme at this stage. This may explain why some teachers reported no benefits at all for student learning, following the implementation of the reforms. "The assumption that students of 12-15 years can self-direct/promote their learning is flawed, and this, in turn, affects any potential benefits" (C40). This teacher expressed that from their experience, the rationale supporting the Junior Cycle reforms may not deliver the quality of student experience hoped for. The question of whether there was enough guidance given to teachers prior to the implementation of the reforms is a complex one. The staggered nature of the roll-out of subjects meant that some teachers might not have engaged with the initial whole-school CPD. Newly qualified teachers may have missed this crucial element of the reform roll-out altogether.

5.3.4. The Benefits -Themes.

There was a high degree of positivity among participants and a welcome for what they saw as beneficial changes in the Junior Cycle. Nine codes were identified in the data recognising benefits in terms of student learning, and these fell into two major themes: the **changes in curriculum and teaching methodologies** and the **benefits for students** because of the changes. Figure 34, below, is the initial map demonstrating the interconnected nature of the themes and codes.
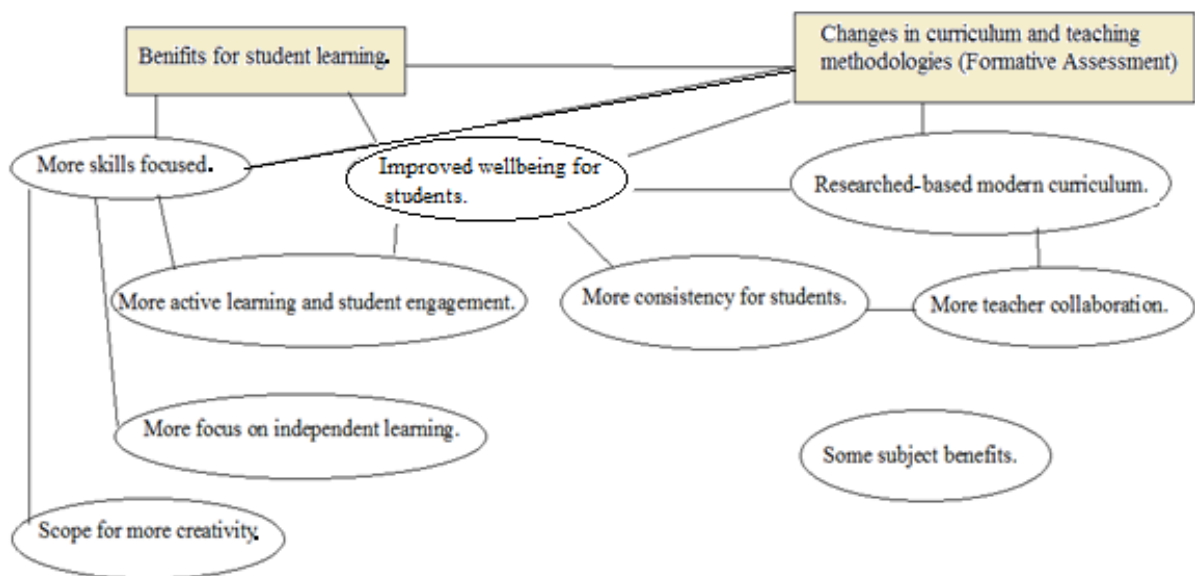
Figure 34: Thematic Map Showing Benefits of Junior Cycle Reform

In part due to a high level of teacher consensus, there were fewer codes relating to the benefits than the perceived challenges. It was decided to use the codes themselves as subthemes, to give the fullest picture possible of teacher perceptions of the benefits of the reforms. Table 10, below, categorises the major and subthemes with the incidence with they occurred in brackets.

Table 10:   Benefits of Junior Cycle. Themes, and Subthemes

Major Theme: **Changes in Curriculum and Teaching Methodologies**	Major Theme: **Benefits for Students**
Subthemes: - More consistency for students. **(3)** - More teacher collaboration. **(8)** - Researched based modern **curriculum. (7)** - Some subject benefits. **(1)**	Subthemes: - More skills focused. (21) - Improved wellbeing for students. (9) - Scope for more creativity. (11) - More active learning and student engagement. (22) - More focus on independent learning. (35)

Changes in curriculum and teaching methodologies. There was a broad welcome for the updating of the curriculum, a fresh approach, and the introduction of formative assessment practices. Teachers noted that "Some of the course is more

up to date and relevant in students' day-to-day lives' (B136). Teachers were remarking that the "classroom experience for students should be more enjoyable" (B16). The emphasis on student wellbeing as an integral part of the Junior Cycle classroom curriculum was embraced, along with the skills development aspect of the reforms. This comment aptly combines the benefits of these two changes: "The student develops skills of wellbeing and managing information" (B 14).

In some subjects prior to the reform, students received little credit for the project and practical work. Teachers were happy to see the skills element of their subject rewarded. Art, for example, no longer has a terminal exam, and students taking Home Economics now receive 50% of their terminal grade based on practical work. However, other subject teachers, specifically Science, were critical of removing credit for a practical investigation from their students.

The introduction of structured teacher collaboration, providing consistency for both teachers and students in terms of methodology and curriculum, was welcomed. Other comments highlighted the advantages of SLAR in providing peer mentoring; and there was recognition of the role of teachers in supporting each other to develop their own teaching, learning and assessment skills. The CPD offered research-based rationale and training. Many said it was supportive of teachers who were keen to modernise and update their skills, noting that the introduction of formative assessment would "develop and encourages more skills than the traditional rote learning methods" (B90).

Benefits for students. Clearly demonstrated in the thematic map, the curricular changes translated into classroom practices that had directly benefited student learning: "Improved digital and research skills, opportunities to gain experience and confidence in delivering to an audience and for the student to challenge themselves" (B40). This comment t reflected confidence in improved student learning opportunities. There was evidence of recognition among teachers that the reforms were delivering the changes intended by the NCCA: "It fosters more independence in students, and the focus on self and peer-assessment can benefit students" (B99). Comments to the effect that it was now a more inclusive and creative environment

for students were noted. It was apparent that many teachers recognised the potential of the reforms to improve learning outcomes for students.

5.3.5. Telling the Story of the Data
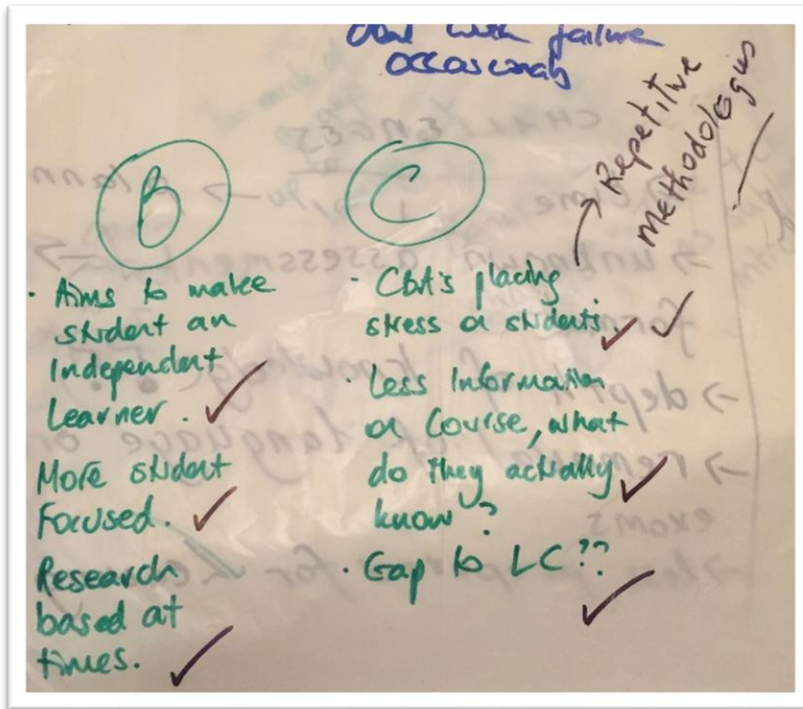
Figure 35: Benefits and Challenges of Junior Cycle Reform

What are Teacher Perceptions of the Challenges and Benefits of the Reforms in Relation to Student Learning and Outcomes?

Lists of benefits and challenges were in evidence on the tablecloths following the participants' discussions as illustrated in Figure 35, above. Teachers' careful consideration of both was evident in the data findings. This was a balanced weighing up, as indicated by the detailed analysis already outlined. A significant number of both benefits and challenges were reported. A comparison of both thematic maps revealed these four major themes:

1. Benefits for student learning.
2. Negative impacts on student learning.
3. Concern over curricular issues, assessment and subject content changes.
4. Logistical difficulties were making implementation difficult.

Benefits for Student Learning and Perceived Negative Impacts on Student Learning

There was a welcome for more student engagement and creativity, and the development of Key Skills, group work and student-teacher collaboration bringing a livelier, more energetic feel to the classroom that students and teachers enjoyed. Some comments questioned the quality and depth of learning taking place in these more active classrooms. Were the key learning objectives being lost in the "frenzy of activity"? The fact that classrooms were noisier, but a "good noisier", was mentioned. There was an enthusiasm for change and the modernising of the curriculum. A strong degree of positivity was evident in teacher conversations. Despite recognising the value of the changes to learner experience, they fell short of endorsing them as providing better learner outcomes.
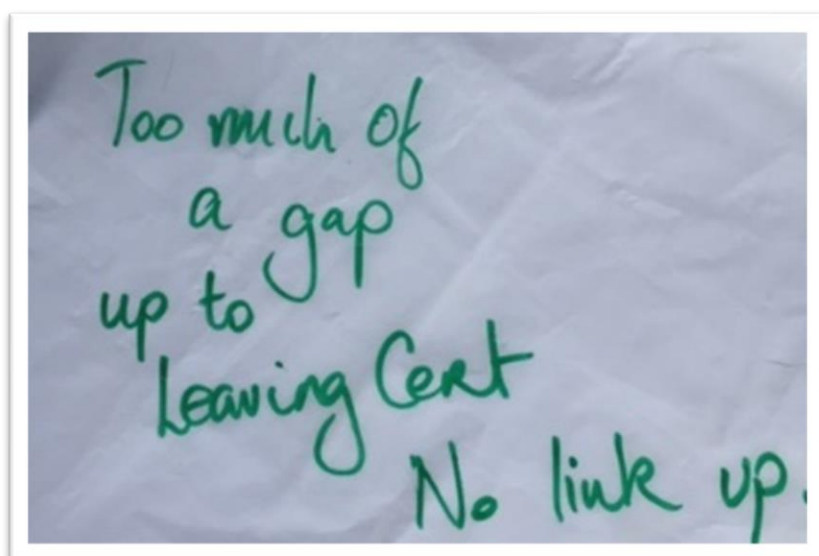
Figure 36: Gap up to Leaving Certificate

Why were teachers reluctant to connect the positive benefits for student learning with success at Senior Cycle? Teachers' perceptions seemed highly coloured by the traditional exam system and what lay ahead for students in two, three, four years' time. "Lack of adequate preparation and content knowledge for Senior Cycle"(C125). There were 16 incidences of similar comments, as shown in Figure 3t, illustrating a common theme among participants. The requirements of Leaving Certificate may have moderated the views of teachers around the Junior Cycle. One teacher maintained there was a "lack of preparation for the demands of Leaving Certificate in

terms of writing and engaging with subjects in considerable depth in comparison to Junior Cycle" (C 152). The changed function of Junior Cycle in developing learner capacity, and no longer being a high-stakes exam, did not seem to have been grasped. Lack of clarity around the form and function of the new assessment practices fuelling a perceived lowering of standards. "Dumbing down" (C149) of curricular content was noted in several instances.

Concern over Curricular Issues, Assessment, and Subject Content Changes
Teachers expressed confusion regarding the apparent denigration of the oral element of both Irish and MFLs. The loss of a specific oral examination was considered unfair to some students who excel in oral activities but struggle with written tasks. It was also taken to imply a reduction in the depth and quality of language acquisition. Teachers questioned student motivation if oral work was no longer graded by the SEC. Would students remain motivated to engage in what some teachers referred to as "worthless" (C99) assessments? Would teachers remain motivated to engage with CBAs, which are not graded by the SEC? This is perhaps a more pertinent question. The high value teachers placed on state-graded exams is a theme that emerges again, when they specifically address the question of the changes in assessment. Some considered CBAs as lost teaching time, as indicated in the comment in Figure 37, below.
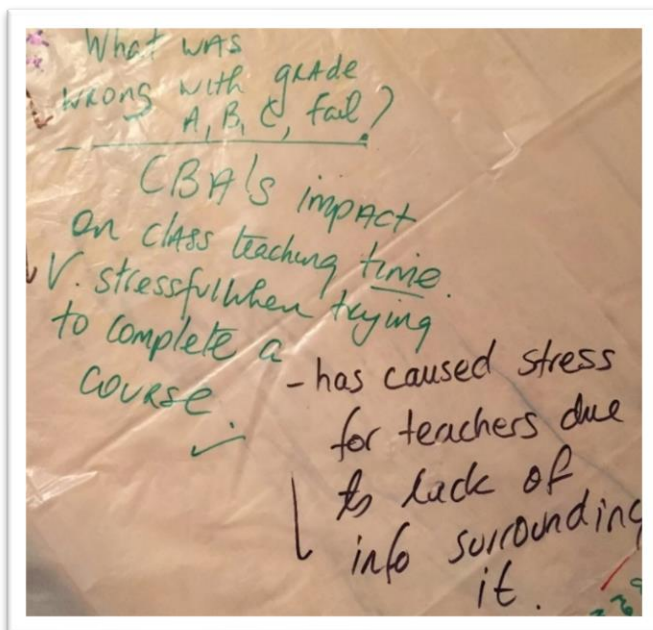
Figure 37: Teacher Comment. CBAs

Concern around the value and repetitive nature of CBAs in most subjects was significant enough to be considered as a subtheme: "Kids will get bored of too many CBAs" (C100). The difficulties for students completing CBAs in some subjects, while continuing learning in others, was raised. Students who were poor attenders would struggle to complete CBAs and ATs in all subjects. Both teachers and students involved in extracurricular activities, sports teams, for example, may become reluctant to be absent from class. The impact on extracurricular activities could be damaging: "Impact on extracurricular activities; CBAs don't allow for trips and matches" (C105).

Perhaps the biggest concern around CBAs centred on their teaching and learning value. The introduction of project work in every subject with dubious benefits, as stated above, is summed up well here: "Time taken to do CBA's is time missed for teaching & learning" (C99). The function of the CBA was to act as a formative framework to develop the Key Skills, while also providing an assessment element. Skills that cannot easily be assessed in a terminal exam could be assessed using the CBA descriptors and a summative AT. In April 2021, the NCCA attempted to respond to the educational fallout due to COVID-19 by removing CBAs as a central component of Junior Cycle. Students would only be required to do one CBA and not to complete an AT (NCCA, 2021a). Some may have understood the removal of such a key element of Junior Cycle assessment, favouring preparation for a 100% terminal exam, to indicate that the NCCA itself did not value the new assessment practices. Returning Junior Cycle to a focus on one high-stakes terminal exam may have the effect of undermining CBA value even further.

Logistical Difficulties Making Implementation Difficult

This comment sums up teacher frustration with practical difficulties they encountered: "Major challenges are large class sizes unless the teacher is a wizard and can differentiate amazingly well and provide unique, individualised tasks for 30 different students" (C122). Teachers highlighted issues around preparation time, class size, resources and access to IT, preventing them from engaging as much as they would like with the new specifications. Issues around mentioned here in Figure 38, below. The prevalence of such comments may suggest factors outside teachers control but, as they are perceived as major challenges, they have prevented some teachers from embracing the reforms.
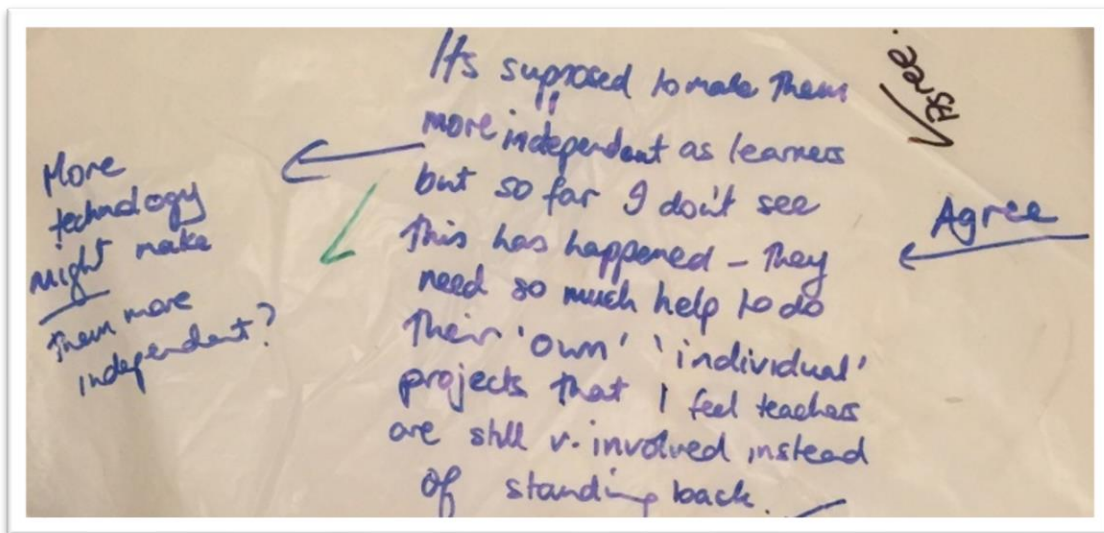
Figure 38: Teacher Comment Challenges of Junior Cycle

Despite data suggesting better learner experience and wellbeing associated with some of the change at Junior Cycle, there was no consensus among the teachers that its benefits outweighed challenges and concerns. The lack of curricular connection to, and poor preparation for, Leaving Certificate was cited repeatedly as a major concern in this and every data set and every data set across this research. This supports a perception that the fundamental goal of lower secondary has not changed in the minds of some. It is perceived as preparation for Leaving Certificate. There is a belief that success in the terminal exam, rather than ongoing and formative assessment practices, is fundamental to long-term learner outcomes.

The concern was expressed that "Leaving Certificate will be reframed in a similar manner which will result in inadequate prep for 3rd level" (C136). This was indicative

of considerable confusion among participants regarding the direction been taken by the DES. There may need to be a reassessment or reframing of the function of lower secondary in the Irish education system. The data suggests teachers see it as principally a preparation for Leaving Certificate.

5.4.   Teacher Wellbeing the Impact on Student Learning

5.4.1. Context

Change in any profession can be a challenge; and as can be seen from the literature, change in the teaching profession has faced challenges. Fullan (1985a) remarked that learning something new "involves initial anxiety, a variety of assistance, small experiences of success, incremental skill development, and eventually conceptual clarity and ownership" (p 409).

Data collection took place between May 2018 and April 2019. At this point of the roll out of the Junior Cycle due to the phased introduction not all teachers were engaged in teaching new subject specifications. Though all were receiving CPD it would be September 2019 before all subjects came online, and it will be June 2022 before all teachers will have experienced one complete three-year cycle (JCT, 2020)

The introduction had faced some resistance from teacher unions. ASTI instructed its members not to engage with the reforms or participate with in-service until 2017. This resistance, along with "initial anxiety" described by Fullan (1985a, p. 409), provides some context for this data collection. Ongoing CPD, whole-school, and subject-specific, had been in progress since 2012. JCT provided a "variety of assistance and incremental skill development"(DES, 2015, p. 28) for teachers. There was, at that point, five years of classroom teaching engagement with Junior Cycle – enough time for some degree of "conceptual clarity and ownership"(Fullan, 1985a, p. 409) to have emerged.

The question posed on the table was: "How has Junior Cycle reform impacted teacher wellbeing and are there consequences for student learning?" Wellbeing formed a central pillar of Junior Cycle reform. *Guidelines for wellbeing in Junior Cycle 2017*, issued by the NCCA, introduced significant changes to the curriculum

supporting student wellbeing. At the time of this data collection, teachers across Ireland had received in-service in this new area of student learning. In the planning phase, the researcher had not included teacher wellbeing as a potential research question. The scoping survey from which the World Café questions derived included many comments from teachers voicing their wellbeing concerns. Following consultation with the RAG, the researcher decided to include teacher wellbeing as a specific question.

There are challenges for teachers engaged in curriculum reform (Fullan, 1985b; . Hargreaves, 2005). The inclusion of a specific question on teacher wellbeing gave space for frustrations to be aired and noted. The researcher hoped this would allow participants to address the other questions in a more balanced manner. Having had the opportunity to discuss their frustrations here participants might not bring those issues to the other questions asked.

5.4.2. Codes

The data contained 277 individual data segments in addition to comments, and some participants had added ticks indicating agreement with comments noted on the tablecloth. The data segments were numbered and identified with the capital letter "W", to identify the question they were associated with Teacher Wellbeing. Initial coding revealed 10 identifiable codes, which were colour-coded and grouped using the MS Excel filtering facility.

The codes were drawn from the participant observations, comments and reflections. For example, "It has increased teacher workload and due to the number of Junior Cycle CBA's" (W28) created a code for a group of similar comments. **Increased work, overload** coded for 83 similar comments, noting words such as "overloaded", "overwhelmed" and "overworked". The data was read and analysed until 10 identifiable codes emerged, accounting for all the data segments. Appendix M identifies these codes, their instances, and a sample of teacher comments corresponding with each code.

5.4.3. Themes

Teacher comments fell into two broad themes: **positive impacts** and **negative impacts** of Junior Cycle reform for teacher wellbeing. Table 11, below, outlines the two overarching themes and associated codes and the incidence the codes occurred in brackets.

Table 11:   Table Teacher Wellbeing Initial Themes

Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts
• Positive impacts for teachers. (10)	• Increased work, overload. (83)
	• Feeling anxious or stressed. (37)
	• Multiple demands on teacher time. (18)
	• Feelings of disconnection and being undervalued. (23)
	• Negative impact on students, causing concern for their teachers. (33)
	• Issues around CBAs. (28)
	• Lack of clear CPD. (32)
	• IT demands. (5)
	• Grading issues. (8)

Initially, the researcher considered the code themselves as creating subthemes. Table 14 laid the foundation for the next stage in the thematic analysis.

An analysis of the data shows that the participants paid significant attention to the initial part of the question referring to the impact of the reforms on **teacher wellbeing**, that is, how the teachers were feeling. The analysis noted 120 incidences under three codes relating to feelings of being overwhelmed, overloaded or stressed. "Staff are overloaded with duties which take from core role of teaching" (W102). A second theme was identified, which contributed to those feelings: **the stressors**.

These include CBAs, lack of clear CPD, issues with grading changes in Junior Cycle, and lack of access to and competency with IT.

Table 12, below, gives a fuller picture of the participant perceptions around Junior Cycle reform and its implications for teacher wellbeing and student learning.

Table 12:   Themes and Subthemes. Teacher Wellbeing

Themes			
Poor Teacher Wellbeing	Specific issues causing stress.	Positive impact for students and teachers.	Negatives for students causing concern for teachers.
Subthemes			
Increased work; overload. **Feeling anxious or stressed.** **Disconnection and feelings of being undervalued.**	Negative impact of Junior Cycle on students causing concerning for their teachers. Introduction of CBAs. Lack of clear CPD. IT demands. Grading issues.	Improved student/ teacher relationships. More independent learning improving classroom environment.	Less depth of learning. Consequences for Senior Cycle. Over emphases on written work may be excluding some students.

Participants voiced their feeling of overload and stress; the thematic map, figure 39 below illustrates the relationships between the themes and subthemes that emerged from the participant discussions. These significant themes and be reduced to three, amalgamating poor teacher wellbeing with the perceived causes. There appears a close relationship between the concerns identified by teachers and negative learning outcomes for students. Teachers did note benefits for both themselves and their students in terms of better student-teacher relationships.
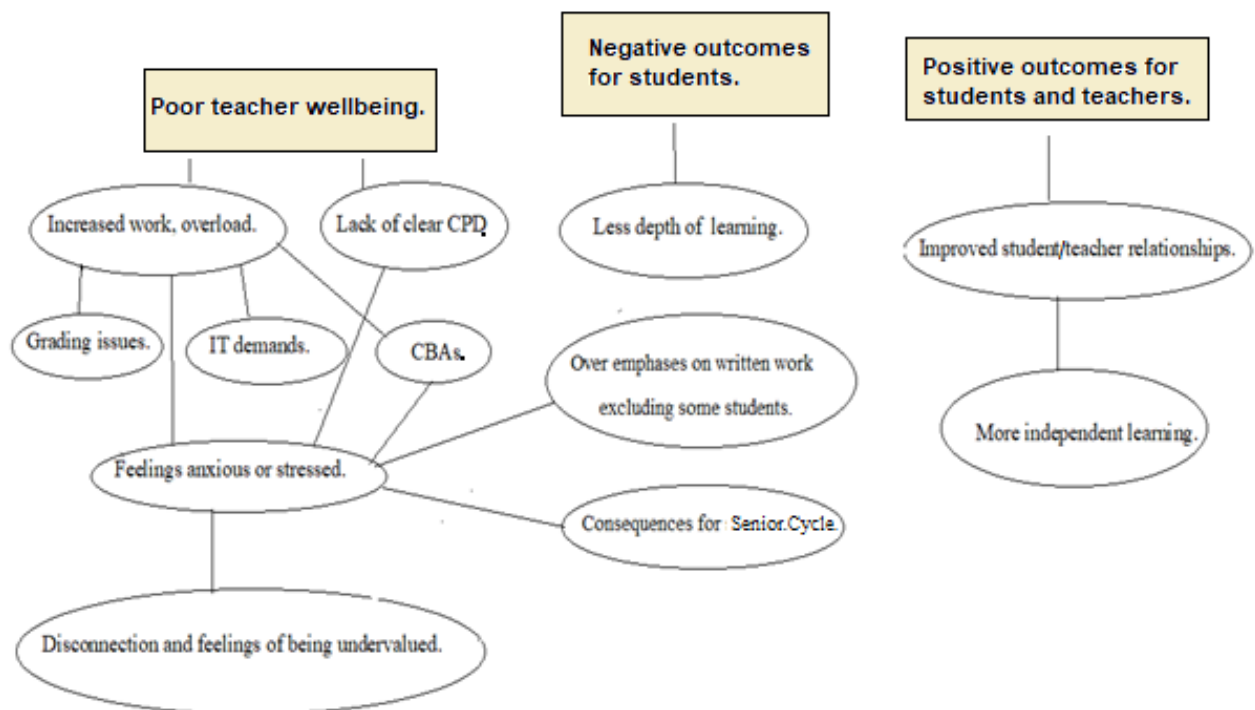
Figure 39: Thematic Map. Teacher Wellbeing

5.4.5. The Story of the Data
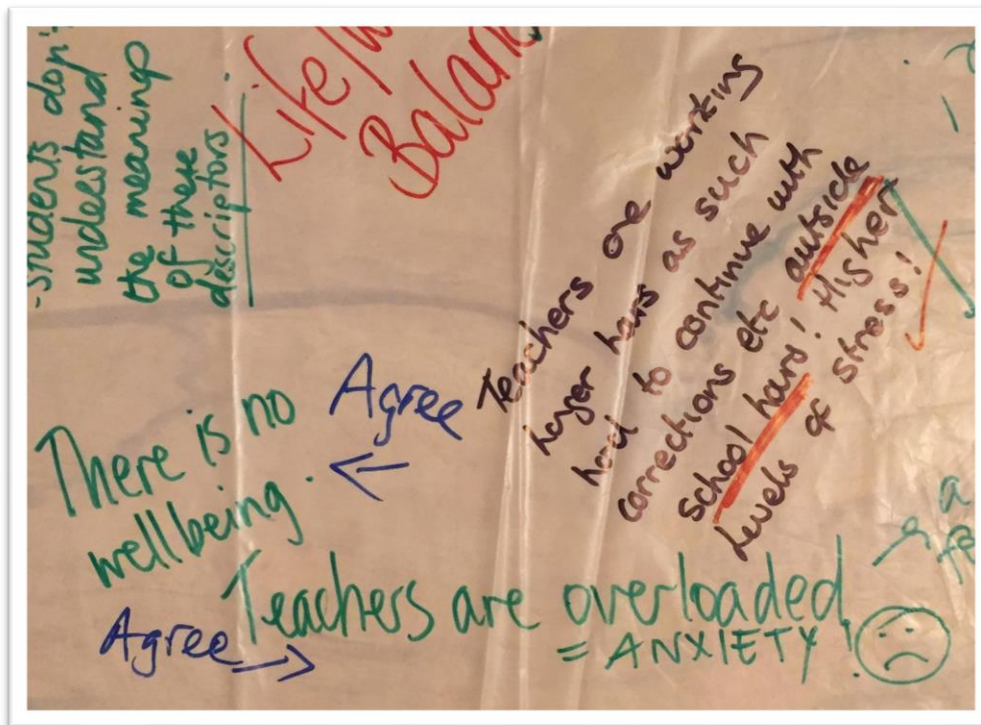
Figure 40: Teacher comments. Teacher Wellbeing

The tablecloth extract in Figure 40, above, expresses well the central theme of **poor teacher wellbeing** that emerged from the data. Subthemes of **increased work, overload** and **feeling anxious or stressed** accounted for 120 of the 277 incidences of data. Difficulties encountered by teachers during the reform process are well flagged in the literature. Priestly (2013), writing about the Scottish experience of reform, noted that a degree of uncertainty and confusion was to be expected at the start. Teacher comments from his study mirror many of the statements made by the Irish teachers exemplified by this teacher, who writes: "I have never been so stressed about what I am managing in 30 years!" (W59).

It was difficult to determine how much of the stress caused was due to the change process itself. However, teachers attributed much of their stress and anxiety to specific elements of the reforms. They cited the impact of **CBAs** as a significant cause of the overload. This participant's criticism was typical of teacher comments: "Increased workload with very little visible positive outcome" (W47). Teachers were also concerned about the pressure the CBAs were placing on students and their impact on learning: "Definite negative impact on student learning too because of the

stress caused by preparing and delivering pointless CBAs" (W47). Teachers also mentioned the lack of clarity around CBAs provided during CPD as contributing to difficulties and misunderstandings. This comment is identifying one consequence stemming from the lack of clarity: "Some teachers have converted CBAs into terminal exams .... with all the consequent stresses for themselves and students" (W38).

Concern for the depth of learning provided by the changes and extension of the academic gap between Junior and Senior Cycle was noted. MFL teachers were animated about the changes to the oral component of the curriculum: "In languages asking a student to complete a Reflection Task in English worth 10% reduces the chance of a student who may be excellent at German but poor at English" (W14). The removal of credit for oral competency in a student's final grade was frequently highlighted, throughout this research, as a cause of frustration among teachers. The over-dependence of written tasks for terminal assessment purposes in the new skills-based curriculum was also noted. These reservations highlighted a recurring theme across the entire research piece: **consequences for Senior Cycle.** One participant framed it succinctly: "Fifth-year students [are] very poorly prepared for Leaving Cert due to Junior Cycle programme" (W23)

Some teachers noted the practical issue of IT competency and access as restricting full engagement with elements of the new curriculum. However, the incidence was minimal, with only five occurrences. Feelings of being time-poor were seen as a more significant impediment: "Less time to show the love of the subject. More increase in stress, anxiety resulting in less effective teaching" (W158). The extract from the tablecloth in Figure 41, below, links these feelings of being time-poor with higher levels of stress.
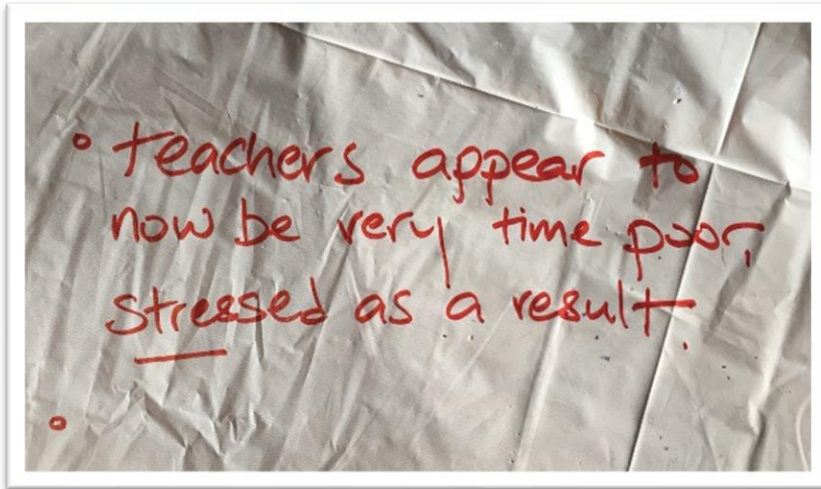
Figure 41: Teacher Comment. Wellbeing

Lack of clear CPD around reforms recurred as a significant cause of stress. "It is exhausting – trying to prep more creative classes and the uncertainty of 'am I doing this right' chips away at teacher self-confidence" (W78). Many teachers echoed this theme of feeling undervalued as professionals. **Disconnection and feelings of being undervalued** formed a significant subtheme. Cumulative effects of an additional workload allied to feeling that their concerns were not being addressed may have caused disengagement from the reform process. "Lack of clear CPD and answers leave many at sea or at least teaching a new ideal using older methodologies, putting huge pressure on those trying to deliver, and often confusing students' (W195). The drawing in Figure 42, below, is taken from a tablecloth conveying the significant depth of emotion on the subject.
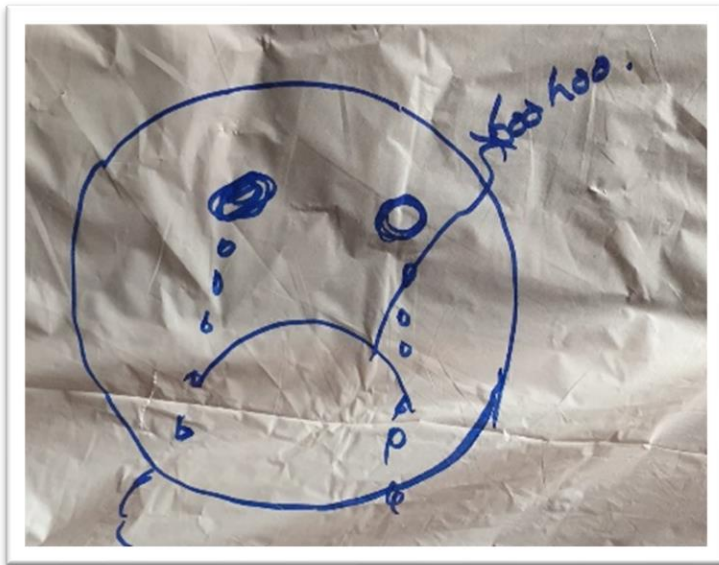
Figure 42. *Teacher Drawing Wellbeing*

There was considerable evidence from the data that many teachers felt the reform process had added significantly to their workload, with the added recognition that once the new curriculum and methodologies were embedded, this would dissipate. "The workload for teachers has become bigger, and this period of adjustment can be overwhelming" (W136). However, much teacher concern centred around the benefits of the extra work. This comment continued, "especially considering there is no continuity with the Junior Cycle and the Leaving Cert". It may not simply have been that many teachers felt [that] 'teacher wellbeing seems to be at the bottom of the pile" (W211), it was that their professional judgment as teachers was not being heard. Teacher resistance to change is well documented in the literature. The research here may imply that teacher resistance may be supported by valid reflections based on engagements with a new curriculum that some feel is not serving all students well.

Participants noted positive aspects of the reforms, namely, increased student engagement and potentially more independent learners. This some teachers felt had led to a better student teacher relationship: "It has made teaching more enjoyable for me" (W165). Professional collaboration has been a notable change due to the reforms and has been welcomed by some participants. "at SLARs we get to consult with colleagues and affirmed in relation to marking and teaching methodologies" (W162). However, feelings of stress and anxiety expressed in 267 individual

comments outweighed the 10 positive comments noted by participants. Teachers were invested in implementing the changes but were concerned that their students might not benefit from them: "Students will not be able to realise their abilities and therefore struggle with wellbeing" (W12). The data reflected the fact that teachers had a deep commitment to their professionalism and to their students. Despite the challenges they faced, they actively engaged with the reform process. Perhaps the participant comment below expressed the feelings of many teachers, as the Junior Cycle reform continued to be rolled out.

> Teachers are only beginning to come to terms with the changes ushered in by Junior Cycle. The transition process has been a great challenge and therefore has increased the level of anxiety and stress among the teaching staff. As teachers become more comfortable and confident with their new brief, it will impact more positively on student learning (W69).

5.5. Chapter Summary

5.5.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

Traditionally, counting codes in qualitative analysis has been seen as controversial. However, some fields of research, health care, for example, have found it useful. Based on code counts, qualitative content analysis makes it possible to compare responses to questions about what similarities and differences are present in the data. It also further helps to highlight reasons for how and why they may have arisen (Morgan, 1993b). Considered a summative analysis process, it is especially effective in working with complex texts and snippets of conversation and works well with a wide range of data. It is considered a valuable tool to gather a "consensus of opinion through group-working activities" such as World Café data collection (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Using the instances of codes across each question makes it possible to synthesise the thematic analysis into concise and visually accessible doughnut charts. A doughnut chart, like a pie chart, depicts the relationship between portions and the whole. The use of the charts provides a visual representation of the thematic

analysis of each of the World Café questions. The charts represent a summary of the findings from the World Café gatherings.

The charts in Figures 43-46, below, provide a visual summary of teachers' perspectives of Junior Cycle reform and its impact on student learning.
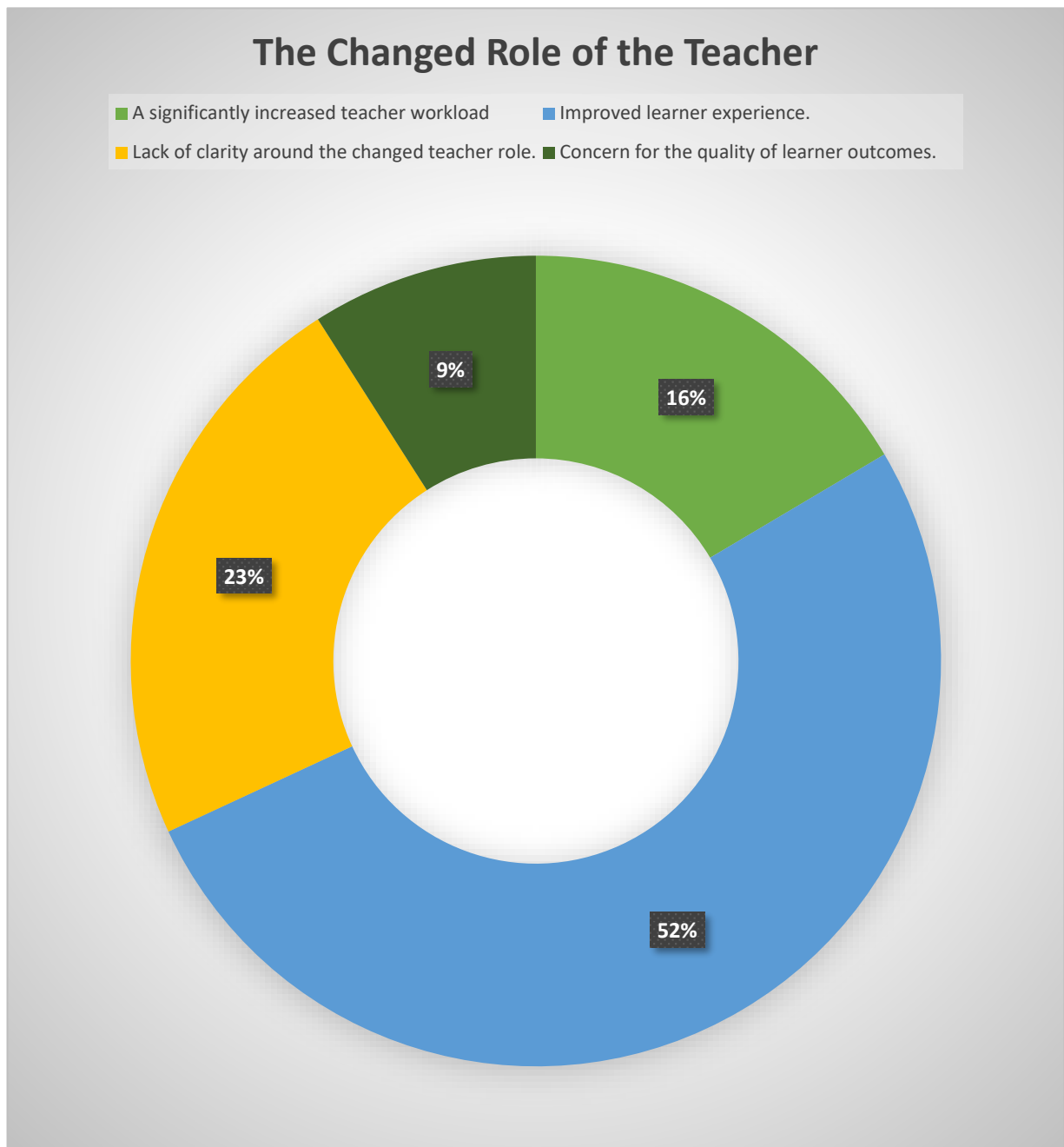
Figure 43: Doughnut Chart Showing the Changed Role of the Teacher

Assessment Changes

- Improved learner experience, more student centered.
- Lack of clarity and confusion among teachers around the reforms.
- Concern around aspects of the assessment changes.
- Subject-specific changes considered detrimental.
- Concern for learner experience and outcomes.
- Logesticial difficulties impeding implementation.
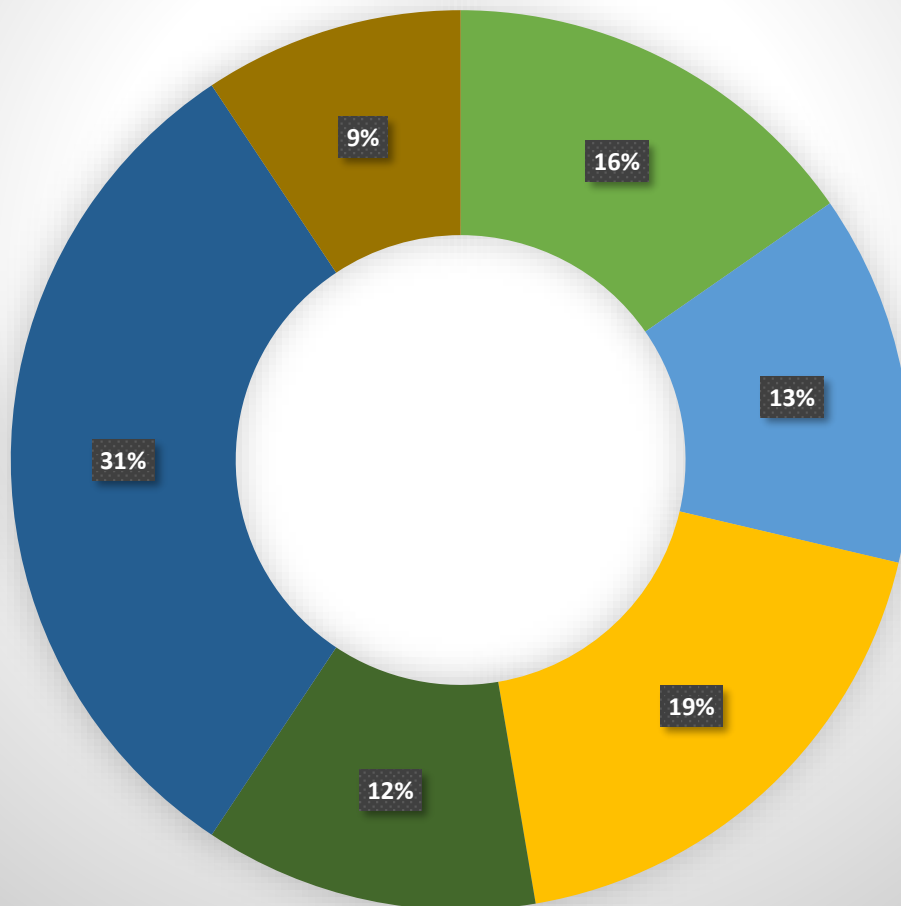
Figure 44: Doughnut Chart Showing Assessment Changes

Challenges and Benefits of Junior Cycle from the Perspective of Irish Teachers.

- ■ Positive impact on learner experience and wellbeing.
- ■ Some students may find it difficult to engage.
- ■ Introduction of a more modern curriculum.
- ■ More collaboration and consistency.
- ■ Concern for learner outcomes and readiness for Senior Cycle.
- ■ Challenges around implementation issues.
- ■ Concern around the efficacy of some assessment changes.
- ■ Lack of guidance hindering the implementation of reform.
- ■ Increased workload for teachers.
- ■ Lack of understanding among parents around the reforms.
- ■ Observed no benefits in the reforms.
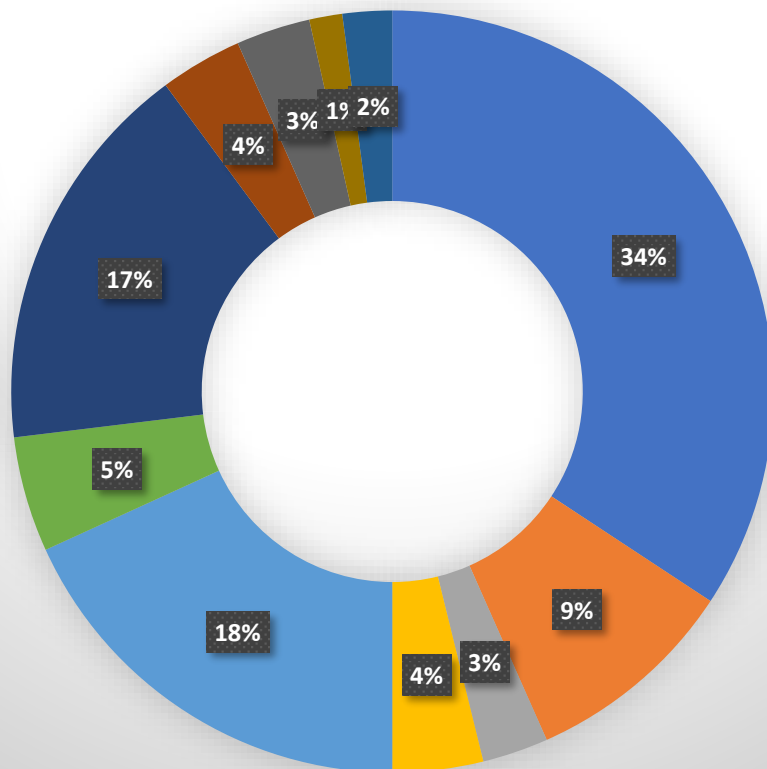
Figure 45: Doughnut Chart Showing Challenges and Benefits of Junior Cycle from the Perspective of Irish Teachers

Teacher Wellbeing

- Increased workload
- Feelings of stress or anxiety
- Multiple demands on professional time.
- Feelings of disconnection or being undervalued.
- Lack of clarity causing confusion.
- Concern for the impact chanhed have on their students.
- The impact of CBAs
- Lack of clarity causing confusion.
- Positive impact for teachers.
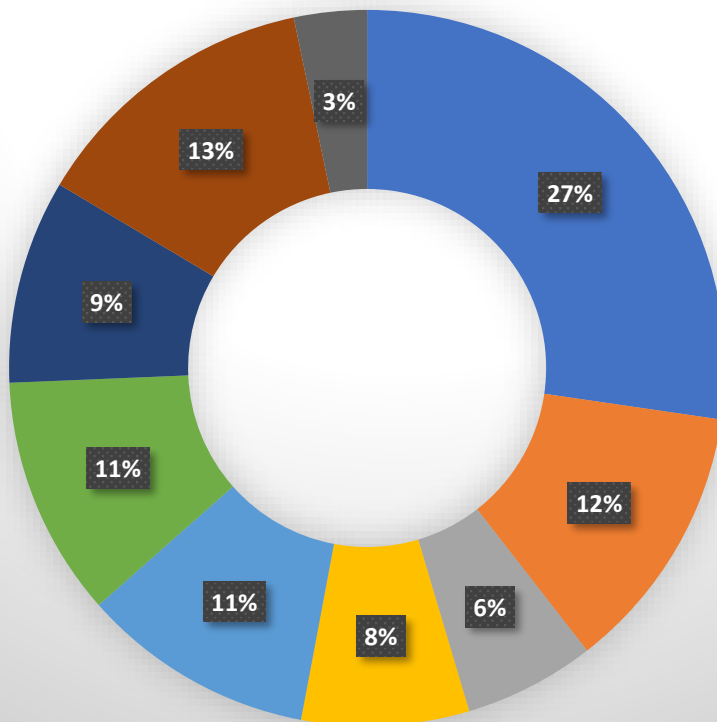
Figure 46: Doughnut Chart Showing Teacher Wellbeing

5.5.3. Broad Findings

Question 1. To what extent did teacher conversations reflect the development of more student-learning environments, as expressed by the Junior Cycle Reform framework?

By and large, teachers welcomed the move to a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning. There was significant evidence that teachers had embedded the new methodologies modelled during in-service. There was a recognition of a changed teacher role, to that of a facilitator of learning rather than an instructor. With this came a recognition that the student had a role greater role in their own learning. This recognition might be said to have created a new era of learning partnership in Irish classrooms.

Question 2. Did teacher conversations identify opportunities and/or barriers to the Junior Cycle Reform's goal to replace the high-stakes summative exam system at the Junior Cycle level?

It was clear from this research that Irish teachers were committed to supporting student learning. This concern for their students was more than merely professional; it had, in fact, impacted their own personal wellbeing. The question of whether the goal of replacing a high-stakes summative exam system had been achieved would seem to depend on the exam in question. As can be seen from the data, teachers expressed considerable concern whether Junior Cycle would adequately prepare students for Senior Cycle and the Leaving Certificate. It was quality of learning not the Junior Cycle summative assessment that was most commented upon. The greatest barrier to replacing high stakes exams seems to be the dominance of the Leaving Certificate in Irish education. This may need to be addressed before it can be said that lower second level is no longer dominated by a high-stakes exam. There may also have been missed opportunities to redefine the role of the new Junior Cycle by the DES as they struggled to cope with the impact of Covid 19 on both the Junior and Senior Cycle examinations.

6.   Discussion

6.1.   Introduction

6.1.1. The Vision

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* was built on the vision underpinning the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2012*. The aim was to fundamentally change approaches to curriculum and assessment that would improve students' learning experiences. The clear objectives in this regard were articulated by the then Minister for Education, Ruairí Quinn, in a statement launching the *Framework* in October 2012. Announcing the reforms at Junior Cycle, he said they would:

1. Place the needs of our students at the core of what we do.
2. Ensure that assessment becomes a key part of teaching and learning across the three years of Junior Cycle and provides high-quality feedback to students and parents.
3. The Junior Cert is no longer a high stakes exam (Quinn, 2012).

6.1.2. Research Background

The literature review highlighted the need for reform in the lower second level was overdue in Ireland. International education trends had moved towards a more skills-based curriculum and a broader range of assessment practices. The NCCA made recommendations in 2009 suggesting that Irish teaching and learning methodologies and curricula were out of step with its partners in the OECD countries. *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle* (NCCA, 2011) identified the direction these reforms should take. A central element of the changes would put students at the centre of the learning experience, and major assessment changes would need to happen. The document noted that for significant change to occur, dependence on a high-stakes, terminal exam would have to change. They concluded that if the terminal examination did not change, then nothing would change. The experience for students across the three years of Junior Cycle would remain essentially the same.

There is a recognition in the literature (Pešková, 2019) that teacher acceptance of the reform process is critical to its success. JCT was the statutory body tasked with

implementing a comprehensive and ongoing CPD programme designed to upskill teachers and bring them on board with the reforms. The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* identified the role of teachers as leaders and facilitators of learning in the classroom. Changing the practice and mindset of teachers would be critical if reforms were to become embedded. The role of teachers as agents of change has been well established. (Fullan, 2016; Guskey, 2002). Teachers would play a pivotal role in the success or failure of implementing this new vision of the Junior Cycle.

This research focused on gathering teacher perspectives on the impact of Junior Cycle reform on student learning. An initial teacher survey identified areas of concern for teachers around the reforms. The World Café gathering allowed teachers to discuss five questions generated by the RAG, after considering the outcome of the initial teacher survey. The research questions were generated following a review of the literature, in conjunction with the RAG-generated questions. The data collected at the World Café gatherings provided insights into teacher perceptions around both the changes and implementation to address the research questions.

Byrne and Prendergast (2020) recognised a lack of research reflecting the concerns of Irish teachers in relation to the reforms. The reform at Junior Cycle was at an early stage, so this was an opportune time to engage with teachers, as both English and Science had completed a full three-year cycle. CPD was engaging all teachers, and many had engaged with most aspects of curriculum and assessment in their own subjects. This research goes some way to addressing the knowledge gap in understanding the level of teacher engagement with the Junior Cycle reforms.

6.1.3. Research Questions

The research questions emerged out of a participatory process involving a RAG. The group worked with the researcher to identify key areas of concern for teachers in relation to the reform process. Following an initial survey and informed by the literature review, the group recommended the following research questions:

Question One: To what extent did teacher conversations reflect the development of more student-learning environments, as expressed by the Junior Cycle Reform framework?

Question Two: Did teacher conversations identify opportunities and/or barriers to the Junior Cycle Reform's goal to replace the high-stakes summative exam system at the Junior Cycle level?

6.2. Engagement with Student-centred Learning

Research Question 1: To what extent did teacher conversations reflect the development of more student-learning environments, as expressed by the Junior Cycle Reform framework?

There is a wealth of literature supporting the value of student-centred learning practices to improve student outcomes. Kember (1997) explored two broad teaching styles, in which he identified teacher-centred and student-centred orientations. In the latter, the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than an instructor. This approach, he suggests, supports deeper learning, as students are facilitated to construct their own knowledge, not merely receive information. O'Neill and McMahon (2005), studying student-centred learning, concluded that focusing on what the students do to attain knowledge, rather than what the lecturer does, is key in understanding student-centred learning. In essence, it is about students being facilitated to do more, to be given opportunities to create meaning, and to be active participants in the learning process. More recent work from Absolum (2011) focuses on building quality learning relationships. He demonstrated how formative assessment could make students more confident and create more fruitful and positive learning relationships. This change in learning relationship necessitates a changed role for the teacher and a move to formative assessment and student-centred learning.

JCT has referenced the principal features of student-centred learning in its work with teachers and school leaders (2019). Brandes and Ginnis (1986) offers a working definition of student-centred learning, which JCT has used to identify the features of

student-centred learning. For the purposes of this research, the following points define student-centred learning:

- The learner has full responsibility for her/his learning.
- Involvement and participation are necessary for learning.
- The relationship between learners is more equal, promoting growth, development.
- The teacher becomes a facilitator and resource person.
- The learner experiences confluence in his/her education (affective and cognitive domains flow together (Brandes & Ginnis, 1986).

The data from this research indicates that the sample of Irish teachers who participated in this study have embraced the reform message and moved to a student-centred learning approach. From participant comments in this research, it is clear Irish teachers have not only developed an understanding of the concept of student-centred learning but have also implemented it in their classroom practice. A significant number of responses mirroring the elements identifying student-centred learning as listed by Brandes (1986) appeared in the data. This data signifies a shift in teacher professional practice and thinking. The summative analysis of teacher perceptions of the changed **role of the teacher** showed that half of all participant comments recognised the embedding of student-centred learning as a result of implementing Junior Cycle reform.

When asked about the **challenges and benefits of Junior Cycle** reform, teachers highlighted a changed focus on students. Participants noted that students were more involved in their own learning and were able to experience success in different ways. There were teachers who noted more evidence skill development among their students. Better student experience emerged as the most significant benefit of the reforms. The majority of teachers believed Junior Cycle had led to a better student experience. The chart in Figure 47, below, identifies the detail of perceived benefits from the teacher perspective.
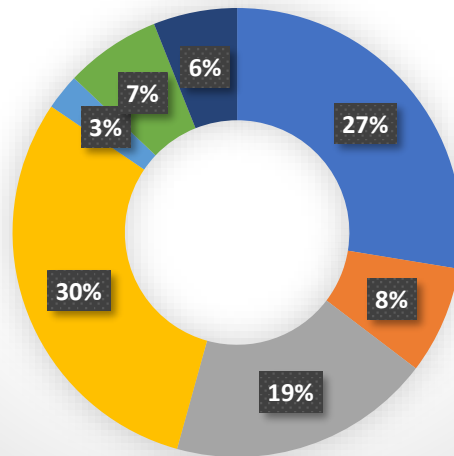
Figure 47: Doughnut Chart Showing the Benefits of Junior Cycle

Some participants felt that the changed learning environment took some pressure off teachers, because students were taking more responsibility for their own learning. Teachers noted this as a welcome improvement in teacher-student relationships and a boost to teacher wellbeing. In terms of embedding formative assessment practices, there was a positive recognition that a move towards the formative assessment had occurred. Other assessment changes did not receive the same level of endorsement. From the research data across all World Café discussion questions, it can be concluded that the reform process has, to some extent, achieved its stated goal of placing students at the centre of learning.

6.2.1. Some Reservations

Early CPD delivered in support of the framework and rationale for Junior Cycle leaned heavily on the work of Dylan Wiliam (2009) to reinforce the message that formative assessment is an essential method for improving teacher practice and, as

a result, student learning. Despite the research indicating that better learner outcomes are delivered when student-centred learning is practised, participants had some reservations.

Learner Outcomes

Notwithstanding the broad welcome for embedding student-centred learning, some participants in this research questioned the quality of student learning being delivered. Concern for learner outcomes was cited in the data collected from all World Café tablecloths across all venues. Some teachers felt there was so much activity that the quality of learning may have been impaired. Others noted that some students required far more scaffolding and may not have been able to engage with independent learning strategies. Statistics representing teacher perceptions around the **challenges and benefits of Junior Cycle** reforms showed that a quarter of the codes cited concerns for learner outcomes. This was also a factor in **teacher wellbeing**, where a significant concern for student learning was also noted. Research suggests that to be successful, student-centred learning requires well-trained teachers who are resourced and supported to implement new practices (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Wiliam, 2009). Perhaps there might be some teachers who were not well supported in this regard.

6.2.2. Teacher Concern Identified

It may seem contradictory that teachers would welcome student-centred learning and at the same time be concerned for the quality of learner outcomes being delivered. There may be other factors surrounding the implementation of the reforms that have impacted teacher perspectives around student learning. This research data may offer an explanation about why this was the case.

Teacher Buy-in.

The literature outlining the benefit for students when teaching practice focuses on student-centred learning is compelling, as outlined above. CPD delivered by JCT focused heavily on informing teachers of the international research supporting student-centred learning and on the work of Dylan Williams, in particular. The CPD provided instruction and modelling of teaching strategies (JCT, 2021). Despite this, some teachers remained unconvinced. Murchan (2018) found that Irish teachers

had not been convinced by international research about assessment changes. This phenomenon is not solely an Irish issue (Datnow, 2020). He argued that complex issues surrounding reform were broader than educational concerns and had much to do with local political, social and economic factors.

The literature review identified that the successful curricular reform may depend in part on the implementation process (Fullan, 2007; Petko, 2015) . The evidence from the implementation of curricular reform cross Europe indicated that a hybrid of both a top-down bottom-up approach incorporating elements of both strategies provided the greatest chance of bringing teachers on board with the reforms. This has been the case in the Finnish experience of an educational reform process. (Tikkanen, 2020; Pietarinen, 2017). The Irish implementation strategy appears to have primarily top-down. Janík (2018) researching curriculum reform in the Czech Republic noted that teachers expressed the feeling of being "alienated executors of someone else's plans" (p 67). The implementation strategy was perceived to be top-down in nature, failing to involve teachers in the kind of collaborative educational reform process advocated by Hargraves (2012) and Fullan (2016). The implementation method may have impacted the Irish teachers desire to fully embrace the curricular reforms.

Other factors outside teacher control, such as resources and class size, may have impacted the ability of teachers to implement strategies and methodologies modelled by JCT during in-service training. Teachers may have been convinced by the theory supporting student-centred learning but impeded by the realities of implementing it. Large class sizes, lack of planning time, mixability student cohorts, and a shortage of Special Needs Assistants were noted as some of the issues perceived as preventing the full implementation of student-centred learning. These factors may have made embracing the required changes more challenging and discouraged some teachers.

Clarity Around the Reforms

Teachers cited a degree of confusion and lack of clarity around the reform process. Almost a quarter of teachers expressed confusion over the "lingo", with the number of new terms and abbreviations causing anxiety for some and misunderstandings for others. Participants were in doubt about their changed role in the classroom or if

indeed there had been a change at all. Lack of clarity and resources to implement the new strategies was cited by some as a cause of stress. Accounting for a significant number of codes relating to **teacher wellbeing**, this lack of clarity may have deterred some teachers from engaging with the reform process.

JCT followed the best practice as proposed by the OECD. Effective professional development should involve ongoing training, practice and feedback. JCT in-service had attempted to incorporate all these features. It provided active learning opportunities for teachers, modelling those they would use with their students. The development of teachers' professional collaboration was a central part of the CPD design (OECD, 2009). CPD was delivered in whole-school days, addressing the framework, rationale and assessment changes. Subject-specific in-service followed up with modelling of methodologies in subject areas and collaborative planning opportunities. Padraig Kirk, director of JCT, was clear that teachers should be given space to explore new ways of teaching and time to talk about their own classroom practice with colleagues. His aim was to provide the resources necessary to help cultivate new and sustainable teaching practices. Though the CPD was delivered to all teachers, it is difficult to assess the level of teacher engagement with it. Industrial action taken in the early stages of the roll-out may have meant teachers began teaching new specifications with old methodologies. Priestley and Minty (2013) noted, as a factor in the implementation of the Scottish reforms, that bad habits may have developed early and become difficult to change.

The lack of concrete answers in relation to examination papers was noted by some teachers as a challenge, as they tried to prepare their students for the terminal examinations. The introduction of subjects with what some teachers considered very broad learning outcomes, without examples of the examination papers, left teachers struggling for direction, when devising assessment activities for their students. Codes linked to a lack of clarity around the reforms were significant and a cause of some stress for teachers. These issues were noted under poor **teacher wellbeing**. The staggered introduction of Junior Cycle subjects discussed in the Literature Review may have added to the perceived lack of consistency experienced by some teachers. Some felt there was a lack of joined-up thinking in the in-service provided by JCT. An Australian study of teacher engagement with educational reform noted

the importance of early engagement in the reform process, to build teacher confidence. This early participation correlated with a sustained commitment to embedding the planned reforms (Willis et al., 2019). The staggered introduction in Ireland may have meant that teachers whose subjects did not come on stream until 2021 may not have been as engaged within services provided in 2015. Some newly qualified teachers may have missed in-service altogether. This might account for some poor teacher engagement with, and perceptions of, the CPD provided to them.

Some research suggests that the modelling of teaching strategies without an understanding of the rationale underpinning them fails to convince participants of their efficacy (Buczynski & Hansen, 2010). The framework and rationale CPD, outlining the reasoning and evidence underpinning the Junior Cycle, was provided at the beginning of the in-service roll in 2014. Some teachers may not have been engaged at that time, perhaps because their subject was not online and Subject Specifications were not available to them. The phased nature of the roll-out caused issues for some Scottish teachers and may have had a similar impact here (Priestley & Sinnema, 2014).The creation of a separate statutory body (JCT) to mediate the curricular changes devised by the NCCA to teachers may have been a barrier to providing effective CPD. The whole-school in-service had been delivered by JCT before many Subject Specifications and subject-specific Assessment Guidelines had been completed by the NCCA. Teacher questions were unanswered, causing a degree of frustration among teachers. The lack of answers may have undermined their confidence in those delivering the CPD. Confidence in the expertise of the CPD facilitator was found to be a significant factor in supporting teacher commitment to new curricular reforms (Crandall, 1983). Gleeson et al. (2020), in research into curriculum reform in Ireland and Australia, indicated that a separation between professional bodies in both countries may have led to a disjointed approach to the delivery of curricular change. Due to the many contributors to JCT in-service materials (the NCCA, the SEC and the Inspectorate), there may have been gaps in the knowledge of CPD facilitators. Those delivering CPD may not, for example, have had answers to questions in relation to subjects that were yet to come online. This fragmentation may have contributed to teacher frustration and undermined engagement with teacher in-service.

Settling in Period

A settling-in period, time for teachers to adjust and become familiar with the new practices, is expected. Some teachers noted that classrooms might be an uncomfortable space for those unused to active learning methodologies. There was a recognition among teachers that it would take time to become comfortable with the reforms. Teachers of Science may be familiar with noisier classrooms and greater student interaction, as student investigations are part of the usual methodology. However, teachers of Maths may be less familiar with that level of student interaction. There was a recognition that it would take time for teachers to adjust and a settling-in period was to be expected.

The literature supports the view that educational reform is a complex and fraught process (Fullan, 1985b) and (Guskey, 2002). This complex process requires the provision of resources, goodwill on behalf of the participants, and time. When a lot of change is happening at the same time, it can put considerable strain on the system. (Coolahan et al., 2017). There is evidence to suggest that the volume of the change introduced has increased teacher workload and stress. **Teacher wellbeing** data showed that a third of codes related to teachers feeling overloaded or stressed. Teachers noted the sheer volume of the changes, new Subject Specifications, using learning outcomes, the introduction of formative assessment, professional collaboration, a new language around assessment, and the new area of wellbeing. In addition, the integration of SSE with Junior Cycle in-service added another layer of language and administrative tasks for teachers. This might have left some teachers feeling not only overwhelmed but undervalued as professionals.

The phased roll-out of the reforms and the accompanying schedule of in-service has been continuous since 2014. A degree of reform fatigue among teachers was evident in the data on **teacher wellbeing**. Teachers recorded few positive benefits for teachers as a result of engagement with the reform. The maintenance of teacher professional engagement and goodwill may be a critical factor in the successful implementation of Junior Cycle. As the DES moves ahead with Senior Cycle reform, there may be significant lessons to be learned from teacher engagement with this research.

Challenging Teacher Beliefs

Changing teacher practices and beliefs is a complex task. There is considerable debate on how to achieve change. Fullan (1982) contends that CPD should change attitudes and beliefs, leading to the desired change in practice. Guskey (1986), on the other hand, contends that changing teacher practices first, with evidence of student success, will lead to a sustainable change in teacher practice. It would appear from the design of teacher in-service that JCT employed both strategies to elicit teacher buy-in. There was considerable information provided to teachers in relation to the international evidence supporting the need for Junior Cycle. Direct instruction and the modelling of formative assessment strategies were key features of JCT in-service. Did the two-pronged approach lead to the desired change in teacher beliefs?

The World Café data indicated that teachers were concerned about learner outcomes and student readiness for the demands of Senior Cycle. Though using the methodologies and engaging with formative assessment, some teachers were not convinced that students were benefiting. Though there was evidence that classes were busier and noisier, and that students were more engaged, some questioned the value of this engagement. Teachers were expecting to see evidence that the changed methodologies would improve learner outcomes. For teachers of English and Science this did not appear to be the case. Perhaps the changes in the grading system that saw the number of students receiving top grades reduced may have affected teacher confidence in the new specifications and teaching methodologies. Changes in Junior Cycle were designed to make the higher-grade band harder to achieve? There may have been a lack of understanding around the rationale for this among teachers,

There were subject-specific concerns also. MFL teachers were concerned that the loss of the oral component for final grading purposes would deter some students from engaging with the oral language. This, they felt, would be a significant impediment for student achievement at Senior Cycle. Other comments concerned less-able students with good language skills unmatched by their written skills. The changes, some teachers believed, would disadvantage these students because all marks were now based solely on written assessments.

Some teachers of Science felt that their subject had lost its practical status by being assessed without any credit being awarded for student practical investigations. Previously, Science had 35% of terminal marks awarded for coursework (one documented mandatory investigation) and evidence of completion of mandatory science experiments. Other practical subjects, Home Economics and Wood Technology, had experienced an increased in terminal marks awarded for student practical work. The loss of this central component of the Science left some teachers questioning the value of the changes. These issues may have undermined some teachers' ability to see the reforms as benefiting learner outcomes due to their subject-specific issues.

6.2.3. Summary

This data suggests that the sample of Irish teachers questioned value and welcome a move toward student-centred learning. Teachers noted that it fosters more independence in students and better classroom relationships. The CPD and reform measures have been successful to the extent that teachers have embraced a changed role in the classroom, which some have seen as a more positive and inclusive approach to teaching and learning. The changes are seen as being of benefit to both students and teachers.

Teachers in this research were highly focused on how the reforms impacted their classroom practice. They were concerned for student outcomes and their progression through Senior Cycle. The research data is supported by Cuban (2011), who noted that teachers focus on student and classroom implications when implementing educational reforms. They ask questions about how the changes will solve the teaching and learning issues they currently experience. Teachers, he suggested, tend to focus on how they can best adapt reforms to suit their students' needs. There is a clear picture from this research that Irish teachers were principally concerned with supporting their students. Though some appeared to be critical of the reforms, their reasons for this were mainly student centred. They were questioning whether, from their experience, some of the changes would or would not support better student outcomes.

The changed role for the teacher has highlighted a new role for the student. There was an acknowledgement of a growing role for students to take ownership of their own learning. The recognition of the importance of fostering learning relationships (Absolum, 2011) was evident in participant contributions. The valuable skill-development aspect of Junior Cycle was acknowledged. Students, some teachers felt, would be motivated to contribute to their own learning, supported by a more relevant curriculum and an increased understanding of learning for the future – not just for exams. Teachers recognised and welcomed this as a positive change.

The challenge for the DES and school management is to maintain the momentum of the positive shift in teachers' professional practice. The data suggests that the main body of teachers who participated valued student-centred learning. More than a third of codes relating to **benefits and challenges of Junior Cycle** related to the positive response to student-centred learning. However, many participants encountered significant difficulties in implementing changes in their classroom. The data from this research identifies the areas of concern for teachers which may have impeded their engagement with the reforms. The Recommendations and Conclusions chapter outlines possible strategies to tackle those concerns. Offering tailored support may go some way to supporting teachers in keeping the students firmly at the centre of learning.

6.3. Replacing High-stakes Exams

Research Question 2: Did teacher conversations identify opportunities and/or barriers to the Junior Cycle Reform's goal to replace the high-stakes summative exam system at the Junior Cycle level?

6.3.1. Background

The Junior Certificate introduced in 1998 replaced the Intermediate Certificate as the lower second-level educational format for 12 to 15-year-olds in Ireland. Both systems were characterised by a high-stakes terminal exam and knowledge-based curriculum. Exams were set, assessed and certified externally by the SEC. Students progressed to Senior Cycle and followed a similar pedagogical and curricular style for two years to Leaving Certificate, with a terminal exam also set, assessed and certified by the SEC.

AfL was introduced as part of the ongoing review of the lower secondary level in 2004 (NCCA). An NCCA review of the Junior Certificate in 1999 recommended four significant changes in order to improve learner experiences and outcomes. The recommendations included:

1. Review of subject syllabi to modernise.
2. Address content overload, improve the student experience.
3. Move away from a high-stakes terminal exam.
4. Introduce formative assessment practices.

The plan to move away from a high-stakes terminal exam and introduce CBA was part of the final proposals for Junior Cycle, published in *A framework for Junior Cycle 2012.* In line with a general trend across OECD countries, a move to skills and knowledge curriculum was a central feature of the changes. The introduction of CBAs would support the teaching of a new skills-focused curriculum.

It was intended that a change in assessment practices would be a central feature of the reimagined Junior Cycle. The move to CBA would see most subjects receiving 40% of their final grade awarded by their teacher through CBA and 60% by a terminal exam. Teacher unions heavily resisted the reforms. The reasons for this have been outlined and further details are available in MacPhail et al. (2018) and (Murchan, 2018) The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* was produced as a compromise, maintaining CBA but also a terminal exam. The SEC would retain responsibility for setting, assessing and certifying student examination material (DES, 2015). Updated and reformed Subject Specifications, a suite of classroom methodologies incorporating formative assessment principals, and new assessment practices were rolled out on a phased basis from 2014 to 2021. The integration of Wellbeing into Junior Cycle was also a significant development and was introduced along with the other reforms. The first group of students to sit an entire Junior Cycle in every subject will be 2024.

Research in Ireland and other OECD countries concluded that external summative exams at lower second level might not be in the best interests of student learning. A report prepared for the OECD identified summative assessment as a barrier to the

introduction of formative assessment in some countries (CERI, 2008). Making the case for formative assessment, the report suggested that introducing AfL pedagogies and a move away from teaching for the test had been linked with better student experiences and better learning outcomes. Citing Black and Wiliam (1998) he report noted considerable gains for learners when formative assessment practices were employed. Recognising the ability of teachers implement formative assessment practices across diverse cultural contexts (Bishop, 2003), the report suggests this as an inclusive education strategy with multiple benefits for learners. Other research indicated that external summative assessments similar to the Leaving Certificate were considered high-stakes exams and not appropriate at the lower secondary level (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012). The solution proposed by the NCCA was a replacement of the exam-orientated Junior Cycle. A combination of formative assessment with summative elements, CBAs and ATs, along with a summative SEC terminal exam, was introduced.

6.3.2. *The Significance of Replacing a High-stakes Summative Exam*

Towards a framework for Junior Cycle noted: "Unless the examination at the end of junior cycle changes, what happens in the three years before it will simply stay the same" NCCA (2011, p. 8). The culture of exams in Ireland is well acknowledged and has already been outlined (MacPhail et al., 2018; Murchan, 2018). The NCCA (2011) recognition that the terminal exam had to change, or nothing would change, may have been prophetic. However, as outlined in teacher response to student-centred learning, there have been significant changes in teacher practices; and a move away from an exam-based mindset has been more challenging. The reasons for this are complex.

Research by Darmody et al. (2020) suggests that Irish teachers are beginning to developed a more sophisticated grasp of assessment literacy. However, a significant number of participants in this research reported being confused about **assessment changes**. It is possible that some Irish teachers have not arrived at a level of competency around assessment that would support them to engage with the kind of assessment changes demanded by the reforms. This finding may indicate

that more information and training are needed to support teachers to engage with a broader understanding of assessment.

6.3.3. The Difficulty of Changing Beliefs

Externally-assessed exams have become a cultural norm in the Irish education system (Murchan, 2018). Research indicates that teachers enter the teaching profession with deeply-held beliefs that stem from their own school experiences (Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017). These beliefs and the influence of a school's culture significantly shape teacher attitudes and behaviours. There can be an overwhelming sense of this is how we do things here, impacting heavily on teacher practice and attitude. The literature documents the impact of school culture on teacher attitude and beliefs (Rosenholtz, 1991). There is a predisposition of teachers to develop attitudes, beliefs and practices based on personal educational history and the culture of the school in which they are employed. This predisposition might be considered a significant barrier to changing the traditional Irish focus from terminal exams.

This research outlined above indicates that other factors may also be influencing teacher attitude to assessment and terminal exams. There were some teacher comments concerning confusion around the new assessment practices. New terminology and lack of familiarity with Assessment Guidelines for new subjects were noted as issues for some participants. It may take more time for teachers to engage with the new assessment practices across the full three-year cycle before clarity and proficiency can be achieved. At the time of writing, only three subjects had been through full cycles of Junior Cycle.

Teacher Perceptions of Learner Outcomes
The findings showed that almost a third of the participant responses relating to the **assessment changes** indicated significant concern for the quality of learner outcomes being delivered. Participants questioned the quality of engagement that the changes would elicit from students. A significant group of participants noted concerns around specific assessment changes that might negatively impact learner experiences: increased peer pressure, as students were now expected to present their work openly in class and were more visible to peers in their classrooms. This increasing pressure is on those who like to be invisible and those who are

uncomfortable being the focus of attention. These comments are balanced by a fifth of teachers giving a significant welcome for the changed emphasis on student learning. They suggested that students who were more involved in their own learning would develop better learning skills than they would through traditional rote learning methods. They considered that the changes would lead to a better learner experience and outcomes.

Guskey's (2002) theory on teacher changes indicates that change comes as teachers see their students achieving. Teachers of English and Science did not see students' learning outcomes improve in a way that might promote this change. As previously mentioned, grades at the highest-grade band, distinction, were considerably lower than at the former A grade in Junior Certificate, leading some to question the efficacy of the new programme. Teachers may not have understood the rationale for the change to the new grade bands and descriptors.

Some responses clearly indicated that teachers were exam focused. Some expressed frustration around lack of clarity about how best to prepare their students for new examination formats. These exam-focused comments were few in comparison to those concerned with the broader issues surrounding learner outcomes. The tenor of comments concerning learning did not support the suggestion that teachers see Junior Cycle as a "dry run for leaving certificate", as suggested by Looney (2007, p. 350). Teachers showed a considerable focus on the quality of learning inherent in the reforms, in relation to building foundational skills and knowledge to carry forward into the Senior Cycle. Some saw the changes at Junior Cycle as being incompatible with Senior Cycle requirements. The dropping of marks for the oral component of MFLs, for example. The concern was for the students' progress into and at Senior Cycle subject level. The examination between lower and senior second level did not appear to be the main focus of teacher concern.

Subject-specific Concerns Colouring Teacher Perceptions
Subject-specific concerns about MFLs, Irish and Science may have coloured some teacher perceptions around the depth of learning being provided by the new Junior Cycle. The perceived reduced quality of learning, rather than an exam focus, was a

priority for some teachers. Teachers active in their own subject areas would have been aware of developments in their subjects. The *Action plan for education 2017*, a DES publication, lays out the policy direction, projects and strategies to be enacted over the next academic year. Its purpose is to consolidate progress towards the achievement of a long-term, sustainable programme of change and reform. Three specific commitments detailed in the *Action plan* were of note to second-level teachers: the commitment to the development of STEM education, a focus on increasing competence in foreign languages, and the Irish language. These initiatives and targets had been quoted in CPD, and its broad initiatives were published in the media, thus highlighting their importance.

Considerable importance was placed on STEM in the *Action plan for education 2017.* In particular, reference was made to the barriers to the uptake of science subjects at second level. The Irish Science Teachers Association (ISTA) surveyed science teachers in 2019. The purpose was to gather feedback on their experience of teaching the Junior Cycle Science specification. There were 762 respondents to the survey. ISTA reported, significant concern among teachers in relation to Junior Cycle. Two-thirds of respondents felt that students would be "poorly prepared for the study of Leaving Certificate science subjects" (p. 100). These results were supported by similar findings in this research. The ISTA report also noted that physics teachers, based on their Junior Cycle experience thus far, expressed serious concerns for the future of their subject at Leaving Certificate level. The report's authors felt that the new specifications were not in keeping with the *Action plan for education 2017* or the *Stem education policy,* published in the same year. In light of the science teachers' concerns, some questioned if Junior Cycle was in line with these commitments. The disparity between the DES intentions to amplify STEM education and teacher experience of Junior Cycle Science may have negatively influenced some teacher attitudes to the assessment changes.

MFLs and Irish teachers also expressed concerns about the removal of the awarding of terminal marks for the oral component of student learning. *Ireland's strategy for foreign languages in education 2017-2026* outlined the intention that the Irish education system would support students to learn and use at least one foreign language. Dropping the oral component and favouring all written assessments was

seen by some teachers as being incompatible with a vision of promoting student engagement with languages. Some teachers felt that the discrimination against the learner with good oral competency but unmatched by their written skills was inequitable. The final student grade for languages is now totally based on written work. Further comments noted that the AT worth 10% of the terminal grade in languages could be answered in English, not the language under examination. The feeling was that this had amounted to a downgrading of the oral component of language acquisition.

Irish teachers were also concerned about the changes in their subjects. They felt that oral proficiency was reduced by removing the oral exam, yet the terminal examination remained highly focused on aural skill. This, some considered, was not an improvement of the previous assessment procedures. The *20-year strategy for the Irish language*, published in 2010, committed the government to developing education policy around Irish that promoted "a significant shift in emphasis towards Irish as a spoken language" (p. 13). This seemed to some teachers to be at odds with a Junior Cycle curriculum that was now wholly graded by written assessment.

This research findings suggest that many teachers, rather than being highly exam-focused, were animated by concerns for their subjects and their students' experience of those subjects. Research by Hubner (2021) into teacher engagement with German curricular reform in 2018 suggested that teachers highly focused on their own subject are less likely to embrace reforms the feel may undermine it. The findings may indicate that teacher concerns are for student learning, not necessarily just for the exam results. There may be indications of a shift in teacher focus away from the exam and onto the quality of student learning. However, there was significant concern that elements of the new Junior Cycle were not supportive of some aspects of student learning.

Leaving Certificate Dominance

A dominant focus of second-level education in Ireland is undoubtedly the Leaving Certificate. It is the terminal examination following a student's completion of the two-year Senior Cycle, described by the NCCA as a "towering presence" on the Irish educational landscape (2002, p. 45). The Leaving Certificate helps the Central

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Applications Office to act as a sorting house, allocating third-level places to prospective students. Its function in this respect has defined the Senior Cycle and perhaps second-level education in Ireland. If, as Looney contended, Junior Certificate was merely seen as a "dry run" for Leaving Certificate (2007, p. 350), then Junior Cycle reforms would have to herald some profound changes to displace this perception.

When considering the **challenges and benefits of the Junior Cycle,** a quarter of the participants expressed concern for the Senior Cycle and Leaving Certificate. It was clear from the data that teachers of Junior Cycle felt the impact of Leaving Certificate. There was significant evidence that they felt a responsibility to prepare their students for the demands of Senior Cycle. Some teachers expressed concerns that reforms of a similar format to Junior Cycle may be extended to Leaving Certificate level. This, they felt, might fail to deliver better results for Senior Cycle students. Some expressed the concern that students would then be ill-prepared for third level.

The high-stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate is documented by (Smyth et al., 2011), who outline the role of Leaving Certificate in the lives of students in Ireland. The pressure placed on students not only to perform in the examination, but also to choose subjects and a career path, is well made. The merits or otherwise of the Leaving Certificate are beyond the scope of this research. What is important to note is the huge significance placed on the Leaving Certificate in the Irish education system. Gleeson (2021) noted "the biggest obstacle to changing Irish curriculum culture is the established Leaving Certificate, the Holy Grail of Irish education" (p16). This research clearly indicates that the impact of the Leaving Certificate is not confined to Senior Cycle but, at least for this teacher sample, pervades teacher perceptions around teaching and learning in Junior Cycle.

Despite this, there was evidence from this research that teachers in the lower second level had become more student-focused. Though there was concern for learner outcomes, it was focused on student competencies not necessarily attainment at examinations. Half of all codes relating to the **teacher role** affirmed student-centred learning and almost a third of codes identified as **challenges and**

benefits welcomed the move to student-centred learning. The data shows teachers valuing changes at the lower second level that improve the student experience.

The research may indicate that the goal of moving away from the high-stakes exam at Junior Cycle has, to some extent, been achieved. As few students now leave school following Junior Cycle examinations, the examination at this point may no longer hold the significance it once did (MacPhail et al., 2018). However, the examination that is dominating teacher and public perceptions around achievement at second level remains the Leaving Certificate. Until there is a decoupling of the Junior Cycle from Leaving Certificate, it is very difficult to see the goal of replacing high-stakes examinations at Junior Cycle being fully achieved.

Mixed Messages: The Cost of Pandemic Decisions

March 2020 marked the first lockdown in Ireland due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It significantly impacted education in Ireland. Several decisions outlined here made by the Education Minister Norma Foley and the DES may have impacted teacher perceptions around the Junior Cycle and the importance of externally graded examinations.

Continued Importance of Externally-assessed Exams at Lower Second Level

The use of Junior Certificate and Junior Cycle English results in the calculation of 2020 Leaving Certificate grades lends some support to those who argue for the academic importance of externally-set and -graded exams at lower second level. The results were used because the National Standardisation Group for Calculated Grades believed them to be "strong predictors of Leaving Certificate performance" (DES, 2020b, p. 15). Their decision to use the results was in part based on research by Millar and Kelly (1998), who followed a cohort of students from Junior Certificate to Leaving Certificate and concluded that there was a correlation between student achievement in both examinations. The group also considered that there was significant linkage between Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examination results in previous years that validated the use of the data in this instance. They concluded that there was a conditional likelihood that Junior Certificate performance was an indicator for Leaving Certificate. The decision may have confirmed for some

teachers, and the public, that the grades at this level are significant and should remain as a valid independent assessment of student achievement.

Trust in Teacher Judgements.

The JCPA a central pillar of Junior cycle, portrays a broader picture of student learning and achievement. It was not awarded in 2020 or 2021. The profile reflects four areas of student achievement: CBAs, Other areas of Learning, Wellbeing and terminal exam results. CBAs were completed, other areas of learning were available for inclusion, but there was no terminal exam. Teachers assessed and graded their own students, providing the terminal grade. Though this exam was intended as low stakes, and only one element of the profile of student achievement, without the SEC-regulated exam, the DES did not award the JCPA. This may have been a missed opportunity to demonstrate trust in teachers' ability to assess their own students. Trust in teacher judgement is a crucial issue. Murchan (2018) contends that the time, work and cost of introducing Junior Cycle reforms may be worth it, "if students, parents, teachers and the wider public value the teacher-generated descriptors from the CBA in the same way that the examination grades will be valued". (p. 124)Despite the intended low-stakes nature of Junior Cycle, teachers' professional judgement on student performance were not considered sufficient. The issue of teacher judgment received considerable attention, due to the need to develop a system of calculated grades for Leaving Certificate. The discussion paper prepared by the Technical Working Group for calculated grades identified validity and reliability as key issues concerning teacher assessment of students (DES, 2020a). These issues may also be applied to teacher judgements at Junior Cycle. In general, the paper noted that "Across a wide range of high and low stakes assessment, teachers tend to overestimate their students' test performance"(DES, 2020a, p. 6). This was based on considerable research evaluating teacher accuracy in assessing their own students (Feinberg & Shapiro, 2009; Glock, 2012; Harlen, 2005). The research noted that teacher proficiency improved with training and instruction on the specific nature and importance of the required assessment (p. 7). Junior Cycle teachers received extensive CPD in rendering professional judgments on student assessments in SLAR meetings. Teachers may have felt the decision not to use their students' grades for Junior Cycle 2020, and 2021 was undermining their professionalism. The

public perception around not using teacher grades may undermine public confidence in any assessment system that is not externally set, assessed and graded.

Decisions made to support the completion of Leaving Certificate and Junior Cycle during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 may have long-term implications for the maintenance of externally administered examinations. The decision reinforces the perception that the DES values SEC grades as the key marker of student learning. Despite considerable training to support teachers in making professional judgements about student learning, teacher grades in relation to Junior Cycle were not considered as an alternative to the SEC terminal exam for certification purposes. It may have been an opportunity missed. If the DES and the NCCA are serious about moving away from externally-assessed exams at this level, they will need to place trust in teacher grading.

Return to 100% Terminal Exam for Junior Cycle 2020/21

In 2021, as the pandemic continued to affect school-based learning, the minister took DES advice and removed one CBA and the AT as a requirement for completion of the Junior Cycle (DES, 2021a). This decision was made "to protect the time for teaching and learning and the completion of courses" (p. 3). This decision was then extended to cover the Junior Cycle cohort for 2022 (NCCA, 2021b). The decision was understandable for the 2020/21 academic year, where online learning was carried out from April to January for the Junior Cycle cohort. However, face-to-face teaching was expected to resume for the 2021/22 academic year, with relatively normal teaching and learning expected to resume in September 2021.

Participants in this research indicated that CBAs were a source of concern and frustration for some teachers. Some participants expressed the feeling that they did not see value in the CBAs. Key Skills are embedded in the curricular material and pedagogy of every subject. The CBA can be understood as a two-part process: firstly a skills development process and secondly an assessment process. The CBA is primarily a formative learning experience designed to develop student skills. The allocation of the descriptor, reflecting the level of student achievement, is a summative assessment. The CBA was intended to support the kind of assessment that could not easily be conducted by means of a written exam alone. In English, for

example, students make an oral presentation on a topic of their choice, demonstrating their communication skills. It might be inferred that the role and function of the CBA was not well understood by some teachers.

The CBA is central to the Junior Cycle learning experience. Removing one CBA and the AT, and reinstating a 100% terminal exam, may undermine the value of the CBAs. The reason given by the DES was to provide more teaching time. The CBA is a three-week piece of work in most subjects. The AT takes 80 minutes, 40 minutes for stimulus material followed by a 40minute reflection paper. The loss of face-to-face teaching time during the pandemic is undeniable. The point here is that Junior Cycle was intended to develop skills such as oral and written communication, managing information, and creativity. It was designed to be a knowledge- and skills-based curriculum. The decision to remove the skills development element in favour of creating more time to cover content knowledge may undermine the value placed on the CBAs altogether. The opportunity was there to reinforce the skills element of Junior Cycle as equally important to content and it was missed.

It may lend support to those who already considered CBAs to be pointless. This is a point flagged by Coolahan et al. (2017), who noted that teachers and students may not be motivated to engage with CBAs for a mere 10% towards their terminal grade. It was felt that this might have a greater effect on already unmotivated students. It remains to be seen what effect, if any, changes to the CBA to protect teaching time and a return to 100% terminal exam in most subjects will have on teacher confidence in the assessment changes. Protecting the teaching of content over the development of student skills may send an unintended message to parents and teachers. It indicates a priority for the minister and the DES on maintaining an external terminal exam assessing subject content rather than skills for certification purposes.

Summary

This research paints a picture of Irish teachers committed to delivering the Junior Cycle. The data demonstrated that teachers have changed professional practices and embraced student-centred learning. Comments from the World Café gatherings showed that approximately a third see this as a major benefit of the reforms. Concern for the quality of student learning formed a significant part of all teacher

discussions. The data showed that teachers believed stress and anxiety, connected with concern for student outcomes, had impacted their wellbeing. Teachers demonstrated a high level of engagement with their own subject areas. However, the data showed that teacher focus on learning outcomes was not confined to the Junior Cycle. Student readiness for Leaving Certificate also had a considerable impact on teacher perceptions. A quarter of all comments related to the **challenges and benefits of Junior Cycle** were concerned about Leaving Certificate.

The NCCA had stated that the key to changing what happens during the first three years of lower secondary was to change the terminal exam at the end (NCCA, 2011). It may have been focusing on the wrong exam. It would appear from this research that teacher attitudes around the Leaving Certificate exam is one of the most significant barriers to changing perceptions around Junior Cycle. This quote from a participant teacher well encapsulates the dominance of the Leaving Certificate over teacher perceptions of Junior Cycle:

> The major challenge I would see is that students will find the Leaving Certificate far more difficult, as the Junior Cycle will no longer prepare students adequately.

It is evident that teachers view their role in Junior Cycle as inextricably linked to Leaving Certificate.

It has been shown that replacing a high-stakes exam system at Junior Cycle is a complex issue. Teachers, it would seem, see their role in Junior Cycle as encompassing a responsibility to prepare their students for Leaving Certificate. This link with Leaving Certificate may have been reinforced by decisions made by the DES in their attempt to solve issues around accredited grades for Leaving Certificate in 2020/21. There was a need for accurate data in relation to student achievement. Junior Certificate and Junior Cycle provided an externally graded source that was judged an appropriate predictor of Leaving Certificate performance (DES, 2020b). If Junior Certificate and Junior Cycle grades were considered valuable by the DES, expressly because they were externally set and graded (and these are key elements of high-stakes exams), their importance might have been reinforced in the minds of

many stakeholders. Moving away from a high-stakes exam mindset may now have become more challenging than ever. There may have been an opportunity here to redefine Junior Cycle as not a replacement of Junior Certificate but an entirely different kind of curriculum.

This research and the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted Leaving Certificate as the high-stakes exam that dominates second-level education in Ireland. This research suggests that it may be difficult to determine if any changes at the lower second level alone would create a climate where this situation could change.

6.4. Limitations of This Research

This research aimed to explore teacher engagement with Junior Cycle Framework and the reform process, from the perspective of teachers. The research questions drawn from the objectives outlined in the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* focused on embedding student-centred learning and the intention to reframe Junior Cycle assessment, so that it is no longer considered high stakes. The intention was to elicit teachers feelings and needs around Junior Cycle reform, using the Lundy Model (2007) method of participatory research.

6.4.1. Sample Size

The data was collected between May 2019 and March 2020. World Cafés were held in five venues, with a pool of 282 teacher participants. According to government statistics, in 2018/19, there were 30,062 second-level teachers in Irish schools (DES, 2021b). The sample size represents a relatively small number of the teacher population. However, the World Café methodology generated the equivalent of 125 individual focus group conversations. The consistency of the data generated implied a high level of consensus and a degree of saturation that led the researcher to believe that the data collected accurately reflected the feelings of Irish teachers in relation to the research questions. The ISTS survey, which was carried out in 2019, confirms many of the findings in this research. This supports the validity of the research and offers some supporting evidence to the conclusions drawn.

The intention was to include all educational sectors in the research: community and comprehensive, ETB, voluntary secondary schools and Educate Together secondary schools. However, COVID-19 restrictions made further World Café gatherings after 12 March 2020 impossible. Even if it had been possible to collect teacher data following this date, its value may have been questionable. Teacher perceptions of Junior Cycle reforms may have been coloured by this unprecedented event. Therefore, data collected after March 2020 could not be equated with that collected before this date.

Covid-19 restrictions following March 2020 made further data collection impossible. As a result, it was not possible to include, the Educate Together schools in this research piece. It is not possible to estimate what, if any, effect this may have had on the research data. The level of consistency across venues would suggest a degree of consensus among teachers generally. There was no attempt to identify trends based on the educational sector or venue. The five World Café venues were intended to capture a sample of teacher comments and reflections in relation to the implementation of Junior Cycle Framework. Whether industrial action during the early roll-out of the reforms impacted teacher perceptions is impossible to say. This could possibly provide an area for further research.

There was no opportunity to include Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) in this research. Therefore, it is not possible to explore whether staff in these schools had a similar or different experience from the staff in other sectors. This remains an area for further research.

6.4.2. Participant Data

This study did not include a detailed breakdown of participant data to indicate the influence of gender, years of service, position in a school or subject taught. Neither was any inference attributable to the educational sector considered. The nature of the World Café format would make it impossible to trace individual comments to individual teachers. Unlike online surveys or interviews like those used in the Finish, Czech, German or Scottish research (see section 2.4) personal data is not recorded along side comments. It is not possible to draw any inferences as to whether any of these factors impacted teacher attitude or engagement with the reforms.

A number of teachers in this research might have been influences by changes made to their subject. Science, Irish and MFL teachers voiced specific concerns which may have coloured their perceptions of Junior Cycle as a whole. The nature of World Café data collection makes it impossible to identify specific numbers of teachers who voiced such concerns. At the time of writing, not all subjects had experienced a full three-year cycle. Teachers may not have been fully aware of the impact of changes on their own subject area. This may, in the future, prove a factor in their attitude to the Junior Cycle Framework. Follow up interviews with participants could perhaps be a valuable addition to the World Café, adding greater depth to teacher attitudes and perceptions.

Measures put in place to facilitate the completion of Junior Cycle and Junior Certificate due to COVID-19 meant a delay in subjects completing the full range of assessment. English, Science, and Business are currently the only subjects to have completed full three-year cycles, including all the prescribed assessment elements. CBAs and the AT have been removed for three cohorts of students, those due to complete in 2020, 2021 and 2022.

It will be at least 2024 before another cohort completes Junior Cycle as envisaged by the *Framework* document. The effect of the pandemic on the reform process is difficult to assess and beyond the scope of this research. The fact that teacher data in this research is free of the influence of the pandemic is worth noting. The research is valuable precisely because it reflects teacher perspectives of the reform free of any COVID-19 implications. The focus is on the reforms alone. It facilitates the comparison of teacher engagement with reform in other countries, such as the Scottish experience.

6.4.3. Limitations of World Café Data Collection

Though providing many advantages in terms of data collection (Restall et al., 2015), there are limitations to collecting data using World Café as a method (MacFarlane et al., 2017). It is possible that self-facilitation may mean that not all participant contributions were recorded. Some may be reluctant to contribute publicly to discussions with colleagues. Though Post-Its were available to participants to record individual comments, it cannot be concluded that all participants contributed or

indeed that all comments were accurately recorded. However, in line with the Lundy Model (2007), space and time were provided, participation was voluntary.

The data may be fragmented and lack the detail and depth afforded by other data collection tools such as focus groups or in-depth interviews (MacFarlane et al., 2017). These limitations may be offset by holding multiple World Café gatherings and having sufficient numbers at each gathering to ensure that there are multiple discussions around each question, to provide sufficient quality data for analysis purposes.

6.5. Contribution to Junior Cycle Research

6.5.1. Filling the Research Gap

Educational reform is a complex and sometimes fraught process (Fullan, 2016; Guskey, 2010). The lack of research into Irish teacher engagement with Junior Cycle reform has been noted (Byrne & Prendergast, 2020). This research addresses this gap. The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* is relatively new. Only three subjects have completed the three-year cycle. The research is well timed, as it will be 2024 at least before other subjects complete an entire Junior Cycle.

6.5.2. COVID-free Research

This research reflects teacher perceptions about the reform and its impact on student learning prior to any effect of COVID-19. Future research may find it difficult to disentangle teacher experience and perceptions of the reforms from the impact of COVID-19 on all aspects of education in Irish schools.

6.5.3. Junior Cycle: a Prelude to Senior Cycle Reform

The educational philosophies underpinning Junior Cycle were referred to as a blueprint for educational reform to be extended into Senior Cycle. Senior Cycle Key Skills (NCCA, 2009) have been developed and are embedded in subjects coming onstream. The academic year 2019/2020 saw the release of Senior Cycle subjects following new Subject Specifications, with learning outcomes rather than subject syllabi. Teaching and learning methodologies in line with those at Junior Cycle are employed. This research may give some insights (to those developing CPD for

Senior Cycle) into the feelings and needs of teachers around these methodologies and specification formats.

6.6. Contribution to Theory

6.6.1. World Café as a Method of Data Collection in Educational Research

World Café was developed in the mid-1990s as a form of participant-led group discussion (Brown 2005). Participants with a common interest engage in several rounds of dialogue with others in a café style environment. Used in research relating to the health sciences, it is underutilised in education research. Using World Café can elicit group discussion, where different perspectives and ideas emerge, potentially leading to new interpretations of the issues by participants (Fallon & Connaughton, 2016; Papastavrou et al., 2010). The environment is social and conducive to the kinds of discussion where sensitive or personal issues can be explored (Restall et al., 2015; Yettick et al., 2017). The impact of COVID-19 on teacher engagement with teaching and learning might be an area where this data collection method could work well.

This data collection method also allows the researcher to step out of the conversations, acting solely as an observer rather than a facilitator. It was particularly useful in this instance, where the researcher was a Junior Cycle teacher herself. Maintaining impartiality and reflexivity is crucial to support the validity of the research findings. Once the World Café gathering is entrained, the researcher is a mere observer. The outcome of all discussions is solely in the hands of the participants. The World Café is considered a valuable and adaptable participatory method that is useful with diverse communities (MacFarlane, 2017). It is potentially an equally valuable tool for use with educational stakeholders.

The use of qualitative data analysis with World Café data facilitates the gathering of fragmented data into coherent themes (Du Plessis et al., 2013; Van Graan et al., 2016). Thematic Analysis (Braun et al., 2014) was used in this research. In keeping with the principles that underpin this research, World Café is participant-led. The groups guide the discussion and record their findings unencumbered by the

researcher (Schwartz, 2016). The role of the researcher is to present the findings in a way that reflects the depth and richness of the conversations. The use of summative analysis was used to present the data. It is a method of presenting qualitative data that is easily accessible and has proven to be very effective (Morgan, 1993a). Rapport (2010) contends that summative analysis maintains the participants' integrity while moving the narrative forward. Its use allows others to effectively engage with the results in a way that is summative in its presentation. Combining these three methods, World Café, thematic analysis and summative quantitative analysis provide an effective framework for research involving groups.

The World Café creates a very structured method of data collection. The format is simple and easy for participants to engage with. It facilitates the collection of data from a relatively large group in a short space of time. It replicates multiple focus groups occurring simultaneously. The self-reporting aspect ensures a degree of distance between the researcher and the group. Removing research bias is useful in situations where the researcher is also a member of the group being studied.

Participatory Research. The method is very much in line with the principles of participatory research. In this case, the Lundy. (2007) was used in conjunction with the World Café, providing a particularly good fit. The structure of the gathering provided space and time for participants to give voice to their experiences and concerns.

Thematic Analysis. Data from the tablecloths can be fragmented. The thematic analysis provided the mechanism made to gather together the five World Café sets of data and make sense of the participant comments.

Summative Analysis supported the distilling of the data into visually accessible chats.

This approach to research has applications for use with all educational stakeholders and might prove useful in a future inquiry into educational reform, parent engagement, or COVID-19-related research.

6.6.2. Adaptation of the Lundy Model (2007) of Participatory Research

The Lundy Model (2007) of participatory research, based on Article 12 of the UNCRC, underpinned the data collection methodology for this research. Devised specifically to give a genuine voice to children in research, it was adapted here to give voice to Irish teachers. Lundy. (2007) explored the inclusion of children in research around children's rights in Northern Ireland. From her research, it emerged that not having a say in the decisions made about them was the single biggest issue for children. Lundy found that, in general, children's views were not sought or indeed valued. This, she contended, was a clear breach of Article 12 on the Rights of the Child. Her model was developed using the principles laid out in the Article itself. The aim was to support children to be safely included in research concerning them, and to develop a mechanism where they could be genuinely heard.

Being heard, Lundy concluded, had four aspects. The model design provides the space for participants to express their views and have their voice enabled, as well as providing an audience for their views and potentially giving that voice influence. The essential elements of this model are illustrated in Figure 48, below.

Figure 48: Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation (TUSLA, 2015 p. 5)

Educational reform, like any change, can be a fraught process. Junior Cycle reform, though developed by the NCCA, unfolded in classrooms across Ireland. Teachers unpacked specifications, mediated new content to students, and implemented radically new assessment practices. The research aimed to gather teacher perceptions of the reforms, based on their experiences. The Lundy Model (2007) provided a sound framework to work not only with children, but with any group. This model was adapted to help teachers to reflect on their experiences and explore the World Café questions safely and in a scaffolded manner The World Café structure provided space and time for teachers to talk informally and express their views – voicing their feelings and needs around a process in which they were key players, yet up to this point had not had an opportunity to be heard.

The results of the conversations and comments from the data underpinning this research give audience to the teacher voice. It remains to be seen what influence, if any, this research will have. Potentially a valuable record of teacher engagement with the Junior Cycle reform, it may offer insights to policymakers or give stimulus to future research. The use of the Lundy Model (2007) was highly effective. Its implicit respect for the participants, and the value it places on their voice, makes it a useful research tool and could be employed in other research settings.

6.7. Chapter Summary

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* was built on a vision that would fundamentally change approaches to curriculum and assessment, improving student learning experiences. Embedding student-centred learning as an underlying principle in Irish education was central to this vision. The NCCA was attempting to change the focus from an exam-dominated lower second level of education to a more formative education that would build student capacity. A shift to a skills- and knowledge-based curriculum with formative assessment at its heart was envisaged. The terminal exam would have to change, and a combination of CBAS and terminal assessment moderated by the SEC would take its place.

This research interrogated two major elements of this vision: the embedding of student-centred learning and the replacing of the high-stakes exam at the end of Junior Cycle. The research indicated that, although teachers were for the most part

adopting student-centred methodologies and formative assessment practices, some had reservations around the effectiveness of the new approaches. It was significant that the second goal, to replace the high-stakes exam at Junior Cycle, may have occurred in the minds of many teachers before the introduction of Junior Cycle. The research indicated that the exam that most influenced teacher perceptions was the Leaving Certificate and not necessarily the Junior Cycle.

This research was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as data collection was halted in March 2020. This limited the research to three second-level sectors, excluding Educate Together secondary schools. The pandemic also impacted the running of all state examinations. To maintain the integrity of the Leaving Certificate and the Junior Cycle, several decisions were made by the DES, which may have long-term implications for the Junior Cycle. Junior Cycle results were used in the calculation of Leaving Certificate grades, and the Junior Cycle reverted to a 100% terminal exam for most subjects

Finally, the novel use of World Café style data collection underpinned by the Lundy Model (2007) of participatory research was a central feature of this study. The combination provided a useful research application that may be of value in other research settings. This research fills a gap in the literature around teacher engagement with Junior Cycle. It may also provide background for policymakers and those developing CPD for teachers in the future. This timely research is all the more valuable, having been collected pre COVID-19. Following the events of 2020/21, it may not be possible to collect teacher data on the progress of Junior Cycle reform that is not contaminated by the fallout from COVID-19. Table 13, below, illustrates a summary of both the limitations and research contributions of this research study.

Table 13:   *Summary of the Limitations and Contributions of This Research Piece*

Summary of Limitations	Summary of Research Contributions
Sample size. Relative to the number of secondary teachers in the country, the participant number was relatively small. One of the four secondary school sectors, Educate Together, was not included in this study. Participant data. Years of service, subject or sector were not included as a factor impacting teacher engagement with the reforms. World Café data collection, though providing many benefits as a data collection method, has limitations. The participant self-recording aspect may have left some teacher comments unrecorded or led to selective bias on behalf of the recorder, regarding what was recorded. World Café data collection does not make it possible to draw any inferences between teacher gender, years of service ,position in school, subject or sector.	**Contribution to Research** Fills a recognised gap in the literature, in relation to Irish teacher engagement with Junior Cycle reform. A timely piece of research free of COVID-19 implications, focusing only on the reforms. It may not be possible to repeat this kind of data collection, as the fallout from the pandemic will have a lasting impact on Irish education. Furthermore, it may not be possible to disentangle Junior Cycle and COVID-19 in future research work. This research may provide valuable insights for those developing and implementing change at Senior Cycle. **Contribution to Theory** World Café in educational research. World Café, thematic analysis, and summative quantitative analysis provide an effective framework for research involving groups. **Lundy Model (2007)** The adaptation of the Lundy Model (2007) of participatory research as an effective model for adult research studies.

7.   Conclusion and Further Research

7.1. Introduction

I have been a secondary teacher since 1987, teaching Science, Maths and Religion in the Intermediate Certificate, the Junior Certificate and Junior Cycle. Experience as a researcher and facilitator of teacher in-service with JCT, and in the role of Junior Cycle coordinator for a large secondary school, has provided me with first-hand experience of teacher engagement with Junior Cycle. This research has emerged from professional practice and immersion in the literature surrounding the teacher role in educational reform and the impact of assessment on student learning.

7.2. Context. A Summary

Junior Cycle reform was one of the most significant and radical changes the Irish education system has undertaken. The NCCA had been working on plans to reform lower second level since 1999. Educational reform internationally was investing in teacher education and moving to skill- and knowledge-based curricula. The Irish education system had come under considerable scrutiny, with articles in the press reporting plummeting standards (Walsh 2011). In 2012, the Minister for Education and Skills announced a suite of reforms to lower second level: the Junior Cycle would replace the Junior Certificate. English was the first subject introduced in 2014 under a revised *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*.

Fundamental to the reform was a changed role for teachers, with updated Subject Specifications, significant changes to assessment practices, the introduction of CBA, and new reporting and certification of student achievements. The intention was to focus on student learning and move away from the high-stakes exam that had characterised Junior Certificate. Placing the student at the centre of learning and developing skills as well as knowledge would, it was envisaged, deliver a better learner experience and better outcomes.

Essential to the success of the reforms were considerable changes to teacher professional practice. JCT was the statutory body tasked with delivering CPD that would equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to implement the changes. Research has shown that changes to the quality of teaching and learning are unlikely

to occur without changes to teacher attitudes and behaviour. An ongoing programme of whole-school and subject-specific CPD was delivered. Initial teacher union resistance was resolved in 2017. A phased introduction of subjects continued until 2021, when all Junior Cycle subjects, along with student wellbeing provisions, were rolled out.

7.3.   The Purpose of This Research.

Five years into the reforms, the perspective of Irish teachers implementing this change had not yet been heard. Black (2018) noted that the day-to-day decisions made by teachers in their classrooms ultimately determine the kind of learning that takes place. The Literature Review details the crucial role that teachers play as agents of educational reform. By 2019, little research had taken place into the impact of Junior Cycle reform on student learning; nor had teacher perspectives of the reforms been ascertained. This study is filling a gap in the research making this work a valuable contribution to the field.

In terms of Irish education, the proposed changes were radical, comprehensive and somewhat controversial. Announcing the reforms, Ruairí Quinn, Minister for Education (2012), identified key reforms that would mean a major change in the traditional teacher role and a profound change to the traditional assessment practices, as follows:

- The teacher role would evolve from instructor to facilitator of learning.
- Formative assessment practices would provide high-quality feedback to students delivering the desired move to student-centred teaching and learning.
- The Junior Cycle, he said, "is no longer a high stakes exam".

The volume of change in the reform programme was substantial. Based on the literature review and the work of the RAG, two elements of the reforms were selected as research areas: first, the impact of assessment practices on student learning and second, perceptions around the move away from high-stakes exams.

Two specific research questions arose from the early research work, as follows:

Question 1: To what extent did teacher conversations reflect the development of more student-learning environments, as expressed by the Junior Cycle Reform framework?

Question 2: Did teacher conversations identify opportunities and/or barriers to the Junior Cycle Reform's goal to replace the high-stakes summative exam system at the Junior Cycle level?

7.4. The Method

Social Constructivism was a natural fit as an underpinning philosophical approach to this research. Evidence of education as a collaborative endeavour is well developed (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Vygotsky's conception that human perceptions and beliefs cannot be viewed as separate from history, culture, and society add depth to any understanding of educational reform (Vygotsky, 1978). From the researcher's interactions with colleagues and CPD participants, initial curiosity and, ultimately, research questions arose. Developing a research method based on cooperative principles empowering participants to engage with the research was a priority.

The Lundy Model (2007) of participatory research, devised to give audience and voice to participants, was the guiding principle behind the data collection. The recruitment of a RAG to explore questions that were of importance to teachers widened the participatory nature of the research. World Café is a flexible collaborative method to gather participant perspectives in a social and relaxed environment (MacFarlane et al., 2017). The data collection method sat well with the underpinning philosophy of the research and provided sufficient data with which to answer the research questions. Five World Café gatherings were held in the midlands and south-east, with 282 teacher participants.

This novel participatory research approach to data collection was followed by a combination of qualitative (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and summative analysis (Frances Rapport Ph, 2010) of the participant data. The analysis methodologies maintained the integrity of the teacher voice, providing rich data to address the research questions.

7.5. Summary of Findings

7.5.1. To what extent did teacher conversations reflect the development of more student-learning environments, as expressed by the Junior Cycle Reform framework?

For the purposes of this research, student-centred learning was taken to include students taking responsibility for their own learning, student involvement and participation, positive relationships between learners and teachers, and the teacher becoming a facilitator (Brandes & Ginnis, 1986). This was one of the definitions shared with school leaders during CPD provided by JCT.

It is clear from the research that there has been a change in Irish teachers' role in the classroom. The principal benefit observed by teachers as a result of the reform process is the move to a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning. The data indicated that teachers had taken the CPD on board and were implementing new methodologies in their classrooms. As expected at the start of any large-scale reform, there was mention of increased workload and considerable stress involved with the change process.

From the research a clear picture emerged of a profession deeply concerned with student learning and student welfare. Changing teacher practices and beliefs is a complex task (Fullan, 2016; Guskey, 2010; Hargreaves, 2005). A number of factors affected teacher engagement with the reforms and may have impacted their ability to fully embrace student-centred learning.

Concerns for student outcomes. Teachers articulated concern for specific alterations to their subjects which they felt might undermine student competency. Teachers of Science, Irish and MFL had specific questions about the new Subject Specifications. This research supports the ISTA survey findings in relation to science teachers' concerns in this regard.

Clarity around some of the reforms. There was some vagueness around elements of the reforms, assessment changes and Subject Specifications. The staggered introduction of subjects meant that JCT facilitators might not have had answers to specific questions when teachers made enquiries about specific subjects. Confusion

caused by the staggered introduction mirrored the Scottish experience (Priestley & Sinnema, 2014).

Settling-in period. New practices require more planning and preparation and an initial increased workload. Teachers also mentioned logistical issues such as large class sizes and lack of resources as impeding their engagement with the reforms.

Teacher buy-in. Murchan (2018) found that Irish teachers had not been convinced by international research about assessment changes. This was also reflected in the present research. Some were not convinced that the assessment changes would deliver better learner outcomes. The dominance of the Leaving Certificate in the psyche of the Irish public and education establishment may have had a significant influence on teacher beliefs. Concern for students' progression to Senior Cycle meant that some teachers felt they were preparing students for the Leaving Certificate as well as the Junior Cycle.

In short. This research establishes a huge commitment on behalf of Irish teachers to the quality of student learning they deliver. The data demonstrated a broad welcome for student-centred learning and a new recognition of the role of the student in the learning dynamic. From this research it can be claimed that the Junior Cycle reform goal of embedding student-centred learning has largely been achieved.

7.5.2. Did teacher conversations identify opportunities and/or barriers to the Junior Cycle Reform's goal to replace the high-stakes summative exam system at the Junior Cycle level?

Towards a framework for Junior Cycle had noted that, "unless the examination at the end of junior cycle changes, what happens in the three years before it will simply stay the same" NCCA (2011, p. 8). The suite of assessment changes was designed to move Junior Cycle away from an exam focus to a student-centred, learning-focused programme. The intention was to build learner capacity through a dual approach to assessment (formative assessment with summative moments) and a skills- and knowledge-focused curriculum. The research identified a number of barriers and concerns for teachers in this regard.

The difficulty of changing beliefs. The political and social implications of assessment are well established (Black & Wiliam, 2005). Research also shows that teachers have deeply-held beliefs that stem from their own school experiences. It may take time for teachers to appreciate and value the new forms of assessment and their place in the Irish second-level education system.

COVID-19 has impacted assessment across Junior Cycle. Though not part of this research the impact of decisions made by the DES may have future implications for Junior Cycle. The pandemic precipitated the altering of assessment procedure in both Junior and Senior Cycle in 2020 and 2021. The use of Junior Cycle results for Leaving Certificate calculated grades may reaffirm for some the importance of state examinations at lower second level. The removal of one CBA and a return at Junior Cycle to a single terminal exam as the only measure of achievement may undermine confidence in new assessment practices. It is difficult to foresee what, if any, effect the changed assessment arrangements announced by the DES due to the impact of COVID-19 will have on teacher perceptions of Junior Cycle. It may be 2023 before teachers again engage with a full cycle of assessment. This interruption during the early stages of the Junior Cycle roll-out may mean teachers returning to old practices and inhibiting engagement with the reforms.

Teacher perceptions of learning outcomes. The research clearly shows that Irish teachers were highly focused on their students' learning outcomes. This focus led some to question the value of the reforms in relation to the quality of learning they deliver. Perhaps lack of familiarity with the new practices, issues around class size and resourcing of subjects compounded teacher difficulties in the initial stages of subject introduction.

Guskey (2010) suggests that teachers begin to embrace new practice when the experience their students' successes. However, the changed emphasis of Junior Cycle away from an exam focus to a learning focus and the new grading system may not have been fully understood, leading some to question the efficacy of the new programme.

Subject-specific concerns. Some subject-specific changes to assessment outlined in Specification and Assessment Guidelines caused concern for Irish and MFL teachers, who felt that the oral element of the subjects had been undermined by the removal of summative value for oral components of the course. Science teachers felt the specifications lacked the depth and content necessary for successful progression at Senior Cycle. These findings were supported by the ISTA Science (2019) teachers' survey.

Leaving Certificate dominance. Minister Quinn's statement that the Junior Certificate was no longer a high-stakes exam may now be correct. However, what this research highlights is the dominance of the Leaving Certificate pervading all aspects of second-level education in Ireland. This research identified student readiness for the Senior Cycle as a considerable concern for teachers. Participants commented on this in their discussions across all five World Café questions. The disconnect between Junior and Senior Cycles was perceived as growing. Reforms taking place at the senior level may bring both cycles more inline. However, as long as Leaving Certificate retains its social and educational importance, it is difficult to see its influence being dissipated by changes at the Junior Cycle level. More than curricular changes will be necessary if Leaving Certificate as a dominant influence on teacher perceptions is to change.

In short. The NCCA observation that "unless the examination at the end of junior cycle changes, what happens in the three years before it will simply stay the same" (2011) may have been focusing on the wrong exam. It would appear from this research that the Leaving Certificate has a significant impact on teacher perceptions not only as their exam focus, but as a measure of learner outcome. It might be significant that a research piece focused on Junior Cycle gathered data with such a focus on Senior Cycle and Leaving Certificate. Changing the perception of lower secondary as a preparation for Leaving Certificate may not be possible until the Leaving Certificate itself is fully reformed.

7.6. Further Research

7.6.1. What More Can the Data Tell Us?

This research aimed to give voice to teacher perceptions of Junior Cycle reform by addressing two specific research questions. This piece has been successful in answering those questions. Teachers have changed their professional practices and embraced a new role as facilitators of learning. Students have been empowered to take more ownership of their learning, and a more collaborative learning partnership between students and teachers is growing in Irish schools.

The move from an exam-orientated lower second level is a more challenging question. The dominance of Leaving Certificate has clearly impacted teacher perceptions about their role as educators. The complex reasons for why this is the case, and how Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle can be decoupled, is perhaps an area for further research.

7.6.2. Identifying and Clarifying the Role of Junior Cycle

This research identifies the Leaving Certificate as a significant influence on teacher perception of their role in relation to student learning. Concern for learner outcomes and student readiness for Senior Cycle was recorded across all five questions asked at World Café gatherings. Teachers did not seem to see the Junior Cycle as having a function in and of itself. The lack of a clearly articulated purpose for Junior Cycle may have impeded teacher engagement with new methodologies and specifications or led them to return to old habits.

Intermediate Certificate, Junior Certificate and now Junior Cycle have evolved to respond to the cultural and societal changes in Ireland. The OECD acknowledges that educational reform is characterised by multiple actors interacting with multiple systems with new and constantly changing demands (Viennet & Pont, 2019). The complex relationships involved in the Irish reform story are well documented by Murchan (2018) and (Printer, 2020). It is difficult to explore the complicated relationships between stakeholders without first identifying the role played by each actor. In addition, there is the interplay between teachers, new systems, curricula, resources and the stakeholders. CHAT detailed in 4.5.1 could be used to explore

these relationships. It had been intended to employ CHAT (Engeström, 1987) to explore the role of the Junior Cycle in Irish education from the teachers' perspective. The tool facilitates the uncovering of pivotal points of interaction in these relationships, identifying potential difficulties and barriers to the evolution of a new role for Junior Cycle.
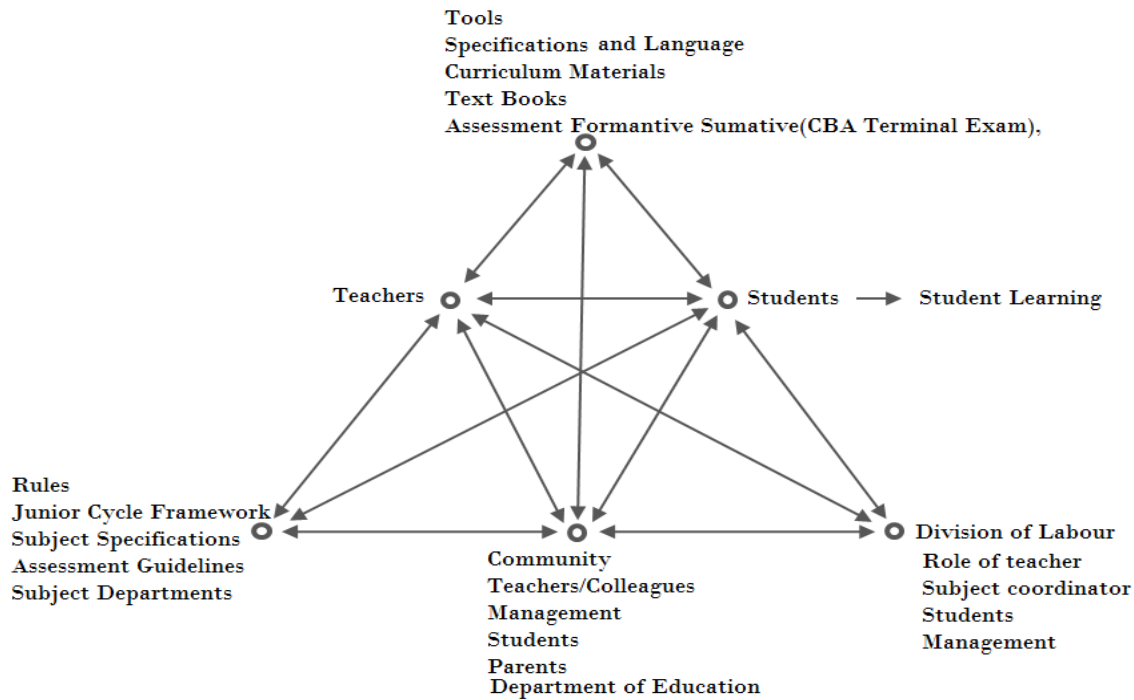
Figure 49: CHAT Analysis of Junior Cycle from the Perspective of Teachers

Figure 49, above, illustrates some of the interactions revealed using the Engstrom Model of Third Generation, CHAT, to explore Junior Cycle from the teachers' perspective. This is an area that deserves more research. Clarifying the role and purpose of the Junior Cycle could be critical in decoupling it from Leaving Certificate (Gleeson, 2021; Looney, 2007). The CHAT Model might provide the basis for further research in this area.

7.6.3. Creating Clarity

This research asked teachers to comment on the impact of the Junior Cycle reforms on **teacher wellbeing.** A significant cause of stress for teachers was identified as a lack of clarity around the reforms. Wiliam (2017) has noted the importance of developing teachers' competency and confidence around the implementation of formative assessment. Failure to do so may, he says, may have detrimental effects

on the learner. Priestley and Minty (2013) reported that some teachers had reverted to teaching in their habitual style due to insufficient understanding of new methodologies. This research may offer insights into why teachers had difficulties engaging with the CPD, particularly regarding assessment.

Coburn et al. (2016) and Murchan (2018) suggested that certain barriers may cause a lack of cohesion between policy and implementation. There may be a conflict between policy objectives and teacher unions or social and economic forces, impeding reform processes. There is agreement that if reforms are to succeed, the message must be clear and accurately conveyed to those responsible for putting it into action on the ground. The confusion experienced by some participants may have led to poor engagement with the reforms. There is room for research into the cause of this confusion. It may be timely, as lessons learned could support the roll-out of reform at Senior Cycle. Possible avenues supported by this research that might explain teacher lack of clarity around the reforms could be:

- Poor teacher engagement wih CPD.
- Flawed CPD.
- Volume and complexity of the changes introduced.
- The phased introduction of subjects impeding teacher engagement with CPD.
- An underdeveloped understanding of the role and function of assessment among teachers.

7.6.4. Barriers to the Change

The literature demonstrates multiple difficulties in relation to embedding educational change. Hargreaves (2005) has identified differences in how teachers engage with curricular change, depending on their years of service. Fullan (1997) noted the challenges of changing school culture. The experience of curricular reform across Europe has demonstrated the importance of the nature of the implementation process in bring teachers on board with change (Pešková, 2019). The early resistance to the reform from the ASTI and the voluntary secondary schools is perhaps a case in point. The title alone of Fullan and Hargreaves (2009) study,

Change wars, suggests that the path to educational reform does not run smooth. It may be useful to understand, from the perspective of Irish teachers, the barriers they had encountered. This research provides a window into teachers' engagement with all aspects of the reforms. It charts engagement from early CPD through a three-year subject cycle to final assessment. It is a resource for those genuinely seeking to work with Irish teachers to bring about lasting educational change in Ireland.

Junior Cycle reform is set to continue at least until all subjects have completed a three-year cycle. The reforms at the senior level are ongoing. The fallout from the impact of COVID-19 will doubtless lead to delays and an extended time frame for both. Assessing the efficacy of CPD provided and understanding teachers' feelings and needs in relation to educational change may be a valuable exercise at this time.

Teachers in this research identified a lack of clarity and consistency around the CPD as a barrier to engagement. There has been little research reflecting the Irish teacher experience with in-service around Junior Cycle reform. Studies from the Scottish experiences identified the phased introduction as problematic (Priestley, 2014). Other research suggests that CPD modelling AfL strategies may not prompt the deep understanding and ownership required (Buczynski & Hansen, 2010). There is room for a constructive critique of the Irish experience. Exploring the barriers teachers encountered may lead CPD providers to deliver more informed and effective CPD in the future. Data from this research offers a starting point – a picture of teacher perceptions of the CPD provided in an Irish context.

7.6.5. Teachers as Partners in Educational Reform

A feature of Junior Cycle has been the cooperation between the agencies, the linking of SSE processes, school inspections and ongoing CPD for teachers creating momentum for change. Hislop (2017) identified the efforts being made to integrate SSE with the roll-out of the Junior Cycle. This strategy is in line with Guskey (2002), who suggested that some pressure may be needed to encourage teachers who may be reluctant to embrace change. Fullan (1985b) made a similar observation. Teachers in this research noted being overwhelmed and stressed by the volume of change and the increased workload. A small number of teachers commented on

feeling underappreciated or undervalued. Was this pressure helping or hindering the change process?

There has been a drive in Junior Cycle to increase professional collaboration between teachers. Dedicated time was enshrined in Junior Cycle to provide for increased professional collaboration. Kirk (2018), director of JCT, announced the provision of professional time for teachers, one 40-minute period per week. It was intended to allow subject departments to meet, unpack learning outcomes for their subject, and ensure consistency across class content and assessments. The aim was to create a coherent and consistent learner experience. SLAR meetings were introduced, where teachers discuss and align grading standards for the CBAs. A SLAR meeting is prepared and facilitated by the subject coordinator, who is also responsible for collecting the completed ATs. This is a voluntary role. Irish schools do not have department heads. This increased teacher collaboration, with SSE and SLAR meetings, provide the kind of internal school pressure that Guskey (1986) and Fullan (1985b) described above. It may be useful to explore how teachers perceive this professional collaboration. The data relating to increased administration, workload and teacher stress might suggest it is perceived as just more work and not necessarily collaborative, professional engagement.

There is a tension between planning for teachers to implement changes in their practices and planning with teachers to develop new practices. Attempts were made to elicit teacher engagement with the reforms. However, Printer (2020) noted a very poor uptake among Irish teachers to engage with the NCCA consultation process. Teachers in this study expressed feelings of being undervalued and not consulted. In the light of this research, it may be worth investigating why the invitation to engage received such a poor response. Current literature proposes potential ways forward in developing teacher professional engagement. Fullan (2008) suggests a six-step path, which includes loving your employees. Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) propose developing teacher capacity through collaborative professionalism. Whether these initiatives are implemented, or whether they take place as a collaborative partnership between educators and policy developers, will make all the difference.

There is a recognition that teacher professional change and development is required. How those developing Irish education policy decide to move forward could be crucial in implementing the changes that will positively impact student experiences and learning. If we want to avoid what Kerr (2006) described as the result of the Canadian education reform experience, where educators are left feeling patronised and irrelevant, it may be worth exploring teacher feelings and needs around professional development.

7.7. Chapter Summary

This research sought to study teacher engagement with junior Cycle reform from the teachers' perspective. Genuine engagement necessitates understanding the perspective of the other without judgement. This research data presents a picture of Irish teachers who are committed to providing quality student outcomes – teachers who are passionate about their subject area and defensive about changes that might undermine the quality of learning. For the most part, teachers have welcomed a new learning relationship with their students and embraced student-centred learning. The research reaffirms the dominance of the Leaving Certificate as an obstacle to real change at the lower second level. A clarifying of the function and role of the Junior Cycle may need to take place for significant change to occur. Possibly not until the Leaving Certificate changes will anything change. Table 14, below, summarises the findings and further research opportunities.

Research Findings	Further Research Opportunities
Embedding student-centred learning. Irish teachers have embraced and embedded student-centred learning. Replacing high-stakes exams at Junior Cycle. Irish teachers are primarily concerned with the quality of learner outcomes. Irish teachers believe their role includes preparing their Junior Cycle students for Leaving Certificate. Considering the dominance of the Leaving Certificate, replacing high-stakes exams at lower secondary level, may not be enough to remove their effect on the student experience. Reform at Senior Cycle may have to take place to bring about any real change.	Clarifying the role of Junior Cycle: in terms of learner outcomes. in relation to Senior Cycle. Creating clarity. Investigating why some teacher did not feel confident about implementing reforms following CPD. Barriers to change. Exploring, from Irish teachers' perspectives, the issues and obstacles that prevent them from engaging fully with Junior Cycle. Teachers as partners. Exploring teacher feelings and needs in relation to professional development.

Table 14:   *Summary of the Research Findings and Further Research Opportunities*

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Appendices

Appendix A: Teacher Online Questionnaire

Teacher perspectives on teaching and learning.

"The Junior Cycle Framework 2015 sets out major change in teaching practice, specifically the embedding of formative assessment and a change in the teacher role in the classroom. A major program of CPD is being rolled out to elicit changes in teacher practice and embed formative assessment." Framework for Junior Cycle. It is in the context of these changes that my research sits. The data collected from this research will be used to investigate the feeling and needs of Irish teacher around teaching, learning, reform, teacher agency and CPD. The changes in Junior Cycle will have a major impact on teachers. I am asking for your input, so the teacher voice can be heard and contribute to, the ongoing debate around the reform taking place in our education system. My goal here is to provide the space to elicit the voice of teachers. On completion my research should reach an audience and hopefully wield some influence on the issues affecting Irish teachers. I would like you to consider what in your experience teachers' feelings and needs are around 1. Teaching 2. Learning 3. Junior Cycle Reform 4. Teacher Agency (The capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues.) 5. CPD Further I would like you to consider what questions I could or should ask teachers around these five areas. Open as you like, any direction you like, anything that comes to you. The broader the contributions I receive, the better I will be able to focus my research on the issues of concern that arise across a significant number of teachers. In any report on the results of this research your identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing names and disguising any details of input which may reveal personal identity or the identity of your workplace. All data will be collected and stored in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research work your time and support is much appreciated.

1. Please indicate the sector in which you currently teach.
- ○ Secondary
- ○ Community or Comprehensive
- ○ ETB
- ○ Other

2. Please indicate your age bracket.
- ○ 20-25
- ○ 25-30
- ○ 30-35
- ○ 35-40
- ○ 45-50

○ 50+

3.Years of Service. Please chose from the options below.

○ Newly Qualified Teacher in first year of teaching.

○ 1-5 years

○ 5-10 years

○ 10-15 years

○ 15-20 years

○ 20-25 years

○ 25-30 years

○ 30 years or more

4.Gender

[   ]

5.Main subject taught.

[   ]

6.Junior Cycle In-service attended

☐ Wholeschool Rationale and Framework

☐ Wholeschool Wellbeing

☐ Wholeschool Teaching Learning Assessment and Reporting

☐ Subject Cluster Day1

☐ Subject Cluster Day 2

☐ Subject Cluster Day 3

7.Elective in-service attended if any.

[   ]

8.What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the feeling of teachers around teaching.

[   ]

9.What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the needs of teachers around teaching.

[   ]

10.What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the feeling of teachers around learning.

11.What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the needs of teachers around learning.

12.What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the feeling of teachers around Junior Cycle Reform.

13.What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the needs of teachers around Junior Cycle Reform.

14.What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the feeling of teachers around teacher agency.

15.What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the needs of teachers around teacher agency.

16.What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the feeling of teachers around CPD.

17.What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the needs of teachers around CPD.

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18.Further I would like you to consider what questions I could or should ask teachers around these five areas. Open as you like, any direction you like, anything that comes to you. The broader the contributions I receive, the better I will be able to focus my research on the issues of concern that arise across a significant number of teachers.

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19.Please add and comments you may have in relation to teacher perspectives on teaching, learning, the reform process, teacher agency or CPD.

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Appendix B: Results of teacher online questionnaire.

1. Please indicate the sector in which you currently teach.

More Details

🔵 Secondary	3
🟠 Community or Comprehensive	4
🟢 ETB	0
🔴 Other	0

2. Please indicate your age bracket.

More Details

🔵 20-25	0
🟠 25-30	0
🟢 30-35	2
🔴 35-40	2
🟣 45-50	1
🟤 50+	2

3. Years of Service. Please chose from the options below.

More Details

🔵 Newly Qualified Teacher in firs...	0
🟠 1-5 years	1
🟢 5-10 years	0
🔴 10-15 years	3
🟣 15-20 years	1
🟤 20-25 years	0
🩷 25-30 years	0
⚫ 30 years or more	2

4. Gender

More Details

7

Responses

Male 1
Female 6
No response 1

5. Main subject taught.

More Details

8

Responses

Geography
Science Biology
Visual Art
Maths and business
Geography
Science
maths
Music

6. Junior Cycle In-service attended

More Details

🔵 Wholeschool Rationale and Fr...	6
🟠 Wholeschool Wellbeing	5
🟢 Wholeschool Teaching Learnin...	5
🔴 Subject Cluster Day1	7
🟣 Subject Cluster Day 2	3
🟤 Subject Cluster Day 3	0
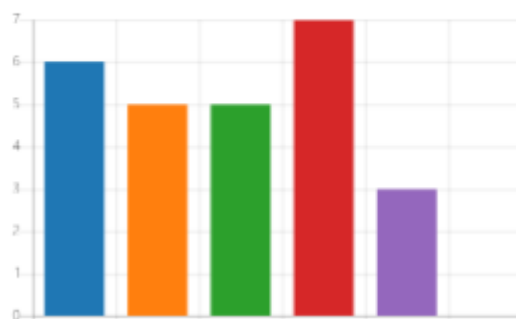
6. Junior Cycle In-service attended

7 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	["Wholeschool Rationale and Framework","Wholeschool Wellbeing","Subject Cluster Day1"]
2	anonymous	["Wholeschool Rationale and Framework","Wholeschool Wellbeing","Wholeschool Teaching Learning Assessment and Reporting","Subject Cluster Day1","Subject Cluster Day 2"]
3	anonymous	["Wholeschool Rationale and Framework","Subject Cluster Day1","Subject Cluster Day 2"]
4	anonymous	["Wholeschool Wellbeing","Wholeschool Teaching Learning Assessment and Reporting","Subject Cluster Day1"]
5	anonymous	["Wholeschool Rationale and Framework","Wholeschool Wellbeing","Wholeschool Teaching Learning Assessment and Reporting","Subject Cluster Day1"]
6	anonymous	["Wholeschool Rationale and Framework","Wholeschool Teaching Learning Assessment and Reporting","Subject Cluster Day1"]
7	anonymous	["Wholeschool Rationale and Framework","Wholeschool Wellbeing","Wholeschool Teaching Learning Assessment and Reporting","Subject Cluster Day1","Subject Cluster Day 2"]

Sub

1	anonymous	Leadership Assessment and Reporting
2	anonymous	Religion Coursework
3	anonymous	none
4	anonymous	None
5	anonymous	N/A
6	anonymous	Junior Cycle Science run by ISTA, Restorative practice.
7	anonymous	one maths new junior cert inservice
8	anonymous	None this school year

8. What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the feeling of teachers around teaching.

8   Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	A sense of being overwhelmed by changes in Junior Cycle. A fear of CBAs /SLARs Fear of all the changes
2	anonymous	Its a tough job working with young people and colleagues too. Its changed a lot in the last 10 years. Parents pressure in a factor nowadays
3	anonymous	Some very positive changes, however teachers need to be consulted more on the needs of students and methods of delivery.
4	anonymous	Stress...resistance to change due to lack of communication.
5	anonymous	Many teachers are frustrated with the changes in teaching and with the attitudes towards teachers.
6	anonymous	Teaching has changed hugely from the analogy of the jug as the teacher and glasses being students filled with water from the teacher. The teaching has changed to more active methods. the Junior Cycle (and some leaving certificate subjects) supports active teaching methods, not just the teacher putting on a power point and students taking notes with a test next week. Junior cycle incorporates key skills which give a broad balanced learner but also encourages/pushs teachers to teach differently such as think.share pair, projects , presentations. note taking. working in groups etc. The students being more active and taking more responsibility for their learning If a teacher was engaged in the process of junior cycle reform from the beginning the process would be much easier for the teacher. Its been a difficult change for some such as new skills to be learned such as ICT. Some teachers havent seen the value of using sucess crictera/learning intentions etc. A huge amount of change have been introduced very quickly.
7	anonymous	teaching is getting harder to do.too much extra work thrown in on top of what is expected to be taught at the end of the year
8	anonymous	Too much paper work and talking about how we should teach rather than letting us teach.

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9. What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting oth teachers formally and informally are the needs of teachers around teaching.

8 Responses

ID↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	More targeted CPD Need to read around the topics . Access and read the specifications & guidelines to be more comfortable with what is expected of them.
2	anonymous	Support from management Better tools and facilities for the job
3	anonymous	Lack of greater vision regarding the whole junior cycle, at many subject in-services the facilitator doesn't seem to have the answers to considered questions from teachers. Much more consultation is needed BEFORE attempts to implement new ideas.
4	anonymous	Consultation from the department...proper and timely training.
5	anonymous	More support. From each other, management and the wider public.
6	anonymous	In service that is of benefit to teachers, some of the quality has been very poor. More working with colleagues in subject areas. Not enough time to work with our colleagues in subjects.
7	anonymous	they need support for their colleagues.
8	anonymous	We are asked to provide Success Criteria for our students and yet aren't given such as teachers in relation to having a sample exam paper to see that our teaching is on track.

10. What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting o teachers formally and informally are the feeling of teachers around learning.

8 Responses

ID↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	Students are getting less content and unsure of what they are replacing it with Uncertainty about efficacy of a skills based curriculum a sizable number rmain to be convinced of its efficacy(Maybe due to the way it was sold to them initially)
2	anonymous	the capacity of students to retain information has changed Technology is a factor now and wasn't, using it in class, them overusing it Social media. Basic skills of learning are missing
3	anonymous	The ethos of contemplation, discovery and exploratory learning is a very sound one, however if the timetabling is not sufficient and if loss of time due to normal school life such as Musicals, projects, sports matches, mock exams are not taken into account then timelines become stressful for both the student and teacher and cramming through the course becomes inevitable.
4	anonymous	Facilators of learning...support students various learning styles.
5	anonymous	Teacher learning or student learning?
6	anonymous	Teachers have to learn the new methodologies, approaches and content, The learner (student) has become more independent, more active. The key skills are an area where students can excel. We can have a well rounded learner at the end of the junior cycle. Learning comes in different forms now such as working in a group, setting goals, being creative, creating a poster, blog, craft, presenting on a topic not just a written test.There is more interaction between the teacher and learner, qs and answers, discussons etc
7	anonymous	students don't seem to be able to learn anymore. everything must be handed to them and then learned for them (in some cases)
8	anonymous	I wonder if students are learning any better and how this will tie in moving into Leaving Cert.

11. What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting othe teachers formally and informally are the needs of teachers around learning.

8 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	Teachers need to be more comfortable with the skills based element of Junior cycle and trust this will meet the needs of 21century students.
2	anonymous	Need to understand how to communicate with the youngsters of today CPD on better learning techniques
3	anonymous	To be listened to especially with regard to above.
4	anonymous	Openiness to new methods and resourses.
5	anonymous	More clear concise direction and support.
6	anonymous	Professional time of 1 class a week is not enough. ICT training is very important. As is the structures and infrastructures to support ICT in classroom and school as a whole. Whole staff discussion on learning is very important. Students not engaging with the process. teachers not informing themselves of their own subject information.
7	anonymous	need to learn new skills to help the whole student body learn in this world where we rely on computers phone and ipads to communicate
8	anonymous	We have been given virtually no time to familiarise ourselves with what we as teachers should be "learning" to help our students learn. Many teachers have 2 subjects which means you have 20mins for prep etc per week. Completely unreasonable. In many cases I feel it is the blind leading the blind.

12. What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting oth teachers formally and informally are the feeling of teachers around Junior Cycle Reform.

8 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	Overwhelmed at pace of change Many embracing the changes some very uncertain it is an improvement
2	anonymous	Its been a strain, some CPD but no resources. Lack of clarity around it. Management doesn't see the changes in the classroom so not much help. More work not more time the increase in work doesn't the professional time we were given Too many meetings
3	anonymous	It seems rushed and that it's being implemented before it's fully realised. a considerable number of teachers see it as a dumbing down of the previous JC. The thoughts around the new junior cycle seem to have replaced real skill building particularly for practical subjects.
4	anonymous	Confusion..anxious...annoyed
5	anonymous	Teachers are very frustrated. They are confused about what is going on. However talking to many teachers they are confused because they have done little to no research around the new Junior Cycle. Some believe they are just changing for changing sake and with respect to some aspects I agree.
6	anonymous	Ranges from positive to very negative. If teachers engaged with the process from the beginning i think teachers found the junior cycle easier. Hopefullywe will get a better learner at the end of the process. (As a mother of 2 students in primary school, I can see the links between junior cycle and primary school e.g.presenting to a group on a topic, primary school now complete these tasks.)
7	anonymous	.Skeptical. its not helping the whole student body.weaker students don't have the support of foundation level. Its going to take a long time to get it right.if it works
8	anonymous	We have been given virtually no time to familiarise ourselves with what we as teachers should be "learning" to help our students learn. Many teachers have 2 subjects which means you have 20mins for prep etc per week. Completely unreasonable. In many cases I feel it is the blind leading the blind. Reform was made with very little consultation with the people on the ground - teachers - who have to deliver the new JC

13. What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the needs of teachers around Junior Cycle Reform.

8 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	Targeted CPD in their specific subjects Templates and specific supports .
2	anonymous	More time Less meetings Clearer directions around content and exam expectations
3	anonymous	Again to be listened to, to have a fully formed curriculum with full collaboration before implementing anything. Many say it's vision is sound but the methods of implementation and assessment are not.
4	anonymous	Consultation...proper training.
5	anonymous	More specific information.
6	anonymous	Time. CPD of value. CBAs, Slars need time to organised and set up.The subject co coordinator now has a huge role and work load to complete. they have to minute meetings, extra paper work, call meetings etc etc. They have no time table allowance or any form of incentive to be coordinator.
7	anonymous	Need time .....to cover the content of the curriculum in the manner in which it is to be done.
8	anonymous	More consultation - Sample exam papers from Year One. More time to upskill and feel confident about what we are supposed to teach - how - and what our end game is. Conflicting advice from everyone - colleagues- textbooks - PDST Team -

14. What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the feeling of teachers around teacher agency.

8 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	Initially the changes mean a feeling of disempowerment and loss of control As changes are embedded they become more comfortable and with the changes and there is more of a sense of positivity in their abilities to deliver a good quality service to their students.
2	anonymous	I don't know what it means really. We get more 'agency' translates into more work
3	anonymous	For the excellent teacher they will always act purposefully and constructively where possible but I have heard excellent teachers say it has made them 'less good' at their job.
4	anonymous	Not sure
5	anonymous	??
6	anonymous	This is a difficult concept for some. we have moved from a very structured syllabus to learning outcomes. This has been difficult for some. Again any one who has engaged with their colleagues on content has experienced growth Working with colleagues has been difficult for some. Working with management who do not see the bigger picture and have a tick the box attitude can be soul destroying and very demoralizing to teachers be demoralizing. On a positive point working with colleagues has been very rewarding and given me different points of view of course content. There is more a freedom to go "off course" if the area was of interest or if a topic is in news etc. Teachers have more confidence (or need) to go teach new topics in different ways.
7	anonymous	dont know
8	anonymous	We are not given time to do such

15. What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the needs of teachers around teacher agency.

8 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	A sense of ownership of the changes and how they can impact in a positive way on student ability to reach their potential
2	anonymous	Id like to be given less agency more direction and less meetings
3	anonymous	To be listened to, their professional experience is a gold mine of ideas and information.
4	anonymous	Not sure
5	anonymous	??
6	anonymous	That management to be confident in their teachers ability to teach the new Junior Cycle. Support from management. Working with people can be difficult with other very opinionated views .
7	anonymous	dont know
8	anonymous	We need much much personal time to upskill and know where we are going.

16. What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the feeling of teachers around CPD.

8 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	Subjects not live yet teachers feel not enough CPD available and a sense of foreboding that they are unable to meet the needs of their students going forward Teachers attending Junior Cycle CPD in specific subjects feel the quality of provision is inadequate to meet their and their students needs.
2	anonymous	CPD was done to us not with us, seemed confused and lacked clarity especially early ones. They couldn't answer questions. No one knew what was happening with exams. Lot of waffley ones day wasted.
3	anonymous	They are ok but often poorly prepared often with CPD instructors not knowing the whole picture and unable to address genuine concerns and questions from teachers.
4	anonymous	Essential..
5	anonymous	As long as it's not just for the sake of using up Croke Park hours it's good. When you come away feeling like you could actually use something in your class, CPD is good
6	anonymous	Some of the CPD has been of poor quality and frustrating. At some in-service teachers were frustrated, annoyed and even angry. The facilitators ranged from engaging and well informed to knowing very little and admitted being lazy. The perception is negative around CPD I would say.
7	anonymous	needs to be done, but be worthwhile
8	anonymous	Not enough - PDST are unsure themselves - As i said the blind leading the blind to some extent

17. What from your experience, professionally, working with colleagues, attending CPD, meeting other teachers formally and informally are the needs of teachers around CPD.

8 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	Targeted specific CPD to equip them with the skills to meet the demands of the new curriculum. A clear and concise rationale that these changes are positive , justifiable & necessary. Specific CPD to support and manage the pace of change.
2	anonymous	Clear informed information about the subject assessment, content and the follow on at leaving cert. To be asked what we need not herded together and managed. No feedback acted upun things should change if enough teachers ask for something Less wellbeing days
3	anonymous	CPD needs to come from a complete vision not different facilitators only holding parts of the jigsaw.
4	anonymous	More local locations for course...most Business cpd in Athlone..
5	anonymous	Make it relevant and worthwhile.
6	anonymous	Better quality, positive CPD.
7	anonymous	subject specific or certain topics. but useful reusable content
8	anonymous	More needed with precise instruction.

18. Further I would like you to consider what questions I could or should ask teachers around these five areas. Open as you like, any direction you like, anything that comes to you. The broader the contributions I receive, the better I will be able to focus my research on the issues of concern that arise across a significant number of teachers.

8 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	The pace of change overall in schools in relation to the number of circulars and policies coming from the Dept which are impacting on their teaching and learning this is in addition to junior cycle eg GDPR Child safeguarding Is this adding to the sense of disaffection among some?
2	anonymous	No
3	anonymous	What is positive and working within your OWN subject? what is NOT working? why? what changes would you make or key areas would you keep from the old JC? Is the new assessment fair? does it cater for the range of abilities you teach? Do practical subjects really need to become so wordy is the act of doing not valued too? How can we improve skills building particularity is 1st and 2nd year before formally assessing students?
4	anonymous	Teachers needs surrounding Junior cycle reform.
5	anonymous	Teacher Well being around JC reform
6	anonymous	explain teacher agency
7	anonymous	none
8	anonymous	What is my role now as a teacher ? Teaching seems the least of our role as we are now involved in so much more planning, paperwork, dealing with mixed abilities and catering to all, managing students' autistic needs, behavioural issues, psychological issues and any other issue that parents and society want to add to our teaching load.

19. Please add and comments you may have in relation to teacher perspectives on teaching, learning, the reform process, teacher agency or CPD.

8 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	none
2	anonymous	Whats happening at senior cycle and when will we be told feel we are the last to know and the most involved.
3	anonymous	Listen to teacher concerns, be specific to each subject, it seems as though a one glove fits all is being attempted in the new JC. some elements work for some subjects and some students and other elements for others. Subject specific changes need to be addressed. Most importantly the new JC seems to be rushed in and does not seem to have been fully visualised.
4	anonymous	Progress is neccesssary .reform can be good provided theres communication
5	anonymous	Reform is good as long as it's not done just to have reform
6	anonymous	None
7	anonymous	It is going to be hard to reform the JC and it will take time to get it to where its going to end up.
8	anonymous	I fear where we are going and question who is making these decisions.

Looking for the teacher voice in

Junior cycle Reform

Part of a doctoral research project

by Gráinne Mulcahy with the School of Education TCD

You are invited to take part in a

World Café Event 5-6.30pm

Wexford Education Centre ....Tuesday 17th Sept 2019

Blackrock Education Centre ....Thursday 26th Sept 2019

cycle reform. I aim to give audience and influence to the teacher voice in the conversations on educational change and the role of teachers in that change.

Please see your local Education Centre website for details.
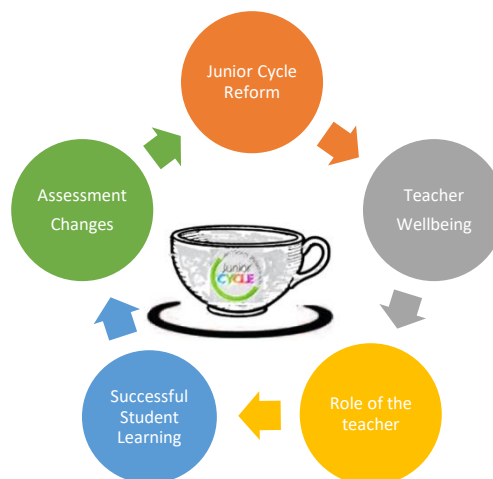
Gráinne Mulcahy

Appendix D; Consent Form World Café

Department of Education Trinity College

Gráinne Mulcahy

How is Junior Cycle Reform impacting on student learning? The teacher's perspective.

The Junior Cycle Framework 2015 sets out major change in teaching practice, specifically the embedding of formative assessment and a change in the teacher role in the classroom. A major program of CPD is being rolled out to elicit changes in teacher practice and embed formative assessment. Kember (1998) takes the view that fundamental changes to the quality of teaching and learning are unlikely to happen without changes to teachers' conceptions of teaching. However, what Irish teacher's perceptions of learning are, has not been established. What they perceive the function of teaching to be, has not been asked. I propose to ask these questions and establish if the current roll-out of CPD and the introduction of a new Junior Cycle will impact on beliefs about learning and teaching among Irish teachers.

The data collected from this World Café event will be used to establish what are Irish teacher perceptions about teaching and learning, in their own words. The changes in Junior Cycle will have a major impact on teachers I am asking for your input, so teacher voice can be heard and contribute to the ongoing debate about the educational reform taking place at junior and Senior Cycle levels. Data collection will take place over the academic year B2018/19. All data will be collected and stored in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Please feel free to contact me about any aspect of the survey or interview process.

Researcher contact details. Grainne Mulcahy email: gmulcahy@tcd.ie phone: 0876470137

Consent to take part in research.

World Café Event

1. You are invited to participate in a World Café event to develop an understanding of teacher perceptions of student learning in light of Junior Cycle Reform. This is a research project being conducted by Grainne Mulcahy, a student at The School of Education Trinity College Dublin It should take approximately one hour to complete.

2. **Your participation in this World Café event is voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the group at any time without penalty. You are free to decline to answer any question you do not wish to answer for any reason. Once you have summitted your comment to the group it is not possible to withdraw from the study, all participation in the World Café is anonymous.**

3. I understand that my personal details, years of service, Subject, CPD attended and education sector, voluntary secondary, ETB, community and comprehensive or other as stated, will be held by the researcher to support data analysis.

4. I understand that participation involves contributing in a World Café event lasting approximately an hour.

5. I understand that I will not benefit from participating in this research, other than benefits that may accrue through reflection on my professional practice.

6. I agree to my contribution being audio-recorded, to facilitate the researcher to accurately transcribe it.

7. I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

8. I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my contribution which may reveal my identity or the identity of people or school I speak about.

9. I understand that extracts from my contribution may be quoted in the research the of Grainne Mulcahy in her dissertation, conference presentation, published papers.

10. I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.

11. I understand that a transcript of my contribution in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for six years following my participation.

12. I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

13. I understand that I am free to contact the researcher to seek further clarification and information at gmulcahy@tcd.ie.

Grainne Mulcahy

Address: Tinnok, Gorey, Co Wexford.

Mobile 087 6470137

gmulcahy@tcd.ie

In signing I agree to all the elements of the research consent.

Signature of research participant --- ----------------

Signature of participant   Date

Signature of researcher I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

--- ---------------------

Signature of researcher   Date

Appendix E: Sample Table Question Prompt

What impact do teachers believe

the change in the teacher role

Framework for Junior Cycle 2015

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Role of the teacher.

To facilitate the type of learning envisaged above, the role of the teacher and the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship will evolve. The teacher's role as a leader and facilitator of learning in the
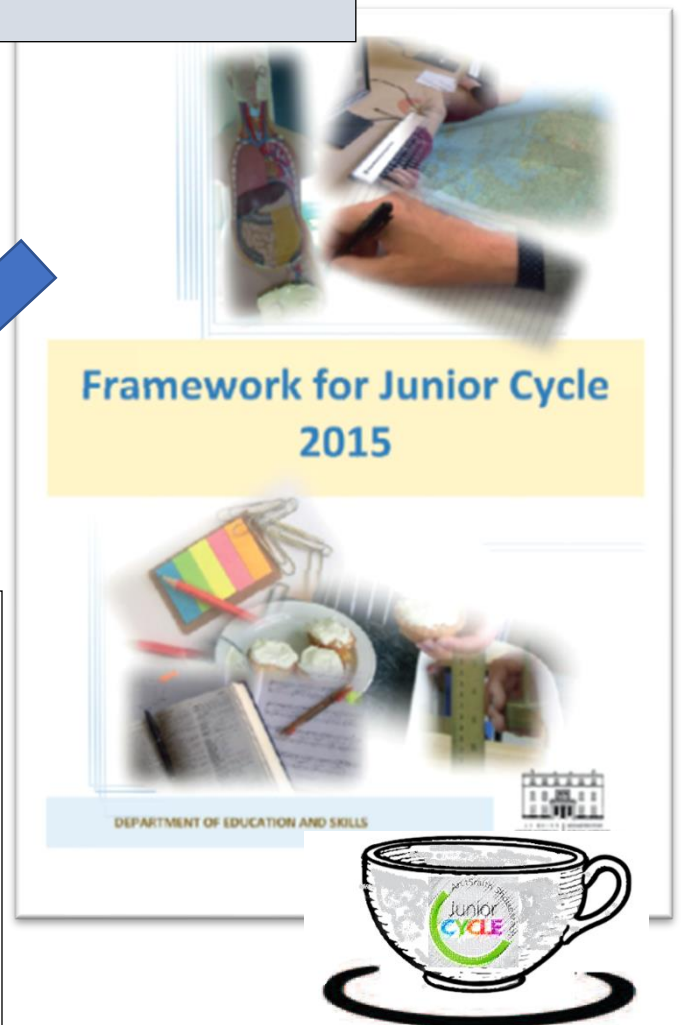
Appendix F: Station Questions for World Café

1. Assessment Changes

The most significant change in the new Junior Cycle is in the area of assessment. There is a substantial body of research evidence to show that educational outcomes for students can be improved by broadening the approach to assessment. There is also a recognition that no single assessment event can provide evidence of the full range of student achievement. All assessment in Junior Cycle, formative or summative, moment-in-time or ongoing, SEC, NCCA or teacher-designed, should have as its primary purpose, the support of student learning. P35

Recognised in the Framework Document as "the most significant change" how do teachers feel the assessment changes might impact student learning?

2. Role of the teacher

To facilitate the type of learning envisaged above, the role of the teacher and the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship will evolve. The teacher's role as a leader and facilitator of learning in the classroom will grow as key skills are developed during the mediation of the content of subjects, short courses and other learning experiences. P2

"This is what teachers have been doing anyway" is a phrase that has been used many times at in-service and amongst teachers.

How has the role teacher's role changed, or has it changed?

If there is a change, what might be the impact on student learning?

Your reactions:

3.Teacher Wellbeing

We know change is messy and there are challenges and an extra work load at the beginning. Teachers have expressed feelings of

- 'being overwhelmed by the pace of change'
- 'there is a huge amount of time needed now for meetings and preparation, even in class everything takes more time'
- 'not being listened to'
- 'teachers are frustrated and confused about what's going on'
- 'more consultation is needed before attempts to implement changes'

What do teachers feel are the challenges they face implementing the Junior Cycle reform?

How might these challenges impact student learning?

Can you suggest supports or resources that could be put in place to enhance teacher wellbeing?

Your reactions:

3. Junior Cycle Reform

The Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) incorporates a shared understanding of how teaching, learning and assessment practices should evolve to support the delivery of a quality, inclusive and relevant education that will meet the needs of Junior Cycle students, both now and in the future. This shared understanding is informed by engagement with stakeholders and by national and international research.

What might teachers say are the potential benefits and possible challenges for student learning posed by Junior Cycle Reform?

Your reactions:

4. Student Learning

The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative.
- John Dewey

What, from perspective of Irish teachers, are the crucial elements for successful student learning?

Your reactions:

Appendix G: Pilot World Café Data Collection Venue 1

Venue 1 researcher present.

- Instructions were sent via email to participants, obtaining consent and outlining the structure of the World Café event.
- Five stations were set up with stimulus material and the research question.
- Poster and markers were available at each station.
- Teacher arrived and informally joined groups or circulated as they wished and moved through each station. There was no particular order or time allocation for each station.
- Participants noted comments on the poster, individually or as a group following discussion.
- Light refreshments were available throughout the event.
- A general discussion and closing were held at the end of the session.
- The researcher was not a participant in the Café session but led the closing discussion.

Data recorded

1. Teacher Wellbeing.

Challenges	Impact on Students
The Jargon used	If teachers don't understand its hard to explain to students
Too much too soon	Lack of consistency for students
Too confusing	
Not being consulted in change process	Causes confusion for students
Techers feel their wellbeing is not being considered	
Lack of examples (CBA, final exams)	Unsure of the depth of topic to be covered for final exam
Huge change	No ICT background, email, Microsoft
Increased departmental elements (challenging with many different outlooks)	Different teachers focusing on different areas. Increased anxiety when students compare

Supports Requested by teachers to support the reform process.

\# Indicates requests identified as particular to this school.

- CPD more relevant
- Timetabled time for meeting/collaborated
- Computers in every classroom #
- A3 paper for projects #
- Teachers own classroom #
- Budget allowance for recording devices #
- In school teach-meets Examples of work/exams given
- More examples of CBAs descriptors
- Printers that have ink and toner consistently #
- Crogh Park hours allotted for ICT training
- How to use online portfolios#
- More online support from JCT

2 Benefits of Junior Cycle reform and challenges of Junior Cycle reform

Benefits of Junior Cycle Reform

- Spoon feeding gone
- Continuous assessment element
- More hands on
- More student input/voice
- More choice for teachers, wider scope for material
- More hands-on curriculum/ more interesting
- Team work
- Public speaking
- Work together
- Introduced to more literature genres
- More creative opportunities
- Personal choice/preferences can be more easily facilitated

Challenges of Junior Cycle Reform

- Lack of guidance
- Lack of resources
- Lack of concrete answers relation to assessment
- Too much work for teachers
- Not enough clear CPD. Too rushed, too much information at any given time.
- CBAs are not clear what are we working for
- Lack of ict skills
- Public speaking difficult for some kids, no training (speech and drama)
- Drop in grades at JC level (No distinctions or very few)
- Groupwork with large classes
- Teachers not owning their own classroom #
- Common level not challenging high achievers too hard for low achievers
- New grading system may demotivate students
- Common-level exam How can you challenge a traditional A student with the same exam taken by a student who would normally take an O level paper.
- Can we provide students with the resources to enable independent learning and research?
- Just as we have been teaching to the test in traditional exams are we in danger of doing a similar repetitive task for the AT.
- What about children absent each time a CBA is on end of 3 years =Not reported = 0

3. The changed role of the teacher in the classroom

Change, If any.	Impact on Student Learning
Teacher is now often a facilitator of teaching	Student will own their learning move as their Key Skills develop
Not just chalk and talk	
This involves a lot of planning for the teacher	With more student led learning
Role not changed teacher still doing same things	Sometimes the basics of a subject do not get covered which is a huge disadvantage in the subject
	Students are not disciplined learners they are jumping from topic to topic and not learning the basics
Teacher workload increased	
Broader student learning	Key kills work together present a piece, more hands on
Teacher autonomy has changed now give more responsibility to students, teacher is a facilitator especially CBA	
	Students should have more responsibility for their own learning eg to produce CBAs
Teachers are changing their methodologies eg using peer assessment	Students experiencing different methodologies
More interactive and engaging	Students are not passive sitting writing notes
Teachers have to incorporate more elements (feedback videos, games, assessment pair work into lesson,) more work for teacher	More enjoyable and interesting for students
So much going on	Student may not feel they are able to complete achieve the los

4 Assessment Changes in Junior Cycle

Change	Impact on Student Learning
Common paper	Not all able for the language of papers
Self-supported study for students not teacher led (peer assessment)	Weaker students can't organise themselves
Assessment is ongoing not on final paper	Good sharing communicating
Assessment Task only 10%	Module type assessment easier on student rather than final exam
CBAs meant to be low stakes but DES saying they will replace exams teachers confused	Concern by teachers not all students will reach milestones in assessment
More reflection included as part a assessment (can be useful for student progress, creates opportunities to improve/build knowledge.	Assessment criteria can be quite limiting Big jump between exceptional and above expectations
	Issues surrounding technology access adds to pressure for anxious students
CBAs being recorded (no budget for devices) #	Questioning can add to pressure fear of unknown
More peer assessment	Students learn from reading each other's answers experience what success criteria amounts to
More ICT at home	
Issues with GDPR	
Grade changes	Grading system can be de-motivating/question their own ability very difficult to achieve 'distinction'
Language change e.g. merit	Language of grading system could affect self-esteem 'in line with' students don't understand what this means

5. Key elements for student learning as perceived by teachers.

- Students must participate meaningfully in class and with curriculum
- Students using their initiative for their work not relying on teachers to give them info
- Students take responsibility for their own learning using self and peer assessment and reflection to progress learning
- LIs and success criteria give clear objectives to students
- Language is often not student friendly hinders learning
- JCSP students and weaker students may struggle with mainstream common level with Communication in general
- Class numbers and lack of computers printers in room are hindering
- Need computers /ipads in room 4 per room at least #
- Discipline
- Assessed (formal and Summative)
- Positive affirmation and reports
- Home/school support for child who is struggling
- Good mental health for both staff and students
- Teacher guided learning still required especially for weaker students (its less intimidating)
- More pressure on weaker child to preform
- Answer what's asked (higher order questions)
- Related to real-life
- Engage with material
- Time management CBAs (a lot going on).

Appendix H: Pilot World Café Data Collection Venue 2

Venue 2.

Researcher was not present. Less structured answers and less content generally than the researcher led data collection event.

1.Recognised in the Framework Document as "the most significant change" how do teachers feel the assessment changes might impact student learning?

- The change takes away from rote learning and there is now more focus on developing skills.
- There is supposed to be less pressure on students. However, students report CBAs being stressful.
- There is more opportunities for different learners such as researching, reporting, presenting etc.
- One teacher reported that the changes within languages is functional. The students are learning to have conversation/role play. Students must answer questions unscripted which means they can't rehearse.
- Another teacher supports this but also remarks that the students are no longer being graded on their oral conversation. They are being marked on the reflection they do after the oral cba.
- For students going through the reform, they must get used to new teaching and learning methods.
- The students must now be continuously doing work, instead of having the choice to cram everything in at the end of the year.
- New Junior Cycle assessment does not set the students up for the leaving certificate.
- Preparation and project work more beneficial for the students and they could come out with a better grade.

2. How has the role teacher's role changed, or has it changed?

If there is a change, what might be the impact on student learning?

- Changes: Students learning from each other.
- There is less emphasis on lecture style teaching.

- Teachers no longer simply handing the information to the students - there is more emphasis on research.

Impact:

- Students must think for themselves and problem solve, therefore they are learning better.

3. What do teachers feel are the challenges they face implementing the Junior Cycle reform?

How might these challenges impact student learning?

Can you suggest supports or resources that could be put in place to enhance teacher wellbeing?

- Teachers feel they need a lot of time and training.
- The challenges will affect students as the teacher might need to take off days for training, or teachers may be stressed due to the challenges which impacts negatively on the student learning.

Supports

- Resources
- Staff wellbeing day which would include a speaker/activities etc.
- Collaboration between teachers.
- Teacher bonding day.
- Organised nights out from the contingency.
- Extra periods per week for planning.
- Extra resource teachers during class times.

4.What might teachers say are the potential benefits and possible challenges for student learning posed by Junior Cycle Reform?

- The changes in teaching and learning do not set the students up for the leaving certificate.
- Teachers felt that there is too much of a gap between Junior Cycle and leaving certificate.
- There's not as much focus on rote learning, now on active learning which is a benefit for most students but not all.

- Teachers remarked that some students prefer rote learning to active learning in the classroom. However, it was also remarked that active learning is better for retention.
- Increased group work is a benefit for students at varying levels.
- Teachers felt there was more pressure on time to get the course finished due to new teaching and learning styles.
- Junior cycle can be seen to be more applicable to real life.
- Students oral skills are no longer be awarded a grade towards the Junior Cycle.

5. What, from the perspective of Irish teachers, are the crucial elements for successful student learning?

- Suitable and achievable but still challenging learning outcomes being set for the lesson.
- Achievement of the learning outcomes by most of the pupils.
- The topic of the lesson adapted by the teacher to engage the students in a meaningful way.
- Differentiation in the way the information reaches the students so that each of them is able to excel at their own pace in the classroom.
- An environment for the students which they feel safe and comfortable to be able to share questions and ideas without being judged.

Appendix I: Ethics Approval Granted Grainne Mulcahy

Phdrsrch <PHDRSRCH@tcd.ie>   Thu, 26 Jul
                                                                    2018, 10:35

to Grainne, Colette, Grainne

Approval Gráinne Mulcahy   27th July 2018

Dear Gráinne,
The School of Education's Ethics Committee has received and reviewed the
amendments to your application for approval of your research project entitled
'Teacher perspectives on learning in light of Junior Cycle reform'.
It is the decision of the Committee that you may now proceed with your research on
the condition that it is carried out as indicated on your application. Should there be a
change in the design of your research project, you will need to re-apply again
for approval from the School of Education's Ethics Committee.
 If you have any queries regarding this decision, please contact the Chair of the
School of Education's Ethics Committee and Director of Research, Dr Ann Devitt
(devittan@tcd.ie).
We wish you all the very best with your research project.
 Kind regards,

Kind regards,

Fiona McKibben
Research Officer at the School of Education
on behalf of Professor Ann Devitt
Director of Research

3088 School of Education Arts Building
Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin
Dublin 2, Ireland.
Tel | + 353 1 8963583
_____
3088 Scoil an Oideachais
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath, Ollscoil Átha Cliath
Baile Átha Cliath 2, Éire.
School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, the university of Dublin is ranked
in the top 100 in the QS 2016 subject rankings.

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Appendix J: The Changed Role Of The Teacher

The table below, details the codes, the teacher comments supporting the code, and the incidence of the codes.

Examples. Code, Incidence of Teacher Role

Example of Teacher Comment from the Data Supporting the Code	Code	Incidence
Students are more involved in their own learning. R3 **Students are taking more ownership of their learning. R4** **Students have more independence and autonomy. R10**	Evidence of more student engagement. Independent and ownership of learning. Varied methodologies. Increases in student and teacher cooperation Awareness of student role.	9 29 16 21 24
is it fun or learning? Can students differentiate? R15 **I have NEVER taught as little in my life at this level, I felt we are doing it for the sake of doing it. R22** **I feel the students are learning less science and they are not prepared for the current Leaving Cert. R23**	Too much focus on activity quality of learning may suffer. Foundational learning not present. Changes do not support Senior Cycle demands on students.	5 3 2
Teacher having to prepare and correct way more work. R48 **Some students are lost: they don't know how to take ownership. R37**	More demands on students are stressful for them. Lack of time to support individual students. Some students are not capable of independence.	4 2 7
Confusion over the lingo: "teacher-led", "student-led learning". R28	Confusion around reforms. Fear of loss of control.	4 4

Uncomfortable space for teachers when students are working together and talking. R34 **The value of what we were doing before is not recognised. R31**	Feelings of being undervalued. The teacher role has not changed. The teachers lead the learning in the classroom.	2 6 27
We need more time and digital resources. R42 **The teacher can't be all and bring all, pens, markers, research. R46** **It's not possible to give a choice to the students the specifications imply. R45** **Role as a facilitator has been impacted due to less contact time. R57** **Time, Time, Time! R50**	Availability of technology. Resources not provided. The workload increased - time pressure. CBAs and administration. We have reduced contact time. Books leading learning	4 5 2 9 4 3 1

Appendix K: Assessment Changes

In total, 20 clearly identifiable codes emerged from the data. Ticks beside a comment were noted as incidences of the code and allocated to that comment. The table below, represents the initial codes created.

Coding, Incidence and Examples. Assessment Changes:

Codes	Incidence	Sample of Comments
Impact on Extracurricular Activities.	3	Extracurricular activities affected by CBA restrictions. (A11)
Lack of school resources.	4	Demand on school resources. (A110) SEN students need more help. (A111)
Stressful for students.	15	Independent and critical thinking is more stressful for students. (A69) More stressful for weaker students. (A70)
Student attendance impacting assessment.	3	[Poor] Attendance avoiding school [as a result [avoiding assessment. (A114)
Negative impact on languages.	10	No oral exam, to the detriment of spoken language. (A6)
Positive outcomes for student learning.	23	New emphasis on new skill set. (A32) More AfL. (A38)
Negative outcomes for student learning.	22	More peer pressure: all students more visible in the classroom. (A60)
Negative impact on Leaving Certificate outcomes.	7 8	Going into Senior Cycle with diluted ideas of content required. (A80) Is content being compromised? (A84)
Confusing for teachers.	20	Teachers don't understand AfL techniques. These should be decoupled from JC and CPD given separately. A45
Impact of CBAs.	15	CBAs will become class tests: they will lose their value. (A126) CBAs impact on extracurricular activities. (A130)
Grading changes confusing and demotivating.	3	The language is very flat and unmotivating. Who aspires to be in-line with expectations? (A57)

Lack of time in class to implement.	2	Time issues and constraints. (A115)
Negative impact on specific subjects. **Science.** **MFLs.**	8	Science terminal exam was 65% now 90% Ten per cent is researching a topic – not an investigation. (A4) Language should be spoken: bring back orals (A8)
Class sizes impacting implementation.	2	Class size and new assessment challenging. (A14)
AT only 10%.	1	(A10)
Formative Assessment.	3	Assessment has ongoing elements, not just a final paper.(A1) More reflection included as part of assessment is good for student learning. (A19)
Exam Papers.		
Common paper not supportive of learning.	3	Hard to see all students achieving on common papers. (A75)
Length reduction.	3	(A 77)
Language of the papers difficult for some.	2	Less-academic students struggle with stimulus-based exam questions (less clarity). (A105)
Still rote learning.	1	(A112)

Appendix L: Potential Challenges and Benefits of Junior Cycle

Codes and incidences Challenges of Junior Cycle Reform

Code	Incidence	Example of Teacher Comment.
Reduced learning.	13	Entertainment at the expense of learning. C46 Content dilution. C56 Watered down content. C53
Weaker students are disadvantaged.	11	The Junior Certificate reform is less inclusive for students with SEN. The terminal assessment is not differentiated enough for these students. There is too much reading involved. It is extremely unfair to present them with such an exam. They will find it very difficult to ever achieve a good grade in the exam paper. C35
Students need certain skills to learn; many don't have them.	3	Students need to be more literate: all written tasks and written exam. C27 Public speaking difficult for some students; new material and new skills. C23 Time to teach basics is needed before we develop into the JC programme. C41
Difficult for unmotivated students to engage.	3	Unmotivated unsupported students?? What support? C28
Mores stressful for students.	4	It creates more frustration and stress for them. More stress created overall, as now, as well as STILL having a terminal exam, the students have the ADDED pressures of CBA's and an AT in most subjects. C40

Lack of guidance for teachers.	10	Lack of concrete answers in relation to assessment. C4
		Poor teacher understanding of how to teach in ways that suit the new exam. Students who want distinctions not being able to achieve them. C19
Poor in-service.	3	In-service training insufficient. C9
Assessment issues.	6	Teachers reacting differently to ATs.C5
		Vastness of course and vagueness of what is required for exam. C5
		Common level that is still too hard for weaker students and holds back the stronger students. C122
		Common-level paper and catering for students who are weaker academically. C16
More work for teachers.	9	More work for teachers. C88
		My head hurts! C89
		Too many things to be done with little value attached to them e.g., CBAs. C69
Lack of resources.	4	Lack of resources. C83
Time pressures.	9	Learner planning time. C82
		Time management. C73
		No department structure. C80
Methodology changes unworkable.	6	Groupwork in large classes very difficult. C62
		Will teachers still teach to the test still all exam based.C64
		Classroom management difficulties. C46

Poor attendance may affect learning and assessment.	5	Students with poor attendance and poor motivation has more long-term harm. C93 Poor attenders will and do struggle with CBAs. C123
Parents don't understand it.	4	Parents don't understand how to help students. C94 Parental lack of understanding. Grade system not being understood. C97
Difficulties with CBAs.		Time taken to do CBAs is time missed for teaching & learning. What's it all worth? A MERE 10%, so what's the point in doing them? C99
Little learning value in CBAs.	5	As more and more subjects introduce a project element, will become increasingly difficult for students to complete tasks, and may require less subjects. C121 Increased pressure on students and teachers CBAs. C108
Stressful for students.	8	Weaker students, in Irish class, are very often not capable of producing CBAs to meet requirements. C118
	4	Kids will get bored of too many CBAs. C100
Students don't value CBAs. **Class size.**	1	Major challenge is large class sizes, unless the teacher is a wizard and can differentiate amazingly well and provide unique, individualised tasks for 30 different students. The "ideal" of the new Junior Cycle is great, but in practice, based on my last few years of it, it hasn't worked. C122
Poor prep for Leaving Certificate.	30	Content of course is not preparing students for Leaving Certificate. C135
Diminished content.	3	Only into third year of Junior Cycle reform in Home Economics, but from my perception, I don't think students learn in a meaningful way that will be of value to them for Senior Cycle, as the approach in Junior Cycle is too wishy washy! C153
Consequences for third level.	2	Lack of preparation for demands of Leaving Certificate, in terms of writing and engaging with subjects in considerable depth in comparison to Junior Certificate. C125 The major challenge I would see is that students will find the Leaving Certificate far more difficult, as the

Concern for Senior Cycle reforms.		Junior Certificate will no longer prepare students adequately. However, this problem will be solved by changing the Leaving Certificate to make it easier and so colleges will feel the effects. C148
		Multinationals will not stay in Ireland if our third-level graduates are not proficient in subject knowledge. C137
		I fear as a result Leaving Certificate will be reframed in a similar manner, which will result in inadequate prep for third level. C136
Negative impact in MFLs.	4	No marks for oral work in final exam result. C162
		MFLs, in particular, had contact time reduced. C164
Exam papers.	6	Poor papers. Prescribed spaces for text in exams. Insufficient. C158
		Exam papers layout and format poor. C171
	2	Common level not challenging top and not facilitating low achievers. C161
	2	Grading system demotivating. C174
Poor methodology.	4	Repetitive methodology. C170
		Too much focus on skills rather than knowledge. C173
		Questionable value of short courses. C166
		Reduces contact time for subjects. C117
No benefits.	6	I have seen no benefits in my subject area. I feel the move to a "Common level" helps neither the weaker nor the stronger students, I find the CBAs a complete waste of time and I have seen no major changes in students' ability to learn autonomously. C177
		The assumption that students of 12-15 years can self-direct/promote their learning is flawed, and this, in turn, affects any potential benefits. C40

Codes and incidences Benefits of Junior Cycle

Code	Incidence	Example of Teacher Comment
More skills focused.	21	One would hope that they would be equipped with skills to investigate their interests in the future. B34 Improved digital and research skills, opportunities to gain experience and confidence in delivering to an audience and for the student to challenge themselves. B40 More focus on spoken or oral content. B23 Research skills. B18
Improved wellbeing for students.	9	This is providing a more inclusive education for all. The emphasis on team and group work aids the inclusion and benefits all. The student develops skills of wellbeing and managing information in this way. B14 Classroom experience for students should be more enjoyable. B16 SEN included. B134
Scope for more creativity.	11	It's much more creative and gives more autonomy to the students. B7
More active learning and student engagement.	22	That the student will engage more in what they need to know in order to learn and meet their subject requirements. B54 Learning by doing, critical thinking skills, which are lifelong. B56
More focus on independent learning.	35	It fosters more independence in students and the focus on self- and peer-assessment can be beneficial to students. B99 Students are more involved in their own learning and can experience success in different ways. It develops and encourages more skills than the traditional rote learning methods. B90
More consistency for students.	3	It helps to give consistency for expectation for students. B101

More teacher collaboration.	8	Working together for the first time, teachers and students. B116
		Collaboration[on] corrections [gives] reassurance of commonality. B111
		SLARS provide mentoring. B123
		Sharing resources. B121
Researched-based, modern curriculum.	7	Some of the course is more up to date and relevant in student's day-to-day lives. B136
		Fresh approach. B119
		More choices for teachers of material; wider scope. B113
		Continuous and formative assessment practices. B129
		Originality and creativity. B5 B6
General comments.	1	The percentage of marks for practical element increased in some subjects. B130
		Some subjects happy with a higher percentage for practical, e.g., Music. B131

Appendix M: Teacher Wellbeing and the Implications for Student Learning

Codes and incidences recorded in relation to Teacher Wellbeing.

Code	Incidence	Sample Teacher Comments
Increased work; overload.	83	It has increased teacher workload and due to the number of Junior Cycle CBAs to be completed appears to add to student workload and hence stress, completing CBA's that are not forming part of their Junior Cycle grades. (W28) Staff are overloaded with duties which take from core role of teaching. (W101) The workload for teachers has become bigger and this period of adjustment can be overwhelming especially considering there is no continuity with the Junior Cycle and the Leaving Certificate. (W134)
Teacher stress.	37	I have never been so stressed about what I am managing in 30 years! (W57) Teachers are only beginning to come to terms with the changes ushered in by Junior Cycle; the transition process has been a great challenge and therefore has increased the level of anxiety and stress among the teaching staff. As teachers become more comfortable and confident with their new brief, it will impact more positively on student learning. (W69)
Multiple demands on teachers' time.	18	Less time to show the love of the subject. More increase in stress, anxiety resulting in less effective teaching. (W156) Teachers inclined to spend far too much time in collection of texts, CBAs; in my subjects [they] don't have time to explore in the same depth, core aspects of the course (W31)

Positive impacts of teachers.	10	[I feel] Positive at SLARS we get to consult with colleagues and affirmed in relation to marking and teaching methodologies. (W162) [Teachers will react] Positively if teacher willing to change focus of process from teacher-centred to student/teacher-balanced participation. Negatively if you read the press. (W167) It takes some pressure from teachers, as the student must take more responsibility for their own learning. Subjects like Visual Art and other practical subjects have been doing this type of learning for years. However, I can see some subject teachers [are] used to chalk. (W166) Better student/teacher interaction and discussions. (W169)
Teachers' feelings of disconnection and being undervalued.	23	Teacher wellbeing seems to be at the bottom of the pile. (W210) Too few posts of responsibility. (W204) Lack of consultation. (W212)
Negative impact on students, causing concern for teachers.	33	Teachers focusing on different areas and methodologies is causing increased anxiety for students. (W2) In languages, asking a student to complete a Reflection Task in English worth 10% reduces the chance of a student who may be excellent at German but poor at English achieving their distinction, and surely it is an exam in a foreign language. Similarly with Music – questions require a high competency in the use of the English language, which may take away from an exceptionally talented musician. (W14) Will have a knock-on effect on student learning, when they find it harder to achieve. (W6)

CBAs.	28	Students absent during allocated CBAs: this causes stress for teachers who have to accommodate the student's absenteeism, so they submit their CBAs [late]. (W47)
		Definite negative impact on teacher wellbeing. Increased workload with very little visible positive outcome. Definite negative impact on student learning too, not just because of the stress caused by preparing and delivering pointless CBAs, which don't even count. (W50)
		I hate the descriptors. Who wants to be told they are in line with expectations? (W217)
		CBA does pose a challenge for teachers in the beginning. I don't think there has been any consequences, aside from the reduction of subject content. (W46)
		It's created more pressure trying to be creative for independent learning, but also ensuring curriculum content is covered. CBAs are given no weight in the final grade but take up a lot of time. (W49)
		It is exhausting – trying to prep more creative classes and the uncertainty of "am I doing this right" chips away at teacher self-confidence. (W76)
Lack of clear CPD.	32	Junior Cycle reform and in-service needs more "joined-up thinking". Teachers are fine on the theory behind the Junior Cycle – we need more concrete examples and scenarios during our training. (W196)
		Lack of clear CPD and resources/answers leaves many at sea or at least teaching a new ideal using older methodologies, putting huge pressure on those trying to deliver, and often then confusing student learning/expectations. (W195)
		Some in-services (cluster days) were very poor. Take a few years for the whole thing to settle. (W197)

IT demands.	5	ICT demands, teacher skills are poor. (W138) The changes have been stressful, especially in the technical approach, whereby many teachers have not been given adequate training. (W199) Access to ICT for projects portfolios, teachers using IT in classroom poorly.
Grading issues	8	Who wants to be told they have met expectations after their work? (W217) What was wrong with A,B,C, fail? (W218)